

Practices | Apr 2017

YOUNGHO LEE'S FILM INSTALLATION For the Viewing Bodies: Reversibility in Vision



Ferris Wheel, 2009, installation with 16mm loop, color, sound, 2'37", mirror, projector, metal construction

Jovana Stokic,
Art historian and
curator, New York

Overview

Youngho Lee's complex film and object installations reached me as translations: via installation photos and short clips that document the display as they inhabited different exhibitionary spaces. This text is a document of the mediated encounter – as her work is meant to be experienced in the space, I am rebuilding this bodily encounter through fantasy. The phantasmatic projection I am after is what - I argue - her works share as a core interest in their representation. In her elaborate channeling of the modernist history of the moving images at the end of the 19th century, the artist is compellingly evoking our contemporary exhaustion in relation to modernism. Our own visions are so saturated

by a shared digitized ecosphere that a visit to a gallery space has to act like finding a liminal space – in order to cleanse the visual sense.

Youngho Lee's works share the critique of the tendency of technology to displace modes of human perception and representation. Her installations are dedicated to the return of the gaze to its human potential and scope. They share a strong conviction that human eye is a reliable connector to emotional core of the being. Moreover, these installations in space are constructed with the viewing bodies in mind: they exist to interact with the viewers' gazes. The sites and the projections are never intended to be observed only analytically – Youngho Lee is interested in creating an emotional impact on her viewers.

French cultural theorist and philosopher Paul Virilio has analyzed the end of the 20th century as an era of the triumph of the electronic image over universal gravity, which carried onto the dematerialization of the objects. He was right to point to this sense of weightlessness and suspension of ordinary sensations that continue to indicate the growing confusion between 'ocular reality' and its instantaneous, mediated representation. Youngho is acutely aware of this confusion – therefore she purposely reaches back to the very beginning of the modernist moving images. Her installation *Ferris Wheel* (2009) thematizes the relationship between modernist utopian zeal of the 1890s and its echoes in our 21st-century technological exhaustion. We are currently confronted by the new interactions of the digital media with our unchanged sensorial potentials. The unbounded technological expansion is not in synch with our senses. Youngho's installations are offering a way not to feel overwhelmed – by a creation of the expanded images into the space that is configured as a synesthetic environment.

The artist is using a potent modernist metaphor – The *Ferris Wheel* constructed as a modern marvel for the 1893 Chicago World Expo. This object's movement epitomizes the fluidity, the speed and the refractions of the modern gaze. Its mechanical construction was paralleled by filmic inventions of the late 1800s. During the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, along with the French pioneers Brothers Lumiere's early films, Edison Studios, a film production organization owned by an American inventor and entrepreneur Thomas Edison, made close to 1,200 movies. The popularity of these moving images was unprecedented. Youngho Lee has undertaken a sort of a reverse archeological approach to this material history of film via a projected image. She describes the nature of this transaction: "Usually a film projector distributes light on a screen which then is looked at by the audience. This is a two-dimensional way of experience. I'm trying to explore the possibilities of transforming this process into a three-dimensional experience, questioning the relationship between current technology, media, and the human perception." Her film installation thus becomes an experiential staging – a setup that allows the viewers' sense to be extended during the perceptual process. The viewers are uncovering the layers of meaning by interacting with the three-dimensionality of the setup. Youngho Lee insists on breaking away from the passive black box film projection dynamics. For almost a decade, starting from her series (2007), she has been investigating the setting of the 16mm film within the viewing space that allows the bodily experience of the viewing process – to reverse the authority of the projected vision and open the viewing space.

In her installation *The Wrapping Process* (2016), Youngho Lee is again confronting the viewer with the contemporary overstimulation of the visual sphere. Again, the new technologies of representation that has evolved since the advent of cinema in what Virilio calls 'vision machines' are here playing a less central role. It is obvious to every viewer that now the digitalized video imagery, new modes of virtual reality and multimedia technologies provide both information and entertainment. At the same time, they remove and blur the boundary between realistic representation and the imaginary. The question is: "Are these vision machines oppressive and alienating to human sensibilities? And if so, how would the vision of the subject and the affective potential of active viewing experience be liberated?"

Virilio mourns the loss of the first-hand, phenomenological lived experience of viewing in which the object of ocular perception in the emergent forms of technological vision and representation, the displacement of the dimension of direct observation and common sense, and thus the loss of the materiality and concreteness of the objects of perception, constitute the realm of appearance and lived

and lived experience.

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who appropriated Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model of vision that identifies a fundamental "reversibility" in vision, saw the body as both subject and object, the seeing and the seen. He took this notion of reversibility and insisted that, despite the reversibility of the seeing and the seen, it is the possibility of being observed which is always primary. This leads to the conclusion that the passive state of being observed via the gaze denies the subject in its full subjectivity. The subject is reduced to being the object of desire and, in identifying with this object, becomes alienated from itself. Youngho Lee's works show how this alienation can be avoided by playful aspects of her installations. She describes this particular playfulness: "I think the point at which new methods of sensory experience, new humans who can create those, and a new order that can be created lies in playfulness. In such experience of playfulness, on one hand, human emotions can escape from the domination by intelligence, and, on the other hand, they can move from judgment based on personal interests to the foundation of a more general understanding."

If the new technological worlds constitute a break and rupture with ordinary experience and thus shift the locus of truth, meaning, and validity to an abstract and enigmatic virtual realm, then the viewing body needs to be reconstituted in the space. Our mediatized existence pushes for an increasing derealization of the body in cyberspace and virtual technologies that pull away from the body as a gravitational center. New technologies of vision displace human faculties and experience, subjecting individuals to ever more powerful modes of technological domination and control. For Youngho Lee, this is a challenge to return the viewing bodies to be agents with their own gravitational forces. She materializes this strategy by construction of a specific interactive space that contains film projection. This space for her is never a static one but a continuous space that reacts to every movement of the audience. The characteristic of film projection is that each frame is projected by the perforations interlocking with the film body, whereas the audience remains static. The artist further explains: "The human body acts as the film body in this space, and the reality in between the perforations is reflected on top of each frame panels and forms refracted shapes. The space is the negative form of the film, while the film is the positive form of the space. In this manner, the panel frames reflect each other to provide limitless expansion of space and carry out the multi-dimensions of screened films." The power of effect – of emotional response during viewing – is a possibility that is invited to unfold within Youngho Lee's film installations. She constructs elaborate mechanical structures that have multiple reflection possibilities to refract the projected light. Immateriality of light in relation to material certainty of the film itself is where the viewers can open the realm of imaginary – playfully interacting against any dictatorial authority of a single projected vision. Projections thus become only a suggestion for the viewers to finish the work – by the very act of viewing.