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## Seoul Art Space GEUMCHEON. Josef Sungeun Lee: Meditations in Virtual Reality by Giorgia Gandolfini



Living Life in Third Person View, 2015. 360 Live 360° video streaming, VR headset. YouTube screenshot

### Overview

Since 2016, Residency Unlimited has been selecting three international curators to contribute with critical essays on the work of artists who participated in the **Seoul Art Space GEUMCHEON residency program** (Seoul, South Korea). The initiative, which runs on a yearly basis, is aimed to promote cultural exchange and support the development of young artists from South Korea by providing a valuable opportunity for conversation. Hereby, we present **Giorgia Gandolfini's Meditations in Virtual Reality**, a critique on artist **Josef Sungeun Lee's** practice.

When looking at Josef Sungeun Lee's work the required headset is not only the Oculus Rift-inspired equipment he fabricated by himself back in 2012, but also a metaphorical one to access the mind of a trained scientist. Lee's personal background includes a long-time consuming passion for natural sciences, and physics in particular, coupled with a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering from Yonsei University – one of South Korea's most prestigious educational institutions. His recent academic experiences include a Fab Academy Diploma program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center of Bits and Atoms. Thus, it is not by chance that he lingers on terms such as measurement and experiment when discussing about his work.

“Who am I?” “Am I real?” “Is the universe real?” Lee has been asking himself those questions all along his life. As a child, he first found an answer in science books his parents gave him. As an artist and engineer today, he seeks out new answers under the same principles of the scientific method, maintaining a genuine, rigorous skepticism towards the reality we are immersed into. Observation first, tested by experiment, whose accuracy is revealed by analysis. Lee's artistic portfolio is a collection of trial-and-error attempts to investigate the reality of the human self and existence through the lenses of a virtual reality (VR) headset. The result is a series of highly-experimental interactive video installations, where original narratives take hold of the audience and don't let go until the screen goes black – a common experience during his own gaming sessions.

## Observation



Living Life in Third Person View, 2015. 360 Live 360° video streaming, VR headset. YouTube screenshot

Observation is the primary reason why the medium of virtual reality enters the stage. In his video performance *Living Life in Third Person View* (2015) ([see video online](#)), Lee – by donning the headset – is able to take a distance from his own body and see himself in third person, while floating in an immersive experience such as that offered by the VR environment. With the more recent *Ethereal - Too Perfect for This World* (2017) ([see video online](#)), the purpose of this same exercise becomes more crystalline and – thanks to an interactive giant robotic torso in addition to the VR headset – the immersive experience increases in intensity. This large-scale installation allows the audience to look at

perspective of a robot which looms behind them and to touch their own shoulders through its robotic arms. Lee explains the robot's large size by alluding to the intention to put the audience in the universe's point of view and thereby convey the sense of infinite smallness of the individual self. "I feel small compared to the universe" he says. This is an enlightening change of perspective, a mindful form of meditation, a mental discipline of liberation which erases the reflective habit patterns we hold, largely based on the illusion of self and self-existence. One could easily put the Buddhist meditation practice and its search for an universal truth in parallel with Lee's observation exercises. After all, isn't Nirvana anything but a mental state, the result of a radical shift in perspective?



Ethereal - Too Perfect For This World, 2017. Pneumatic robot, 360° camera, VR headset, cotton.  
YouTube screenshot

## Experiment

If experiments are the only reliable judge of scientific truth, then Lee proceeds by way of testing and measuring reality. In the mixed-reality video *Things That Happen at the Same Time (Please Don't Watch)* (2018) ([see video online](#)), we can follow the artist's experiment where he touches a 3D-scanned image of his body and makes it melt, explode and break down into pieces. The simple actions of seeing and touching imply the intention of measuring reality, which is an essential activity to prove the existence of human self and its tangible universe. With *Things That Happen at the Same Time (Please Don't Touch)* (2018) ([see video online](#)), Lee invites the audience to actually watch, touch and break virtual bodies, which are once more 3D-scanned reproductions of his own body. The *Things That Happen at the Same Time* pieces carry on Lee's interest in providing an alternative point of view on the self and its realm, an interest which is highlighted when he states "My work is all about perspectives". In fact, the artist's body continuously shifts from a submissive position – the knife passed into the audience's hands in *Please Don't Touch* – to a dominant one – the self-measurement actions in *Please Don't Watch*. If in our individual reality our bodies float in a submissive state and are solidified by the gaze of others, on the contrary, *Please Don't Watch* in particular wants to experiment a completely different approach on self-perception.



Things That Happen at the Same Time (Please Don't Watch), 2018. Mixed reality video (5'35"), 3D-scanning, game engine, mixed reality. YouTube screenshot



Things That Happen at the Same Time (Please Don't Touch), 2018. Mixed reality video (5'35"), 3D scanning, game engine, mixed reality. YouTube screenshot

In the 5-minute VR film *Death in Virtual Reality* (2015) ([see video online](#)) the audience maintains this submissive position and is projected right inside a vivid narrative, whose intensity is not only amplified by the immersive VR experience, but also by the fact Lee decided to set the scene in a hospital room, shooting from the perspective of a dying patient. The film exemplifies the artist's attempt to inject narratives which have the specific function to obliterate momentarily the onlooker's personal existence and replace it with the virtual protagonist's. As Lee states:

"The fundamental thing of virtual reality is that it makes you forget about your physical body, whereas virtual reality coupled with storytelling make you forget about both your physical body and your self-existence by projecting you into a fictional narrative."

This is a striking distinction between the experience of virtual reality and that occurring with traditional films. One might feel torn apart while watching on a screen Titanic's heroic Jack sacrificing himself and freezing to death in the ocean. The VR headset allows to actually take on the role of his beloved Rose and tell their story in first person.



Death in Virtual Reality, 2015, VR film (5' 30"). Installation, 360° video, VR headset. YouTube screenshot

## Awakening

When asked about the future of virtual reality, Lee admits he can picture how people in the future will increasingly be able to experience a range of feelings by simply wearing a headset which will cater not only to the visual and audio senses, but also body-wise, temperature-wise and smell. The line between the reality we experience every day and virtual reality has already been blurring since the advent of digital portable technology. For those who will be able to preserve a critical eye, questions such as "Am I real?" and "Is the universe real?" will get more and more poignant. Lee draws from his education as a physicist to provide a parallel between this form of existentialism and the quantum mechanics area, under whose principles matter does not exist unless an observer is looking at it. Is what we can measure actually real? Or, is it just human-real? "The map is not the territory" as Alfred Korzybski stated. Every human word or concept, clear as it may seem to be, has only a limited range of applicability. Lee's experimental meditations invite the audience to step off given certainties, change the perspective and reflect about the realm of our self and existence, lulled by Buddha's teaching – "Everything is an illusion".

**Giorgia Gandolfini** is the curator and manager of RU Dialogues. She is also the co-founder of The Artist is Present, a program for tailored artist residencies in private organizations to trigger innovation and creativity processes, and studio manager at Folder, an agency for visual research. She holds a MA in Arts Management and a BA in Art History Studies from the University of Bologna (Italy). She spent a semester abroad at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA, and at Ludwig-Maximilians Universität (Munich, Germany). Since 2015, she has worked as program manager for several international art residencies such as Careof-ViaFarini (Milan), Random (Lecce) and Residency Unlimited itself.

The **Seoul Art Space Geumcheon** is a workspace exclusively dedicated to visual arts. The location is a former printing factory in Doksan-dong, Geumcheon-gu, which has been renovated following the guidelines of the current Seoul's culture-nomics urban strategy. Since its foundation, 397 artists from 48 countries across the globe have benefited from the programs offered at Seoul Art Space Geumcheon.

<http://geumcheon.blogspot.com/p/project.html>