

# “LOWERING” (NAT-CHIM) RAISED IN EMPTY PLACE - OUTSIDER HA CHA YOUN'S VOICE OF SOLIDARITY

Gim Jong Gil

“This earthly being has always put her perspective in a low place.”  
– Kim Jongmok, journalist of *Kyunghyang Shinmun*<sup>1</sup>

“At first sight, the Outsider is a social problem. He is the hole-in-corner man.”  
– Colin Wilson, novelist<sup>2</sup>

In July 2021, “Ha ChaYoun Solo Exhibition: Return Home” was held at Alternative Space LOOP.<sup>3</sup> The epidemic had reached its peak that summer. All humans had to isolate themselves in order not to contract the coronavirus, because it could only be avoided by staying separate and alone. They really had to go back “home.” It was a time when violent and intrusive words began to appear to be plausible and appropriate. What a paradox!

During the pandemic period, all human beings were strangers and migrants upon the Earth. Narat-Jib (nation) dispersed the “community” by forcing Narat-ssial (nation, people) to “refrain from gathering!” These were the days when people who lived relying on the “global life” returned to the “individual life.”

## #1. “To protect and overcome me”: “re-planting” in the place of “being” (存在)<sup>4</sup>

Ha Cha Youn has been proceeding with determination along her path since 1983. Her life and art became brighter when they pushed each other upwards as if they were rising all at once in line with the pandemic situation. She had always hoped that her life and art would take root somewhere just like “replanting” in the process of cultivating rice. Her life and art became clearer in these times of pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Jongmok, “Plastic bags and PET bottles, discarded things are turning into aesthetic tools... ha cha youn, who makes requiem and consolation for minorities,” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, August 6th 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* [1997 (3rd ed.), Bumwoosa], p. 27. In Korea, the first edition was published in 1974 with a translation by Lee Sung-kyu.

<sup>3</sup> The exhibition was held for a full month from July 22 to August 22 in Alternative Space LOOP (335-11 Seogyo-dong, Mapo-gu, Seoul). In addition to “Je me brûle” (1986-1987), the exhibition presented “Study Return Home 3” (2019/2021), “Balade de Carola” (2008), “Tojjigi” (2019), “The Collecting” (2020), “MAT, BOAT, CARPET – my mat, a boat for family, a large carpet for all” (1988/2021), “Navigation” (2021), “Arrival” (2009/2021), “Sweet Home 4” (2009), and “Return Home – in Memory of the victims in Mediterranean Sea” (2019). All were video works, except for “MAT, BOAT, CARPET – my mat, a boat for family, a large carpet for all.”

<sup>4</sup> ha cha youn's oeuvres over the past 40 years vary slightly by period; it could be said that most of them are interconnected. I am starting my article from a solo exhibition in Alternative Space LOOP in 2021. The quote of “To protect me and resist” was taken from “Artist Interview with ha cha youn” (July 14, 2021) by curator Sun Mi Lee.

It was because her works always depicted “individual lives” of “lowering” raised in empty places and the pandemic pushed the poor to stay in a more difficult vacancy.

The “emptiness” in an empty place means total emptiness, poverty, and absence; but also existence and the edge of space which is pushed out. Ha Cha Youn's “Return Home” represented the return to the place where people originally came from, not the destination of those who departed. It is a “home” that they left alive but returned to after dying.

Ha's works resemble the Confucian ritual of preparing food on a table facing a wall (向壁設位).<sup>5</sup> This is because the works are installed like ancestral tablets of the “lives” turned into corpses. However, she does not stop at memorials or mourning. She enable people to all realize the revolutionary ritual of Cheondogyo that sets food on a table for those who execute the ceremony (向我設位) as reversing the light and shining it backwards (回光返照).

In other words, it is a matter of looking back at oneself without searching for one's “true self” elsewhere, of seeing the spirituality (靈性) within one's heart right away, and of returning to one's sanity before dying. Thus it can be an act of mourning for all living things! It should not be forgotten that “loss”(喪失) is already present at every moment in life.

“Lowering” is a full breath (氣:息) that is alive in a low place. Breath is power. Those beings are free that are not tied down and can breathe on their own. So they have power. However, sometimes this fact causes makes them to be suppressed, pushed out, and abandoned by society.

The edge that is suppressed, pushed, and abandoned is in a low place. The freedom bound by society (拘束) is not authentic. True freedom comes when the whole breath is possible even though it happens in the low place.

Ha Cha Youn is an outsider. Whether in Korea at the eastern end of Eurasia or in Europe at the western end, she has always been an outsider. So she came to focus her gaze on the “floating landscape,” of outsiders as a place life that had not taken root, in similarity to her own predicament.

Life is the breath of heaven (天命) that everyone should enjoy, but clothing (衣), food (食), and housing (住) are required for living. Those who live in “floating landscapes” do not struggle to be alive, but they do struggle to survive. Living becomes hard and difficult, so they start to “live floating.”

Lee Sung-kyu, who translated Colin Wilson's “*The Outsider*”, asks readers, “What is an outsider? It literally means a foreigner (局外者) or an outlier (列外者). In other words, the person is able to get along smoothly and harmlessly regardless of any group, society, or gang.”

The “person” never has any problems. There are only groups, societies, or gangs that regard differences as “problems” and push the person away. There are countless people who have been pushed out like that.

Exiles, defectors, immigrants, strangers, migrant workers, the Romani people, homeless persons, refugees (難民)... There are people who are not rich; who are beset with difficulties, pushed out, oppressed, bound, entangled; who are alone,

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<sup>5</sup> This is a manner of performing a Confucian-style ancestral rite, which refers to placing the deity facing the wall during the ceremony. Its purpose is to mourn the dead. Hae-wol Choe Si-hyeong, the second leader of Donghak, advocates “Hyang-a-seol-wi” (向我設位) based on the “Si-cheon-ju idea” (侍天主思想). He say that it is right to honor me as the living God.

subject to violence, or on the run. They are all refugees who cannot relax even for one single day.

The Mediterranean is called the “refugee graveyard.” In 2014 alone, 3,072 people died within its waters.”<sup>6</sup> Among them, there were about 700 people who drowned when a boat carrying African refugees sank off the coast of Malta and Libya.

ha’s works tell the stories of refugees who “can live without any harm.” Also, she always includes herself in the story. She causes the exhibition to blossom with the voice of “solidarity” (連帶) connecting many people with each other.

Her exhibition calls for solidarity as activism. It is a voice shouting “together.” It emphasizes “we” without distinguishing between “me” and “you.” The artist becomes the first spark in a spreading fire. “Breath of fire” occurs. We are all interdependent in the causal web that breathes life.

## #2. Low breath: spirits rising with “lowering”

Why did she walk into “them”?

She once protested (抗辯), saying they were “us” not “them.” They were the ones who didn't become us, who were pushed out of us, who voluntarily refused to be us, or who had to leave us.

Yes. In those words of “refugees, breakaways, immigrants, strangers, migrant workers, Romani people, homeless people, and refugees,” there are thick traces of lives that were forcibly pushed out and kicked out of “us.”

In 2006, Ha spent 35 days with homeless people who lived in tents on the Saint-Martin Canal. The people she met must be the “ochlos” (οχλος · 民衆) as written in “*Gospel of Mark*”.

Mark used the word “ochlos” to address the audience of Jesus, which included tax collectors, sick people, prostitutes, and children of the lowest class. They were the ones who were underprivileged and marginalized, who did not have a share in society. In other words, they were the subjects who became “others.”<sup>7</sup>

Minjung theologian Ahn Byung-mu interpreted them alternatively as the protagonists of the Jesus Incident. The “(historical) Jesus Incident” is an encounter that Jesus had with “ochlos”. Thus, the “ochlos” must have been the “bearer” and “transmitter” of the first event, and the “interpreter” in Mark's eyes.

Another Minjung theologian, Seo Nam-dong, even said, “The appearance of Jesus means a proclamation of human salvation and liberation, that is, a struggle.” Not only that, but he also argued that it was a work of human liberation from economic poverty, from social and cultural prejudice, from ignorance and political oppression living in the darkness where facts were concealed.

A Latin American Father Gustavo Gutierrez, who developed liberation theology previous to us, wrote in “*We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey Of A*

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6 Kim Hwan-Tae, “The Maginot Line of Refugees' Happiness, the Border of Death, the Hell of the Mediterranean, and a Unified Korean Peninsula,” *Kookmin News*, 1.16. 2015. According to this column, 22,394 refugees died in the Mediterranean by 2014.

7 Ahn Byung-mu pays attention to the meaning of “ochlos” that appears thirty-eight times in the “*Gospel of Mark*”. “Because I saw that only this Gospel refers to a specific category of people. In a word, they are ‘people outside the boundaries’ those who are stigmatized as objects of hatred by society.” Kim Jin-ho, “Minjung, Become the First: Minjung Theology, An Introspection on the Beginning”, *Da-Da* (4), Gyeonggi Minyechong, 2022, p.112.

People” that “Where oppression and the liberation of man seem to make God irrelevant - a God filtered by our longtime indifference to these problems - there must blossom faith and hope in Him who comes to root out injustice and to offer, in an unforeseen way, total liberation.”

Ha's works do not follow metaphors (隱喻) that hide their true meanings, but instead pursue similes (直喻) that reveal their significance on the surface. Her voice is not hidden. If you hear it with your eyes and see it with your ears, then you can immediately recognize it since her “shout (voice)” moves the heart.

Also, the shout is the weft and wind wave of this world that involves each of us. It is a strong “sound string” that connects us all. Within her strong faith, there seems to be the conviction that “a sound string of shout connecting all will save the world!”

Perhaps that is why, while watching her video work “Return Home – in Memory of the victims in Mediterranean Sea”, a low voice quietly flowed into my ears.

“Now thou art about to experience it in its reality in the Bardo state, wherein all things are like the void and cloudless sky, and the naked, spotless intellect is like unto a transparent vacuum without circumference or center. At this moment, know thou thyself; and abide in that state. I, too, at this time, am setting thee face to face.”<sup>8</sup>

While watching ha’s gesture of pressing down a glass plate onto the sandy beach after collecting the plastic bags washed up onto the shore, I recited the same “voice.” The sound that touched my heart came out through my mouth. I eagerly hoped that their souls would stay in the light by “lowering” raised in the empty place.

### **#3. Art of Gut-jit (act of shamanic ritual) : recovering the life of an “energy circulation”(氣運)**

The plastic bags that appear in “Study Return Home 3” and “Return Home – in Memory of the victims in Mediterranean Sea” symbolize those who drowned while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Looking at the plastic bags in the frame and her single-channel video, I pondered the meaning of her Gut-jit (act of exorcism).

Her act of exorcism was for the art of mourning, soothing one's sorrow, witnessing oneself, being silent, shouting through silence, fluttering with living breath(生氣), and collecting the “audience” into a group, as well as for art language constructed and raised. It was for all living things...

Then, why did I describe it as an “act of exorcism”?

In “Je me brûle”, a performance work produced from 1986 to 1987, empty plastic water bottles were burned and stacked to form a black “tree” shape. The tree, born in the process of “burning” and “watering,” struggled for “communication.”

In 1987, South Korea ignited the hottest flame in its history. While she struggled to communicate in France, South Korea was seething with resistance. It was a struggle for living art and society. The imagination of fire flared up.

"Burning PET bottles produces toxic gas. I smoked gas at school. One day, in the middle of winter, the water supply was cut off, so I put hot water in a plastic

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<sup>8</sup> Compiled by Padmasambhava, translated by Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup, edited by W. Y. Evans-Wentz, and translated by Ryu Shi-hwa in Korean, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* [2023 (first edition, 50th printing), Inner World Publishing], p. 242.

bottle, but the bottle became distorted at some point. It felt like a symbol of Koreans and their political situation. So I tried to make such a shape by burning a plastic bottle. It looked like a human body, like a figure fighting with fists, or like a figure with all its fingers cut off by external forces and shriveled up. Although I wasn't in Korea during the 1980s, it nevertheless reflected the circumstances of the times that were shrunk and cut off like that".<sup>9</sup>

Discarded things are trash. She has collected garbage, rebuilt and erected it for a long time. She removes the labels from the PET bottles, washes and dries the plastic bags. Some are burned and some are framed. Some are gently pressed into the sandy beach.

Her act of exorcism originates from a healing gesture towards what has been pushed aside as social trash. In that context, she is rather a "shamanic artist."

The reality is an asura-pan overflowing with resentful events. The reality world of the asura-pan is a series of events in which all kinds of symbols become "fossilized symbols [symbols that solidify and become ideas]" without being suspended. Then, this can be asked: "What kind of attitude or meaning can an artist/art have?" It should not be an aesthetic language limited to "fossilized symbols" such as images of animism, but a "living language" (活語) before the birth of aesthetics (美學前夜) and a voice mediated by a shaman.

"MAT, BOAT, CARPET - my mat, a boat for family", a large carpet for all<sup>10</sup> was made by cutting and weaving about 1,000 plastic bottles. There were a mat for one person to lie on and a boat for a family to ride on. The mat and the boat were at the limit situation of being pushed out. She slipped in a rug carpet there.

When it is said that, the foreground (前景) is the reality in front of our eyes and the background (後景) is the projected world like a shadow on the other side of reality, then asura-pan is a world where both these grounds join together. Thus, only the shaman can conduct the world. The shaman identity shows the 21<sup>st</sup>-century artist's prescient identity. There is Ha's aesthetic foresight in the rug carpet she put in.

Ha does not separate her art from her life. Because she doesn't believe that art stays in the studio. Always gazing at a biased reality from a non-erroneous perspective, she creates works that "finally exist." Moreover, she goes into the other side of the "tilted reality" and calls up the scenes of loss trapped within it. We witness these scenes.

We take a peek at the actions she created and caused with her body, and imagine the ecstasy of her act of exorcism. In the place where the events of the reality have passed over to the exhibition, we witness a new aesthetic event arising again. It is an art that leaves us speechless. The absurd society is revealed.

We should not perceive the background (後景) to be the same as the reality in front of us. Isn't the background a world where the symbolism of surrealism or unreality projected from reality is ecstatically created? It also becomes reality when the world of the background is represented and forms the foreground.

The two are in mutual relationship like the baby's belly button and the mother's umbilical cord with no hierarchy, between them, so that neither of them can be only true or original.

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<sup>9</sup> These words were taken from a conversation with the artist in Alternative Space Loop.

<sup>10</sup> This work was made from plastic water bottles and twines and trips of twine; it was produced in 1988/2021.

Artists-shamans, and shaman-artists are subjects who can access the background world that provides the basis of existence for the foreground of the reality world in which we live.

Shamanic artists get a glimpse of the truth of life in the gaps of time's disconnection and continuity. Only shamanic artists can see asuras in the background. The background is full of chaos, but there is cosmos in that fullness.

It is only through the mediating bodies of shamanic artists that the background extends its power to the foreground and crosses over into it. Their mouths burst with incomprehensible words, goosebumps-bringing songs, and spirit-meeting humming voices. The realism of the background is finally embodied in the shamans' mouths, and thus it becomes "shamanic realism."

Beauty (美) has a structure that cannot sustain continuous vitality (生動) unless the beauty itself is dismantled and divided when the concept of beauty is established. It can be said that East Asian shaman artists have long maintained such a structure of beauty through a spirituality close to faith.

This is the reason why Shitao (石濤) said in his painting theory, in the distant past, that there were no principles [法:美] and even a large log was not scattered, but once the log was scattered, Dharma was finally established.

Aesthetics are born through "dispersion," namely, a new transposition of disintegration and division.

#### **#4. Mourning art: planting seeds of new art now and here**

In the era of great shamans, the arts are not separated but instead become harmonized (總和). Genres –"painting, sculpture, photography, video or literature, theater and fine arts"– are no longer distinct. This phenomenon has already been evident in the works of many artists. The transformation of an exhibition space within an art museum into a literary text or a sudden transformation of a small theater into a media space for art is not an incident but is instead a natural phenomenon. This is not a matter of space or location, but is also expressed in the critical awareness mind that shamanic artists' fields of action do not necessarily have limitations with regard to the concept of space.

In addition, artists who have leapt into the scene of events in reality curate a very direct shamanic art-exorcism. Beauty conceives, exhausts, resurrects, and matures there.

Beauty is not a byproduct of exorcism, but tears, joy and sound serve as the condensation of exorcism. If ancient shamans reached the level of incarnation through words and dance, shamanic artists of this present age will reach that level as a form of creative beauty. The embodiment, the incarnation, and the stage of beauty are not separate, but exist in one indivisible body.

The world aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism in the 20th century are similar to the strategy of imperialist rule pursued by the world of neoliberalism or supercapitalism. Intentionally or not, Western aesthetics quickly flattened the uniquely - created fragments of a cracked world into a single structure of universal aesthetics.

They continue to dismantle and divide the beauty within them, and to spread ruptures ceaselessly; but paradoxically, the aesthetics of the third world they sow was stuck in outdated doctrines and ideas.

It was not until the second half of the 20th century that artists from the third world again began to break down and dismantle the monolithic aesthetic system, creating fine fissures within it. Perhaps this is the moment when world aesthetics begins to crack again and to overcome the lag of contemporaneity with consistent change in a fragmented state. For a long time, Ha Cha Youn has been showing the way in this endeavor.

Translated by Sun A Moon