



siren eun young jung, 정동의 막 *Act of Affect*, 2013, single-channel video, HD colour, stereo, 20min. Documentation of performance at Atelier Hermes, Seoul. Courtesy the artist

## Acts of Affect: siren eun young jung's *Yeoseong Gukgeuk Project*

– Ashley Chang

siren eun young jung's *Yeoseong Gukgeuk Project* (여성국극 프로젝트, 2008-ongoing) attends to the remnants and remainders of *yeoseong gukgeuk* (여성국극), a little-known form of performance that first emerged in Korea during the 1940s. Today, *yeoseong gukgeuk* is on the verge of extinction. With its melodramatic tales of war and romance, set to the plaintive drumming of the barrel-shaped *buk* (북), *yeoseong gukgeuk* resembles a more popular style of Korean opera known as *changgeuk* (창극), usually performed by men. What distinguishes

queer theorist Jack Halberstam has called 'female masculinity', a category of gender expression that challenges men's claim to manhood.<sup>1</sup> As Halberstam argues, 'masculinity does not belong to men' and 'has not been produced only by men'.<sup>2</sup> In *yeoseong gukgeuk*, masculinity is neither skewered nor imitated. Rather, masculinity is *generated* – through precise modulations of 'voice, gesture, emotion and attitude', in the words of one of its practitioners.<sup>3</sup> *Yeoseong gukgeuk* demonstrates that gender is both malleable and makeable.

**In *Acts of Affect*, siren eun young jung returns to the disappearing *Yeoseong Gukgeuk* theatre. In her discussion of the project, Ashley Chang examines how masculinity is produced by women.**

it from *changgeuk* – and perhaps what consigns it to the peripheries of the Korean performing arts – is its queer regard for the fluidity and fragility of gender. Its ensembles consist only of women who, wearing *appliqué* beards and silken *hanboks* (한복), take to the stage as men in archetypal male roles: the hero, the joker, the villain.

In its approach to gender, *yeoseong gukgeuk* departs somewhat from its analogues in American drag culture. Preferring intense sincerity to the more playful sensibilities of camp and limiting their pursuits of hero/joker/villain realness to the theatrical stage, *yeoseong gukgeuk* performers do not trouble gender by parodying or passing as men; their aim is neither to mock manhood nor to impersonate it. Instead, the women of *yeoseong gukgeuk* push back against dominant forms of masculinity by producing one that is all their own: a masculinity without men. *Yeoseong gukgeuk* performers author, rather than appropriate, alternative manhoods that are no less real than those created by men. In doing so, they embody what

Simultaneously panoramic and kaleidoscopic, jung's *Yeoseong Gukgeuk Project* documents – through video, photography and installation – the time jung spent with several surviving *yeoseong gukgeuk* practitioners as they reflected on the origins and legacies of their craft. Assembled from nearly a decade's worth of exchanges with these women in their homes and at theatres, backstage and onstage, choreographed and improvised, jung's elegiac collection examines gender and its performance; reality and its representation; history and its telling; time and its passing. Death hangs over every piece: the first and second generations of performers are either dead or dying, and once they are gone, the tradition itself might not have much longer to live. In many ways, *yeoseong gukgeuk* is already beyond recovery. jung articulates its ongoing dispersal and disintegration by showing it in fragments, flung across media and gathered into an imagined – a wished-for – whole.

Though most of the women featured in *Yeoseong Gukgeuk Project* are 'grannies' (할머니), as jung calls them, a few are significantly younger than these older performers who are in their seventies and eighties.<sup>4</sup> jung's two-part piece *Act of Affect* (정동의 막, 2013) enlists Eunjin Nam (남은진), a latecomer to the tradition whose expertise lies in playing the romantic male lead, the *nimai* (니마이). Through Nam, who is in her forties, jung examines not just *yeoseong gukgeuk*'s unforeseeable future



but also the affective intensities that limn its wavering present. *Act of Affect* documents the ruins of *yeoseong gukgeuk* through what literary scholar Heather Love calls the ‘forms of ruined subjectivity’ created by its gradual loss – a ruination that is, Love says, inescapably part of ‘the history of queer experience’.<sup>5</sup> In keeping, then, with the investments in affect that have long informed queer and feminist theory and politics,<sup>6</sup> *Act of Affect* offers an account of *yeoseong gukgeuk*’s decline through an intimate catalogue of feeling: the boredom of rehearsal, the pleasure of becoming a man, the torment of obscurity, the thrill of doing it anyways. Affects, here, give

specific texture and shape to the larger social structures that have worn away at *yeoseong gukgeuk*, its culture and its communities, making it possible to see how the effects of patriarchy and homophobia emerge at the level of individual experience. Nam’s delight is marred by frustration and despair, a constellation of affects painfully particular to her experience as an artist whose art approaches its end and, moreover, as a queer figure whose very queerness is at risk of displacement and disarticulation.

By foregrounding affect, jung translates Nam’s losses into the language of the body, and of Nam’s body in particular. These losses are hard to describe in ordinary

siren eun young jung, *경동의 막 Act of Affect*, 2013, single channel video, HD colour, stereo, 15min 36sec. Courtesy the artist

language because the experience that is being lost – the experience of becoming a man in a folktale played before an audience – is rare to the point of lacking much precedent in contemporary Korean culture. There are few references Nam can make to talk about *yeoseong gukgeuk* and what it is like to keep doing it as it disappears. As Halberstam has observed, female masculinity tends to be ‘indefinable’ and ‘unspeakable’, standing as ‘all that cannot be absorbed into systems of signification, legitimation, legibility, recognition, and legality’.<sup>7</sup> jung’s interest in the body – in its affects and its expressions – allows *yeoseong*

*gukgeuk* to remain unassimilable, existing somewhere beyond everyday speech. For jung, explanations of Nam’s suffering would only go so far. Better just to let these feelings be felt.

#### ***Act of Affect: Performance***

The public performance of *Act of Affect* took place in 2013 at Atelier Hermès, an exhibition hall in the Gangnam district of Seoul (서울 강남). Throughout the piece, Nam’s voice slips in and out of a masculine register of delivery, with her appearance sometimes easing and sometimes vexing the overall readability of her gender.



This slippage, borne out through careful adjustments to the tone of her voice, underscores the dynamic process of journeying towards and into manhood. To become a man is, for Nam, to shuttle through various iterations of masculinity. She hovers in hybridity and half-tones just as often as she settles someplace stable.

The piece begins with a musical demonstration marked by ambivalence: between masculinity and femininity, between senescence and youth, between performance and rehearsal. As the performance gets underway, Nam starts by singing a Korean folk song: ‘I was once a youth’, she croons, her voice deep, ‘and I am a pathetic old man now, with my snowy hair’. The old man’s lament sits at odds with her apparent youth and femininity. This incommensurability comes without pomp or pageantry: the plurality of her identity is casual, even noncommittal. For

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much of the song, she hovers in an empty corner of the exhibition, singing to no one in particular. She appears not to be performing – just rehearsing. As the song goes on, however, she gradually lifts her posture and acknowledges the crowd. She concludes it in the centre of the room, fan gallantly unfurled. What begins as an almost private warm-up becomes a public performance, confident in its multiple dualities. She is not *between* masculinity and femininity, senescence and youth, performance and rehearsal; she is *both* masculine and feminine, old and young, performing and rehearsing, all at once.

Nam shifts, then, to her speaking voice, a soft alto that corresponds more smoothly with her body. She proceeds to give a short talk on *yeoseong gukgeuk*, taking special care to explain that she first took up the craft ten years ago in order to have the honour of creating a character who is, she says, ‘female and male at the same time’. She confesses, however, that she is not famous, nor does she have any upcoming shows, nor are

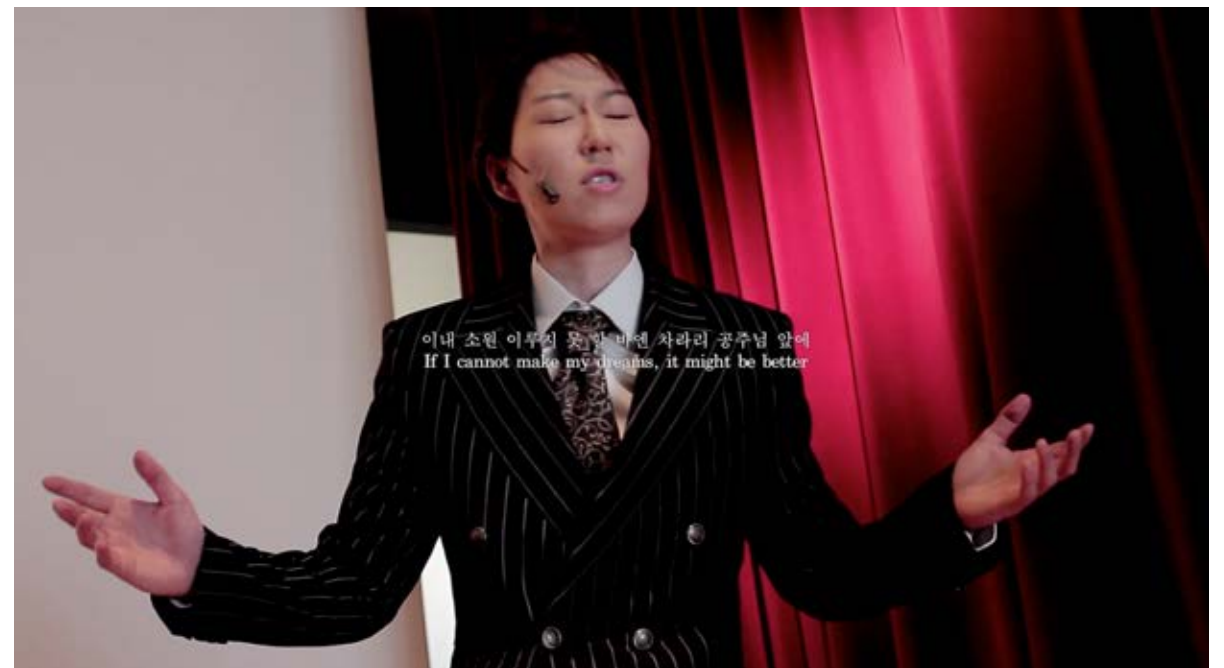
there enough performers to keep *yeoseong gukgeuk* alive. ‘There lies my tragedy’, she tells the audience, her countenance grim. She is a performer with no opportunities to perform.

Upon sharing these accounts of longing and admissions of failure, she retreats to a clothing rack in a makeshift hallway flanked on one side by a wall and on the other by a red velvet curtain. The audience lingers at one end of the narrow corridor. Facing away from them, Nam takes off her shirt, revealing her bound chest. She dons a buttoned dress shirt, switches out her espadrilles for leather oxfords, unrolls her cuffed slacks, slips into a matching blazer and tightens a tie around her neck.

When she turns back to the audience, her eyes are steely, her demeanour firm and her voice low. Though she moves little, she gives off energy like heat: she simmers, she radiates, she is white-hot. In becoming a man, she produces what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call ‘a bloc of sensations’, a bundle of vibrations that escape fixity and convention.<sup>8</sup> With her transformation, made complete by the sonorous timbre of her voice, the whole atmosphere becomes charged and the audience enraptured. There is a ‘boiling’ in her heart, she says, and not because passion is the purview solely of men but because this is what it feels like for her to become a man.

Her ardour, she goes on, is coupled with a sense of feeling at home in such attire, a sense of *belonging* (a ‘comfortable unity’) and, at the same time, a sense of *unbelonging* (an ‘unexplainable strangeness’). The exhilaration of being both whole and divided is, for Nam, irreducible. ‘What can I say?’ she asks, by which she seems to mean: ‘Nothing can be said, not really.’ Her experience eludes easy explanation, so she resorts, ultimately, to metaphor. She tells her audience that whenever she finds herself onstage and the curtains open, she imagines her former self sitting in the audience, a mental picture that always makes her smile: ‘I, who is me and not me at the same time, am smiling on and off the stage.’ Her two selves – though split across time, split across gender and split, too, across the threshold of the stage – are affectively united, their smiles in impossible harmony.

The harmony Nam shares with her former self cannot shift the course of her tragedy, however, and the smile that concludes *Act of Affect* makes no pledge of



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hope. The performance ends, as it began, with a song. This time, her words reveal the perspective of a young man. ‘Better to die in front of a princess’, she keens. ‘That would be my land of happiness. Do not hold back and do not hang on. Living is hell if you don’t solve (*sic*) your wishes’. The yearning of the character that she embodies echoes her own yearning for *yeoseong gukgeuk*’s survival, for chances to perform, to play the hero. The verse enunciates her character’s feelings as well as her own. The verse also underscores the painful reality of her situation: while his wishes might come true, hers are likely never to come to pass. As she sings, she walks away from the audience. Finally, she disappears behind the curtain with an enigmatic smile. She smiles without any great faith that the future might somehow turn out differently. Rather, as if to shift focus to the present or even to the past, she smiles for herself – for *herselves*.

#### ***Act of Affect: Video***

The live performance at Atelier Hermès explores the complex bundle of feelings associated with Nam’s production of masculinity. These feelings find their clearest expression only obliquely, through metaphor, song and gesture rather than through ordinary speech. Jung’s short film *Act of Affect*, by contrast, attends to the more existential questions of *yeoseong gukgeuk*’s inevitable dissolution and impossible reconstitution.<sup>9</sup> In other words, while the performance feels its way through the process of becoming male, the film considers

what it feels like to stand inside a fast-collapsing form.

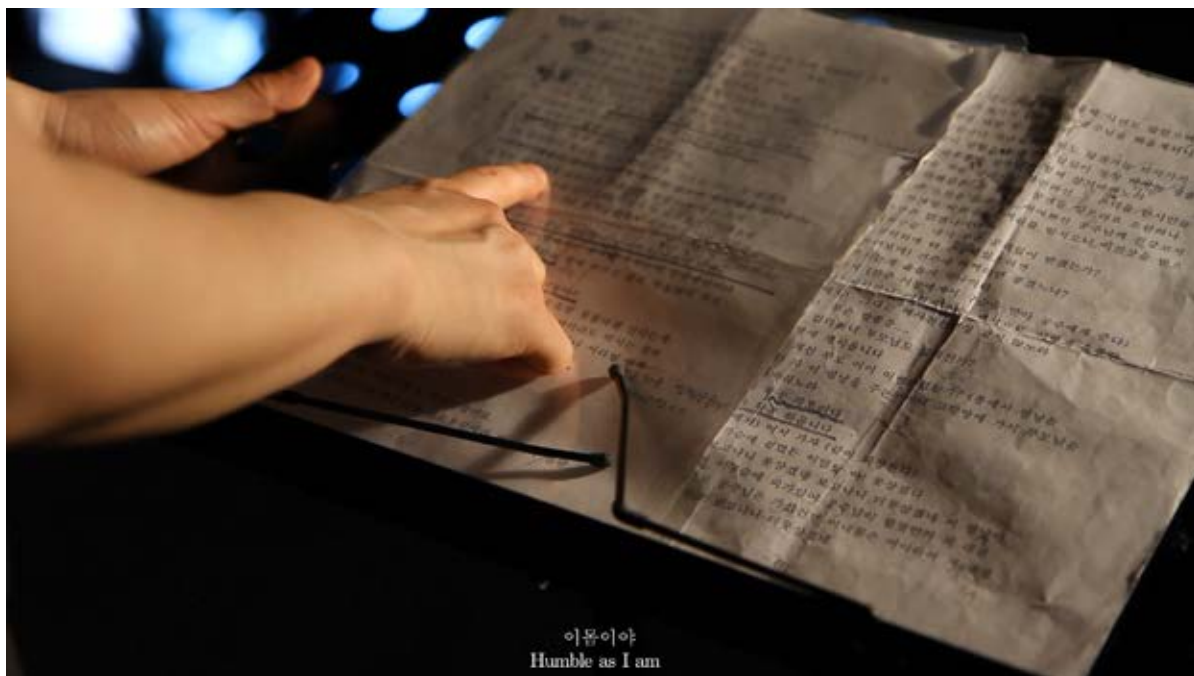
Just fifteen minutes long, the single-channel video begins on the verge of a performance. Nam stands centre stage, behind a closed curtain, in full *hanbok* and make-up. The viewer shares in her excitement and anticipation as she takes several breaths. When the curtain opens, the camera stays on her face. It is not possible to see what she sees – a full house, perhaps, or, more likely, an empty one. For the viewer, the performance is made hypothetical through its indefinite deferral, though for Nam, the conditions of the performance are known and, whatever they are, worth standing. She remains onstage, steadfast.

The video then moves into an extended montage of images and sounds from rehearsal. Here, Jung captures the acute sense of loss hovering over *yeoseong gukgeuk*. The impossibility of its restoration and revitalisation is partially reversed through a strategically incomplete and inchoate strategy of collage. Split across four frames, the camera records haphazard close-ups of her fan as it spreads; her torso as she turns; her neck as she sings; her feet as she runs across the black vinyl floor; her body prone on the floor. Moving in and out of frames, Nam is pictured in pieces, her body fractured and her selves multiplied. Jung reveals Nam’s isolation and, by picturing her in busy company with herself, somewhat relieves it. Though Nam might be lonesome, that lonesomeness is coupled with a discipline and desire that surround and sustain her.



이내 청춘 더러우리  
My youth is not tainted





Opposite and previous spread: siren eun young jung, 정동의 막 *Act of Affect*, 2013, single channel video, HD colour, stereo, 15min 36sec. Courtesy the artist



Nam's preparations continue in a dressing room, where the components of her masculinity appear in parts, prostheses separate from body and body severed from voice. As the camera pans slowly across a table, Nam caresses its contents: a fake beard and a roll of cloth bandage. Suddenly her voice breaks through. 'Better to die in front of a princess', she belts off-screen. 'That would be my land of happiness.' Her singing continues as, with deep familiarity, she applies make-up and changes into her *hanbok* before a mirror. Here, again, she is figured multiply - in objects, through voice,

in the mirror - as if to compensate for her total isolation.

As the final scene reveals, Nam is alone backstage and everywhere else as well. In the theatre, the audience is entirely absent - except for her. She sits, as the man she has just become, in the empty house, surrounded by a sea of red velvet seats. The stage is empty, too, until she walks down the centre aisle and stands upon it. When she turns back around to face the audience, she sees herself, still as a man, sitting where she had just been sitting. She smiles and, upon smiling, turns her back on the absent

audience - and on the version of herself seated there. Then the curtain closes. The camera sweeps through the house, which is now empty.

In contrast to the presentation at Atelier Hermès, which shows a performance before a live audience, the video shows the preparations for performance and, ultimately, the impossibility of performance. Without an audience, Nam cannot perform. Nevertheless, in full possession of her masculinity, she enters the stage. Once she does so, there is nothing to say - nothing is *sayable*. All she can do is be there and, finally, turn away. Her masculinity, which arises only in the context of *yeoseong gukgeuk*, has come to fruition in spite of the failure of that context to receive it. In a gesture of refusal, then, she turns away from the public arena of performance - away from the expectation of attention and the consolation of applause - and retreats backstage, deeper into the theatre, into a space of unreality, the only space that can accommodate her queer reality.

#### Queer Pasts and Futures

*Yeoseong Gukgeuk Project* was most recently presented at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019. Curated for the Korean Pavilion by Hyunjin Kim, the exhibition takes its title - 'History Has Failed Us, but No Matter' - from the first sentence of Min Jin Lee's 2017 novel *Pachinko*, which follows four generations of an impoverished family through the Korean diaspora. Too often, Lee observes, historical archives omit or occlude 'all illiterate people and those

who do not have others recording their lives in real time'.<sup>10</sup> Her novel attempts to redress these unjust omissions and occlusions, and the exhibition follows suit.

Though not shown as part of the exhibition, *Act of Affect* also participates in the work of redress. jung submits to the archive an account of *yeoseong gukgeuk*, speaking to its collapse, to its misfires and to its heartbreaks. Though *Act of Affect* is hardly an optimistic contribution, it constitutes a crucial index of queer loss. In *Feeling Backward* (2007), Heather Love proposes embracing the past - with all the 'suffering' and 'abjection' that the past entailed for queers - in order to envision a future that includes more than just pride, celebration and triumph, the mainstays of mainstream LGBTQI politics.<sup>11</sup> 'I insist on the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury', Love says, because melancholia, shame and stigma 'cannot be uncoupled' from queer subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> As such, Love's approach to history is neither affirmative nor redemptive nor beholden to the demands of positivity and progress. Instead, it is 'forged in the image of exile, of refusal, even of failure'.<sup>13</sup> Along these lines, jung recognises and reckons with the cluster of negative affects that have become so central to *yeoseong gukgeuk*: exasperation, resignation, loneliness and longing. To allow for experiences of exclusion is to forge a more inclusive queer politics - not by moving on from these feelings of hurt but by making space for them.

1 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.  
 2 *Ibid.*, p.241.  
 3 *Act of Affect* (performance), dir. siren eun young jung, 2013, 19min 35sec, available at <http://www.sirenjung.com/index.php/yeosung-gukgeuk-project/act-of-affect-performance-2013/> (last accessed on 5 November 2019).  
 4 siren eun young jung, 'In Place of a Preface', *Yeoseong Gukgeuk Project* (ed. Sohyun Ahn), Seoul: Forum A, 2016, p.183.  
 5 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007, p.162.  
 6 Sarah E. Chinn, 'Queer Feelings/Feeling Queer: A Conversation with Heather Love about Politics, Teaching, and the "Dark, Tender Thrills" of Affect', *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, vol.22, no.2, 2012, pp.124-31.  
 7 J. Halberstam, 'Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition', in *Female Masculinity*, *op. cit.*, pp.xx-xxi.  
 8 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell), New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.167.  
 9 *Act of Affect* (video), dir. siren eun young jung, 2013, 15min 36sec, available at <http://www.sirenjung.com/index.php/yeosung-gukgeuk-project/act-of-affect-2013/> (last accessed on 5 November 2019).  
 10 Elizabeth Flock, 'Min Jin Lee annotates the first page of her bestselling book "Pachinko"', *PBS NewsHour*, PBS, 9 July 2018, available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/min-jin-lee-annotates-the-first-page-of-her-bestselling-book-pachinko> (last accessed on 12 October 2019).  
 11 H. Love, *Feeling Backward*, *op. cit.*, p.30.  
 12 *Ibid.*  
 13 *Ibid.*, p.71.