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AS IT IS BECOMING

JIN-ME YOON

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When do I crawl? Why do I crawl? Where do I crawl? What do I feel when I crawl? What do I see when I crawl? What do I smell when I crawl? What do I taste when I crawl?

When do you crawl? Why do you crawl? Where do you crawl? What do you feel when you crawl? What do you see when you crawl? What do you smell when you crawl? What do you taste when you crawl?

Who do I see crawl? When do I see them crawl? Why do I see them crawl? Where do I see them crawl? How will I see them crawl? What do I feel seeing them crawl? What do I see watching them crawl? What do I smell when seeing them crawl? What do I taste when seeing them crawl?

Who do you see crawl? When do you see them crawl? Why do you see them crawl? Where do you see them crawl? How will you see them crawl? What do you feel seeing them crawl? What do you see watching them crawl? What do you smell when seeing them crawl? What do you taste when seeing them crawl?

In his recent essay, “Saying and Doing,” Robert Storr laments contemporary art’s confusion about the difference between praxis and practice, arguing that, as opposed to practice/critique as an end in itself (of which Storr is highly wary), praxis at minimum requires engaging in some activity for a period of time that will test one’s ideas against the reality one seeks to address.¹ Storr argues against using politics as an artistic platform if the artist has never experienced social upheaval or participated in practical forms of political organization. He maintains that the application of political critique to the art practice of many—without the artist demonstrating a methodology of sustained activity of measurable outcomes—is meaningless.

In *As It Is Becoming*, Jin-me Yoon presents a problem of praxis and cognitive dissonance to the viewer. The repetitive process-based activity of crawling in contested political sites that she performs and presents in video format collapses personal perspective and body with history and cultural memory. Outside benign circumstances of infancy, play, and sexual recreation, humans primarily crawl in illness, in moments of threat, and during acts of submission, degradation, ambush, and escape. Bipedalism as a primary mode of bodily movement is an exclusively human trait. Chronic quadruped movement in a mature human is typically understood as reflecting either a compromised state of mental capacity or a chronic illness. Illnesses that require an adult human to crawl are considered an affliction. When one crawls, there is no overarching perspective that provides optic continuity with the surrounding environment. Contemporary understanding of cognitive dissonance is rooted in Leon Festinger’s idea that although most of our cognitions are completely unrelated, sometimes they are, and sometimes these related cognitions do not line up with one another. When our cognitions are quite oppositional, an internal conflict (“dissonance”) arises that we seek to reconcile based on

our pre-existing beliefs and personal convenience. This is the juggernaut of *As It Is Becoming*: the struggle between saying and doing, and how cognitive dissonance runs rampant within attempts to unfurl and clearly demarcate the activities being enacted and presented to the viewer by the video performer.

The fifteen videos comprising the exhibition are looped; the depicted sites for the activity are historically and materially non-sequential. The videos themselves are presented in one of three formats. Eleven appear in the main gallery on square black monitors placed directly on the floor with cords snaking to the various power sources within the darkened gallery. For this mode of presentation, the viewer is required to either kneel down to view the works or stand to survey the installation as a material whole. Two videos appear as medium-sized wall projections; one is within the monitor-populated space while the other is given a room of its own. Bridging the space between the primary areas of installation display are two videos on wall-mounted flat-screen television monitors. Within the fifteen videos a black-clad figure of inconclusive age and gender crawls face and belly down upon a modified skateboard in real time, pulling herself/himself along with bandaged hands. The expanses being crawled are a former U.S. Army base and Atomic Treatment Centre in Beppu, Japan, and the urban spaces of Seoul, Korea. The viewer is provided multiple stationary views of the figure's activity in order to digitally bear witness to the pilgrimage of the crawler and the urban environments s/he undertakes. The crawling figure is miked at the chest, which heightens the viewer's awareness of the crawling figure's panting breath and the popcorn grinding of the skateboard wheels. The sounds of the figure's surroundings push and pull at the top levels of the audio recording, intermittently obliterating the constants of the figure's breathing and dragging. The gallery viewer watches scenes of the figure struggling in unpopulated isolation or being ignored,

looked at, and avoided by the people and cars commuting the streets and passageways as s/he presses alongside garbage, the tires of parked and moving cars, electrical posts, street barriers, and stamping feet. In some of the video, the camera records the process from high above, transforming the horizontal crawling body into an undulating form suspended upon the vibrating surface of the video image.

The depictions of muscular pilgrimage presented on floor-based video monitors fold the performer's first-person ground-level perspective of physical/environmental immediacy with that of the video-mediated and privileged standing position of the viewer within the leisure site of the gallery. The comfort of the vertical viewer is in stark contrast to the discomfort of the quadruped video performer. This contrast of site, activity, and effort is confrontational since it places the viewer in the position of dispassionate aesthete, gazing upon a struggling performer who refuses to provide disinterested aesthetic contemplation. The spaces being traversed are also collapsed within history and cultural memory. The legacy of American and Japanese colonialism in Seoul is a past moment with the city now being one of the most wired and technologically advanced societies on the planet. The location of the former U.S. Army base and Atomic Treatment Centre in Japan is now one of the country's most famous areas for hot spring resorts, which, again, draws our gaze back to the gallery as a fraught site for political activism. The undertow of leisure and commerce constantly threatens to make a strange and disagreeable creature out of the video crawler.

In terms of dedication to labour and effort, Seoul financially and socially rewards the gruelling twelve-hour training days of its professional video gamers (exclusively males who range from their teens to early twenties). These superstars play on massive indoor screens in large public arenas packed to capacity with avid fans. The South

Korean government allocates over \$100 million each year towards the development and promotion of this gaming industry and, backed by sponsors like Samsung, superstar gamers are allowed to postpone mandatory military service until their gamer career is over. In *As It Is Becoming*, the eleven videos presented on floor-based monitors are accompanied by a wall projection of the crawling figure on hands and knees, moving around a circle median in a busy traffic intersection of Seoul's downtown core (it is the only video in the exhibition where the performer is crawling without the aid of the modified skateboard). Unlike the other videos, this projection is flipped upside down so that the activity of endurance becomes a nod to the celluloid trickery of early Hollywood motion pictures, which releases the crawler from the position of an alienated martyr of indeterminate affliction to that of a knowing actor performing a cinematic wink to the gaze of the viewer. The inverted video is aggressively perspectival; the crawler is both framed and eclipsed by huge skyscrapers housing built-in mega monitors for the projection of images. Here, the black-clad crawling figure becomes bug-like, defying gravity as s/he circles the flipped image plane. Compared to the mega monitors of Seoul's city centre and the arena screens provided to its gaming heroes, the technology used within *As It Is Becoming* is pointedly bare-bones, looking back to the post-minimalist and conceptual video practices of a vastly different consumerist culture. The fact that the superstar gamers of South Korea have access to the most up-to-date technology and are temporarily immune from mandatory military service makes the Cold War era references within *As It Is Becoming* a social and technological haunting. The work functions as a memento mori within the commercial mechanisms of the gallery.

By "crawling" the contentious socio-historical flux of her chosen sites and presenting her efforts by way of video documentation within a gallery setting, Yoon enmeshes

theory and praxis through bodily performance. But the endgame here is not to resolve the contradictory conflicts within her sites or reconcile the dialectical tension between the privileged arm's length viewer position of the gallery goer/art patron with the physical efforts and bodily risk of the performer/artist. Rather, the work is a death head, sustaining a minefield of simultaneously contradictory thoughts and feelings. Ambivalence purposefully runs roughshod within the work. As much as crawling can be seen as a marker of weakness or disadvantage, it can also be a most useful and pernicious tactic for ambush and domination. And while we like to think of ourselves as empathetic beings, watching someone displaying a perceived weakness can illicit our fear and contempt as much as it can call us to productive action and assistance; depending upon our pre-existing knowledges and beliefs, thoughts can easily wander to what the person has done to deserve their present predicament.

Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine
 Meltin' in a pot of thieves
 Wild card up my sleeve
 Thick heart of stone
 My sins my own
 They belong to me, me
 [...]
 Here she comes
 Walkin' down the street
 Here she comes
 Comin' through my door
 Here she comes
 Crawlin' up my stair
 Here she comes
 Waltzin' through the hall
 In a pretty red dress
 And oh, she looks so good, oh, she looks so fine
 And I got this crazy feeling that I'm gonna ah-ah make her mine
 [...]

—Patti Smith, "Gloria" (1975)

Jin-me Yoon's video performance and performative persona recalls the activism and tough-mindedness of a period of post-minimalist performance, when the art market did not yet eclipse the motives and agency of an artist seeking to question and resist the commercialization of art and everyday life. Yoon's scholarship and art praxis has consistently scrutinized and lay bare notions of identity, self, and how we view and understand others around us. *As It Is Becoming* literally crawls these issues out by building an environment of disruption and uncertainty within the gallery that antagonizes the activities and pleasures of our unreflexive territorial occupation and cultural consumption.

NOTES

1. Robert Storr, "Saying and Doing," *Frieze* 125 (September 2009), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/saying_doing (accessed 15 September 2009).