

Conceptual Footnotes on the ‘Translation’ series by Meekyoung Shin

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The late 1980s and early 1990s were a dynamic time for South Korea: the 1988 Seoul Olympics evoked cultural pride and financial confidence, while the long struggle for democratisation culminated in the election of a civilian president in 1992. During this time globalisation began to truly take hold in Korea: restrictions on overseas travel were removed and a wave of students began studying abroad and taking backpacking trips to different parts of the world. Many art students visited prestigious museums in Europe, hoping to see the classic masterpieces they knew only from art history books.

The artist Meekyoung Shin was one of the early South Korean pilgrims to Western Europe when she traveled there on her way to London to study at the Slade School of Art in the mid-1990s. Shin’s art is deeply rooted in her experience of different cultures and it was her visits to European museums during this trip that first caused her to reconsider the Western value system and the process of modernisation in South Korea that was strongly influenced by the West. Upon seeing the Parthenon in Athens and the Elgin marbles at the British Museum, London, Shin was drawn to the contextual gaps between the original site of the statues, their display in a museum and her art education that had started from copying Greek statues. Many questions arose. Why had those artefacts been stripped of their original context of religious worship and displayed as art objects? Why have I been taught to believe that the Greek marble statues from the Classical period are the canon of beauty? How has the aesthetic lineage been established between ancient Greece, modern Europe and contemporary Korea?

Shin’s art is a constant process of trying to answer the questions ‘why’, as the facts, customs and perceptions that once seemed self-evident become strange and unfamiliar during her life in the United Kingdom, where she moved to study in 1995. Just as Descartes’s methodological

skepticism moved the axis of philosophy from the realm of the divine to humanity, the critical observation of cultural differences or misinterpretations provided Shin with an entirely new direction.

Translation

Glancing through Shin's notes, one repeatedly comes across words beginning with the prefix 'trans-', which can mean either 'to cross' or 'to go beyond': 'translation', the act of traversing languages; 'transportation', the act of traversing spaces; 'transition', the act of traversing phases or conditions. These words exemplify Shin's entire existence, as she is constantly breaking away from, interrupting and insinuating the boundaries between different cultures. Since 2000, Shin has been crafting reproductions of museum artefacts using a very unique material: soap. She calls these the Translation Series (2006–ongoing), because the works might represent the 'products of continuous translation which reflects my existence and life'. [1]

In *Experiences in Translation*, Umberto Eco writes: 'translation is always a shift, not between two languages, but between two cultures'. [2] As such, effective translation requires more than just the linguistic knowledge and sense of the translator; the cultural context of the original must also be fully understood. But unlike most translators, Shin is not necessarily concerned with producing an accurate or correct translation based on her comprehensive knowledge and experience. Instead, she intentionally aims at mis-translation to highlight the disjunction between the source language and target language. When viewed in the context of her choice of material and her entire production process, a gap emerges from the visual correlation between the original and the reproduction.

In the Translation Series, Shin makes reproductions in soap of museum artefacts such as Greek marble statues from the Classical period and porcelains from Korea or China. The artist has coined a term to describe the process by which those artefacts become utterly de-contextualised

from their original time and space: ‘relic-ification’. Soap is very malleable, making it easier for Shin to recreate the relic-ification process, but that is not the main reason why it is her preferred material. For Shin, soap plays a crucial role in allowing her to accent the ‘clue of mistranslation’. Shin intentionally uses soap with a distinctive scent to prevent people from mistaking her reproduction for the original and to guide the viewer’s attention to her own narrative, which inherently lies in the gap. In making her reproductions, Shin is not fundamentally interested in the specific source or background of the original, her intended narrative emerges from elsewhere.

In the early works of her Translation Series, Shin focused on faithfully reproducing Greek marble statues. But in 2000, she began making strategic changes. This is exemplified by Shin’s reproductions of works by Praxiteles, a sculptor of the Hellenistic period, which she transformed into self-portraits. The original Crouching Aphrodite, by Praxiteles, made in the third century BC, is no longer in existence, so Shin based her work on an illustration of what is believed to be a Roman copy, made some 500 years after the original. Shin’s version of the Crouching Aphrodite is certainly reminiscent of the Roman copy, but the artist insists that her sculpture, rather than the one she copied, has authenticity as an original work.

Over the course of the Translation Series, Shin has modified various secondary details of the works, such as the form or method of exhibition. In the meantime, she has consciously maintained two primary components: the direct reference to classical works (e.g., European marble sculptures or Chinese porcelains) and the use of soap, a substance that is completely different from the original materials. However, despite her technical mastery, Shin’s intended meaning emerges not from the aesthetic pleasure of the finished work, but from the process of subverting the hierarchy and value of the original and reproduction.

In the Toilet Project (2004–ongoing), Shin exhibits her soap sculptures in a toilet and encourages the audience to wash their hands with them in order to further accelerate the ‘relic-ification’ process that normally takes hundreds or thousands of years. In this project, after many people have used the sculptures to wash their hands, the misshapen forms are transferred back

into an exhibition space and displayed as aesthetic objects. The Weathering Project (2009–ongoing) can be seen as a spin-off of the Toilet Project. For this, Shin exhibits her delicate works outside, directly exposing them to erosion. This act of transitioning the value of the work is essential to Shin’s art, confirming that her overall process is just as important as the finished works of art themselves.

For her 2004 performance and exhibition in the Great Court at the British Museum, Shin added her own face to reproductions of Greek and Roman marble sculptures from the collection. She also added colours to these white marble works that had been stripped of any remaining original paint during the Victorian era. Some viewers may have felt a little awkward or uncomfortable at seeing a strange Asian face added to familiar Western classical images, and that is exactly the emotion Shin herself experienced when she saw relics from Greece at the British Museum. By adding her face to the sculptures, Shin makes herself a visual spectacle of the museum, thus invoking empathy for the complex emotions she felt after leaving Korea for the United Kingdom akin to artefacts being relocated from a temple to a museum.

In the 2006 show *Through the Looking Glass* at Asia House, London, Shin experimented with a new form of display by presenting soap replicas of Chinese porcelains alongside crates that they might have been packaged and transported in, thereby introducing a new context of ‘mobility’ to her works. Rather than being set neatly on a pedestal, her faux porcelain works were placed on rough wooden crates, as if they had just been taken out of the box. This gave the exhibition an unfinished look that shattered the traditional rhetoric of a museum installation, which aims to provide a complete narrative through sleek presentation. Here again Shin was innovatively challenging and negating the supposed authority of museums to judge historical and aesthetic values.

Museum

For Shin the museum is not only a source of inspiration, but also an object of doubt. In his article 'Exhibition Complex', Tony Bennett argues that visitors to museums are subject to a type of discipline and control. Museums strategically arrange the order of their displays and impose that order on their visitors, thereby covertly revealing the imperialistic aspects of the ruling class.[3] Additionally, Bennett examines how museums constitute the Western-centric view of history by organising exhibitions chronologically according to the development of works. The timeline adopted by most Western museums, beginning with the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, is a direct result of colonial rivalries among Western powers. Furthermore, the universally accepted history of ancient civilizations was constructed according to the results of archaeological excavations of the times, and thus converged with a region's modern history as a nation-state. These converged histories became the fundamental framework of nineteenth-century museums in the West. By this process, the rest of the world came to be defined as 'primitive' people and cultures that had not been the primary agents of history. Excluded from the Western-centric history, Asia and other 'non-Western' areas were reduced to a supplementary role highlighting Western superiority.[4] The discomfort that Shin experienced upon visiting the British Museum following her trip to the Parthenon in 1990 was perhaps due to the ideological apparatus that was devised, as read through Bennett, to solidify and eternalise the museum's imperialist perspective.

This attitude can be further explained by two contrasting approaches to the museum observed by Theodor W. Adorno, who criticised the museum's function of producing ideology in the 1960s. In his article Valery Proust Museum, Adorno compares Paul Valery's strict, critical views on museums with Marcel Proust's more flexible, positive views.[5] Valery expressed his discontent with museums chaotic distortion of the original context of objects, memorably comparing artefacts removed from temples and churches to 'abandoned children whose mother is dead'. [6] However, in spite of this chaotic and sometimes tragic effect, Proust argued that a work of art could be liberated from confinement to its function and become an entity of its own only when it is dead and separate from the order of life.[7]

In line with Adorno, Shin both directly and indirectly interferes with artefacts on view in a museum, effectively replacing Valery's negative views with Proust's positive ones. This switch

is exemplified by Moon Jar that Shin made from soap and exhibited in the Korean Gallery at the British Museum in 2007. During the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897), moon jars were everyday objects used to store food, but in the Japanese colonial era (1909–45), moon jars were re-contextualised as the representative artefact of Korean aesthetics and enclosed in glass showcases as an art object. Shin’s soap reproduction of a moon jar acquires another layer meaning by paradoxically shedding light on the jar’s original function – a household object, like soap – which was lost in colonial appropriation.

Ghosts

In recent years, Shin has been largely focusing on reproducing ceramics, including large, ornate works from China as well as modest celadons and white porcelains from Korea. Shin became interested in the fact that the types of Chinese ceramics that many Europeans collected during the nineteenth century were not the type that Chinese people used in their daily lives. In fact, many were produced for export specifically according to Western tastes. In other words, the ‘Chinese ceramics’ that Europeans so eagerly consumed were actually ‘Chinese-style European ceramics’.

As with her other recent works, Shin experiments with variations during the reproduction process. While she sometimes conveys her expert craftsmanship by meticulously copying the resplendent inlay designs of Chinese porcelains, other times she swaps the form or colour of Goryeo celadons and Joseon white porcelains, obfuscating their identities. For her Translation - Ghost Series (2007–ongoing), Shin removed all the surface details of the ceramics she reproduced, leaving only the form and the glass-like translucent colour, effectively evaporating the solid materiality of the object to leave behind only its trace. Shin titled these works Ghosts because they had been extricated from their outer shell to exist as vague shadows. A ghost is something that exists and mediates between the world of the living and the dead, as well as a trace left behind after the disappearance of the original. As such, the Translation - Ghosts Series can be seen as an unstable and dynamic entity that disturbs the order of bordering spaces. Writing about the trajectory of ideologies in the post-ideological era, Slavoj Žižek

addressed the idea of ghost or spectres, arguing that the ‘spectral apparitions’ of ideology are the symbolic fictions that seek to cover and suppress reality.[8] This concept can be read in Shin’s works, which question and dissect the modern value system that governs our consciousness.

Shin found the spectral apparitions of imperialist ideology not only in the de-contextualised artefacts in a museum, but also in the art education system. She often reminisces about her trip to Athens and visit to a Greek art school in 1990, where students were making drawings from classical sculptures. In Korea, high school art students take a practical test to enter an art college, wherein they are asked to complete a drawing from plaster casts of classical Greek and Roman marble sculptures within a certain time limit, in a similar manner to Greek students. However, although the students of Greece and Korea draw from the same statues, their interpretation of the objects cannot be the same.

In the Translation – Julian Project (2002), as part of her solo exhibition at Sungkok Art Museum, Seoul, Shin reenacted a practical test for entrance to an art college. For this performance, high school art students were invited to make a soap sculpture after a plaster bust of Giuliano de’ Medici, by Michelangelo, a work frequently used for the drawing test. In this process of art education, students are infused with the idea of classical art as a canon of beauty without knowledge of the relationship between the artist and the model, and without the historical and cultural background of art patronage during the Renaissance period. By doing this performance, Shin disturbed the persistent lesson of classical aesthetics and techniques in a playful way.

Shin does not compliantly accept nor conceitedly repel the spectral apparitions of Western supremacy that emerge from the symbolic fiction of ‘ideal beauty’ as taught in museums and art schools. Instead, she uses various materials and production processes to concretise the fictitious reality that such spectral apparitions attempt to evoke. The repeated process of reproducing a work in a way that is totally detached and unrelated to the original is not an exorcism; it is more like a game that Shin plays with the paradoxes arising from the gap

between the concept of ideal beauty and the reality of art education at established institutions, which is no different from the spectral apparitions of colonialism.

Epilogue

In the summer of 2012, Shin began *Written in Soap*:

A Plinth Project, a public artwork in Cavendish Square, located just behind Oxford Circus in London. Again Shin's goal was to reveal the inherent fallacy of the art system, symbolised here by historical monuments. Creating a large-scale equestrian statue, standing three metres high, the project not only exemplified Shin's sculptural expertise, but also enabled the artist to explore her favoured theme of cultural translation on an even grander scale. As passers-by stop to look at the statue from the street or in the public square, their various gazes and responses manifest an infinite series of translations of a former war hero who is now wandering through existence as a spectre of history.

All of her representative projects – *Translation*, *Museum*, *Ghost* – delineate undefined, unattached conditions and attributes that are constantly moving and changing in an intermediary zone, just as soap hovers between a solid and liquid state. These inscrutable conditions and attributes migrate from one language to another, from life to death, from living space to institutionalised space, and from memory to oblivion. By removing objects from their original spatial and temporal context, Shin exposes the gap between existence and reality.

This process is her way of contemplating her own life and art, which were transplanted into a different culture as a Korean emigrant in the United Kingdom. From her place on the boundary between different cultures, Shin cannot define her identity in a word. Indeed, she considers it a fact of life that her identity is constantly changing and taking on new meanings. For her, the

myriad experiences that she finds taking place at the contact point between cultures become subjects of translation, from which she produces endless variations in artistic languages.

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[1] Meekyoung Shin, 'The Concept of Translation', Translation (Seoul: Kukje Gallery, 2010), 249.

[2] Umberto Eco, Experiences in Translation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 17.

[3] Tony Bennett, "Exhibition Complex", New Formations 4 (1988): 77–79.

[4] Ibid., 89–90.

[5] Theodore W. Adorno, 'Valery Proust Museum', Prisms, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholsen

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 175.

[6] Ibid., 177.

[7] Ibid., 182.

[8] 'reality [. . .] presents itself only via its incomplete-failed symbolisation, and spectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality'; see Slavoj Zizek, 'The Spectre of Ideology' in Mapping Ideology, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London: Verso, 1994), 21.