

## COMMUNITY OF HANDS : Yun Suknam`s Wood-Dogs

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### 1. "I hope to live and die as a 'feminist' artist"

"I hope to live and die as a 'feminist' artist." With these words, Yun Suknam opened her second exhibition, <Mother's Eyes>, in 1993. That is what she remembers saying during her tribute to the passing of Jino Gaori, an art scholar who had contributed greatly to the development of the Japanese feminist movement. However this was neither a simple recollection nor a personal wish that had taken form through 'repeated affirmations.' It is also a question that the artist poses both to herself and feminist cultural activism in the context of the opening of the 'Dog Project,' her first exhibition in five years. In this exhibition, Yun Suknam leads the viewers of her two groups of 1,025 and 108 wood-dogs to an aesthetic experience of both surprise and compassion.

It is clear that her conviction that she had to become a social recluse, encountering only wood and remembering only dogs, in order to immerse herself in the carving of 1,025 wood-dogs, had its roots in her 1993 confession that, "Even though the scope of my work as a feminist artist may have narrowed, I believe in the future." Whose or what`s future did she believe in? Moreover, what kind of future? Of course, she probably believed in her future as an artist. Certainly, the one thousand plus wood-dogs that accompany her appearance are proof of the narrative range and philosophical depth of her belief. At the same time, her intuition and ability as an artist are founded in an extraordinary self-assurance. These qualities also resonate powerfully with feminisms in the forms of new world-views and interpretations.

At present, we are living in an era where art auctions are drawing the interest of the general public as an important site of financial investment, and where 'art products' sit next to luxury brand items to be enjoyed by consumers who want to be a bit more discerning and to possess unique things. It is also an era of neoliberal competition where everyone is forced to challenge themselves, while the meaning of their lives remains mortgaged to the market. In this generational context, the 'Wood-Dog' project, to which Yun Suknam has devoted five years of her life, provides an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on the feminist movement and to repose the question of feminist art itself.

"No matter how much the goal of creating art is said to change, the things at the

very bottom, such as the psychic energies that flow below the surface, don't change all that easily. What are 5 or 10 years when one has set one's mind to doing something at all costs? I am a person who is, in fact, used to thinking in decades.<sup>1)</sup>

If so, what is the context in which she set her mind to "doing this at all costs"(and did so in a lightening flash!)?

## **2. The community of hands: Creating bridges between ethics and aesthetics, and aesthetics and politics.**

To me, Yun Suknam's 'Wood-Dogs' project makes us reconsider the future of the contemporary feminist movement in two ways. One is feminism as a resistance movement against capitalism. The other is as a feminist discourse about the new ontologies that are appearing during this period of techno-culture and the new kinship networks that are forming on the basis of these ontologies (Haraway, 2003).

According to Lewis Mumford, there are two methods to design and create something new: 1) the agricultural method; and 2) the mining method (Mumford, 1961). Unlike mining projects, characterized by ruptures and discontinuities, destruction and deprivation, the things that are sacrificed and destroyed for the sake of creation within the agricultural method, become incorporated into that very process of creation. In other words, death, as a part of the cycle of reproduction and rebirth that sustains life, becomes incorporated into the concept of 'eternity.' Feminist artists' hands have created outstanding models of agricultural design and creation. Yun Suknam's "Wood-Dogs" project and Lee Aeshin's cohabitation with 1,025 abandoned dogs, which struck Yun like a bolt of lightning, can be said to have their roots in this long tradition of agricultural creation.

Look! Between the wood-dogs that fill up the exhibition space are two women. There is Lee Aeshin who lived in a metal trailer while raising more than 1,000 stray dogs, and Yun Suknam who spent five years of her life secluded from the outside world, working without rest in order to make sure that the stories contained in the wood and the experiences of the stray dogs would 'happily' meet. These two women work so hard during the day with their hands that when night falls, they sigh with exhaustion. They are workers! Just like Lee Aeshin's 'Dog Farm' is ultimately not a parable of a bucolic countryside, Yun Suknam's 'Wood-Dogs' cannot be reduced to the spectacle of consumer capitalism's cultural industry. Each of these dogs has to be taken care of and 'remembered' one by one. The impression that the work makes is inexpressible: it has to be experienced,

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1) The statements quoted here are from an interview with the artist on Dec.14, 2008

directly to be appreciated. Here, Yun Suknam works as an artist as a producer. However, contrary to Brecht, Yun Suknam's labor is a type of production that erases consumer capitalism. Resisting consumer capitalism, which, along with disposable products, casts aside even living things as 'garbage,' her two hands create things 'that cannot be consumed.' Among those things that should never be eliminated through consumption, and never be reduced to waste products, are living creatures, including humans.

But reality is different. Just as refugee detention centers are built in 'uninhabitable places,' humans are also becoming 'outcasts'. Biological life and social life are both becoming endangered that way (Bauman, 2005). Excluded from the welcoming embrace of the capitalist nationstate's life worlds, residents of dirty streets, urban slums, refugee camps, ghettos, and immigrant ghettos become 'surplus humans' reduced to 'bare life'(Agamben, 2002).

Dogs are not different. In many cases, the dogs that were abandoned in South Korea in the past couple of years were either presents exchanged without much thought between lovers or commodities bought in the course of consumer fads spread on the Internet. Alongside their 'surplus human' counterparts, these 'abandoned dogs'— victims of fickle consumer sentiment and affection within the contemporary capitalist, neoliberal system of power — are yelping silently against the system. Yun Suknam's project is an aesthetic response to these silent yelps, giving root to aesthetics in the soil of ethical sense and presenting them on the stage of politics.

This entire process where the abandoned dogs are 'gathered,' taken care of, then represented as 'Wood-Dogs,' reminds us of a particular practice of (re)distribution that has existed since ancient times. Within the Jewish communities represented within the Old Testament, only nine tenths of the grain was harvested from the fields. The remainder was left for women without husbands, vagabonds, people without homes, or those with homes but were poor. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ declares that tithes are God's share of production. Women without husbands, vagabonds, and beggars are precisely the God's living on the earth's surface.

Sixteenth century French law also came up with a similar ruling. After harvest, poor people, destitute people, people who did not have other forms of subsistence, had the right to harvest the rest of the grain. The only provision was that this harvesting had to be done between dawn and dusk. One can thus see how selfish desires and accumulation that form the central logic of the capitalist system are contrary to the spirit of just (re)distribution — the basis of any community.

*In The Gleaners and I* (2000), the 'older' female director, Agnes Varda, discovers in these 'women who glean' the prototypical images of an anti-capitalist activism or psychology. These are women who humbly bend their backs to gather grain or fruit deemed without commodity value in late capitalist societies, where all things are given their value and legitimacy for life through the logic of the commodity. Or they salvage useful things that have been thrown in the 'garbage' as people's desires become oriented towards new objects. These are all people who resist the 'consumption-freedom' ideology of late capitalism. The things that they 'collect' or 'gather' or 'salvage' are things that they eat, use, or transform into art, rather than consume as signifiers.

For Lee Aeshin, the things that she has 'collected' are stray dogs. This practice of collecting is but the beginning of a process that will continue for a long time. She will have to live with and take care of these dogs till they meet their natural deaths. In that case, the 'hand' that collects and looks after these dogs will not only further resist capitalism's consumer culture but also resist its kinship culture. Resisting the existing perspective on the relationship between dogs and humans that rests on the Cartesian dualism between body and mind, the dogs taken care of by Lee Aeshin, and the 'Wood-Dogs' created by Yun Suknam, drawing on the inspiration of Lee's own life, will create new relations of equality between dogs and human beings, and bring about a new kinship network. Upon viewing Lee Aeshin's dogs, Yun Suknam exclaimed, "This is the subject that I've been waiting for."<sup>2)</sup> The whole process of the 'Dog project' pointedly demonstrates that bringing about such a new kinship network is an ethical and political practice.

There is a scene in *The Gleaners and I* where the hand of the director is caught in a huge close-up. Declaring, "It is thrilling to film one hand with the other hand," she captures her hand with its deep wrinkles and tiny ones in the frame. Caught in that way by the close up of the camera, one can no longer distinguish the back of her hand from a body part of some animal, or the furrows of plowed fields. Her monologue, "I'm like an animal; that is, an animal that I don't even know," meanwhile, is far from being a statement of self-loathing. On the contrary, that statement contains aesthetics of discovery, spinning with both curiosity and the pleasure of freedom. This hand which has for all its life held a camera, trying to glean images and other inspirations, becomes a hand gathering leftover grains, a part of some animal's body partaking in the memory of all living creatures, and the furrows of a plowed land, scattered with leftover grain. Revealing a multi-faceted

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2) The artist further elaborated on her feeling of making the "Wood-Dogs" project: "It was strange. I felt a great sense of yearning. Looking at it now, results are also very important. But at that time, I used to simply enjoy the moment, the practice itself rather than the results. And I shuddered thinking about what effect this exhibition would have on those viewers who looked at the 1025 dogs. So I struggled towards that, just heading there without much thought, without any thought."

identity, this hand implodes the binary of nature and culture, enabling us to slip into the affective mode of "natureculture"(Haraway, 2003). This is both the flesh and sign of a female artist`s work. Yun Suknam`s hand, held afloat by passion as it creates the 'Wood-Dogs,' further overlaps with the director`s hand.

These are the hands of women who gather the grain left in the field without any shame or self-consciousness. They are, at the same time, the hands of economic minorities who don`t have grainaries and the hands of people building communities. Above this hand rest the gazes of all dogs that look after the livestock, herd the flocks of sheep, and share the hot summers and cold winters with vagabonds on the streets.

### **3. What it means to live with the dogs**

Even as they refuse these roles, Yun Suknam`s 'Wood-Dogs' are, at the same time, metaphors or analogies for human beings` lives. In people`s lives, animal metaphors have become cliches. There are metaphors where the meaning is clear (i.e. 'to live like a dog,' which means to be at the mercy of others and have poor living conditions) and metaphors where the 'speech' of dogs is dismissed as meaningless compared to the speech of human beings (i.e. 'what is that dog barking at?'). Even though a certain amount of trust and value is attributed to a human being`s relationship with a dog (i.e. 'that bastard is lower than a dog'), basically, relationships with dogs are considered to belong to a lower class of relationships than those between humans. As long as this type of humanism prevails, it`s probably a foregone conclusion that 'pets' will be brought into the home at one`s whim, and abandoned also at one`s whim. Accordingly, it is important to examine the historical context of human beings' comparisons with animals.

Animals, which resemble human beings but still remain different and obscure, have accompanied human beings on inquiring into the origins of their life since the beginning of time. Animal fables and allegories are the oldest literary genre that amply demonstrate that there is a long tradition of a close relationship between humans and animals which has enabled their relationship to become metaphorized. However, the personification of animals that took their clearest form in animal fables and allegories became problematic after the 19th century.

In the process of modernization, zoos made their appearance as a symbol of the power and hunger for conquest of imperialism, and, as Disney shows us, animals became a variety of commodities for families in consumer capitalism. Along with this latter phenomenon, the animals that disappeared from human beings` everyday lives<sup>3)</sup> started slowly reappearing as 'pets' in people`s consumer oriented lives. In

this transformed context, it was inevitable that the personification of animals should begin to reflect a nostalgia for an original 'purity' craved by human beings who were forced to live complicated psychological lives, which then infringed upon the freedoms of both human and animal species (Berger, 1992). Many narratives that featured 'pets' emphasized the 'unconditional love' of these animals. However, the myth of 'unconditional love' had its roots in the consumerist whims of humans and the economy of affection. When human beings' affection for their dogs withers or the 'unconditional love' of dogs expected by human beings does not materialize, these dogs may be abandoned (Haraway 2003). In other words, the 'unconditional love' that frequently featured in the scripts of romantic love popular in modernity, have left the life worlds of human beings in late modernity, filled only with a sense of disillusionment, and become to some extent refocused upon the 'competency of pets.'

'The cross-species sociality' created by animals and humans living together invites us toward feminist insights about emergent naturecultures. The important thing to remember here is that dogs are not simply thinking companions but also life companions. What are the ways in which both human and dog species can cohabitate to ensure their maximum equality and freedom? These ways are likely to be derived from an evolutionary view point that transcends both biological and cultural determinism.

From that evolutionary view point, human beings and animals that cohabitate can provide each other with meaningful environments that will help to configure each other's existences and evolve together. The task of a human being and a dog, or a human being and some other animal, cohabitating together, is a process of "communicating across irreducible difference" and "relating in significant otherness"(Haraway 2003). This type of relating is something that feminists have continuously pursued and developed. Accordingly, the task of expanding the concept of an animal that one is cohabitating with from a 'pet' to a 'companion animal' to "companion species" takes on a political and revolutionary character.<sup>4)</sup>

Stories about relating in significant otherness convey the existence of dogs with

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3) Looking at history, John Berger notes the relationship between the estrangement of farmers in the peasant class from mainstream society and the estrangement of animals from mainstream society. Farmers, he notes, are the only class to maintain an intimate relationship with animals and, through that intimacy, to continue to learn from them.

4) "companion animals" are related to new forms of life, existence, and intimacy that are emerging within a techno-cultural environment. Identity-play within cyberspace, along with images of diverse mutants formed with the development of technology, enable a corporeal experience of the implosion of boundaries between species. The term "companion animal," meanwhile, doesn't refer to the "beloved animal" exclusively owned by humans, who may consider them "family member," but rather to the changes in kinship networks occurring in a techno-cultural environment. "Companion animals" thus act as an emblem and symptom of these changes. From this perspective, Donna Haraway proposes expanding the term "companion animals" to "companion species."

individual personhood in a voice of surprise and delight. And Yun Suknam's 'Wood-Dogs' can provide an important role model for these stories.

"Imagine, in fact, how much I must have wavered…… carving wood in order to give the shape to these dogs. However, the extraordinary thing is, through the repetitive process of cutting and rubbing, cutting and rubbing, I could begin to sense their materiality. I could sense something that felt like this dog's skin, even though it was certainly wood. Of course, I used wood. However, I could sense it becoming a conversation. When I finally painted their eyes on the wood at the end, I could suddenly feel the dogs rushing toward me. At that very moment I felt, 'Yes, yes, you……' Through this, I could sense the gentleness of these dogs…… much more gentle, it seems, than human beings. I felt that each dog was very regal and graceful."

In this way, the wood-dogs began to appear as conversation partners whose skin was touchable and whose personhood was perceived. Drawing the dogs for almost a year, she became immersed in their anatomy. In this process, the dogs finally became substances that moved freely between the ends of her fingers and her right brain. The two hundred dogs made at the beginning of the project were only dogs, not yet become 'dog.' Her countless drawings were a process of recognizing the dog's otherness and a process of encountering with dogs/the 'dog' within that otherness. In this sense, Yun Suknam's 'Wood-Dogs' are both living things as well as concepts. They are individual dogs with different textures of 'skin' at the same time they are universal 'dog.' Struck with both surprise and insight (the realization that "something fundamental to human beings has been lost") when she saw Lee Aeshin looking after her 1,025 dogs, she wanted people living in our time to feel the same sense of tragedy and hope ("the unintentional attitude of this woman who looks after 1,025 dogs"), that she had felt.<sup>5)</sup>

That is because she considers the social-political power of art to act as a "sieve that strains out the impurities in the flows of society" and, in doing so, enable people to enjoy life sustaining laughter. "They are saying: 'Ah…… there is hope even in the face of difficulty'…… Should I call this the hope of art? With their hearts throbbing in excitement, 'ah, this is good. Now, there is value to living, no?' That is what art does. I considered it necessary to provide the sustenance to bring about a socialist revolution even though I may not directly influence that social revolution."

In order to make the hearts of the viewers beat with excitement, Yun Suknam gave form to 1,025 wood-dogs with her own hands. If the 1,025 dogs were to take on

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5) To her, the sense of disinterestedness that she sensed in Lee Aeshin has a kinship relation to the disinterestedness that forms the origin of the impression made by an artistic product, according to Kant's theory of aesthetics.

the aura of a spectacle, that would be in order to bring about a transformation in consciousness through surprise rather than to promote the superficial and temporary excitement of consumption. In the same way, it is unlikely to incite a temporary wave of pity that soon dissipates. Rather, it should promote a deep sense of compassion and the will to effect change.

"However, even though I may have infused these artistic products with a passion approaching that of religious fervor, at the end, what remains is the exhibition of the end product. From the first day that I displayed these products, I saw that energy and passion that I worked with disappear. In the end, all that the people who saw my work felt was a sense of pity for the abandoned dogs. That was it. In fact, what I did was more than gather stray dogs. What I wanted to do was to talk about the kind of human beings created by modern civilization, and the contradictions within that creation. That is, a society where everything is about me, me, me; where things like love for the other have become something laughable; and life has become too real in being all about myself. In other words, should I say, how things have become shallow down to their core? Where things such as femininity and friendship cannot intervene and only self?— thrives? I wanted to show all these things."

#### **4. "All these things happened as I engaged in this dog project"**

**—The aesthetic sense of beauty does not stray from the actual sensations.**

That is not all, however. After the end of her Yun Suknam—1025: With or Without Person at Arko Gallery, she started again creating 108 wood-dogs. The dogs that were deprived of their lives and did not exist, until the time of this exhibition at Arko Gallery, didn't have eyes. However, through the exhibition, she entered a new stage of self awareness where she confessed, "Now, dogs without eyes have no meaning for me whatsoever. Even dogs that don't exist need eyes." These dogs 'without existence' that are re-finding their eyes have bright flowers on their backs and sides that exist only in the world of dreams. The number '108' undoubtedly refers to the "One hundred and eight torments of Mankind" referred to in Buddhism. Now, she is probably waiting for the salvation of the dogs. "Hmmm. I guess what they needed was a ceremony," she states. In one interview about the exhibition at Arko Gallery, she mentioned, "I feel sorry because I wonder whether my desires as an artist didn't take precedence over expressing the pain and torment of the stray dogs." Rather than speaking facilely about salvation or emancipation, we may assume that she might have gone back to the 'first scene' of the 'Wood-Dogs' project, to ponder how people became insensitive to the fate of 'surplus humans/surplus living creatures,' to rethink the issues of aesthetics and ethics of



living in this difficult reality.

That`s because there`s much that she has experienced and transformed through the process of creating these wood-dogs. She has lost 'Saebyuki,' her companion dog, who used to possess 'a royal dignity,' prancing around like a king, and who always used to make her quiver with excitement wanting to "embrace" him: whose existence, she could not but express as "very…… very…… lump……"(here, the empty spaces that follow 'very' express the interiorities of the dogs that she cannot enter as a member of another species.)

Dogs are not only abandoned; they also get caught and taken to "particular places". That means restaurants for dog meet. She, who used to respect the freedom of Saebyuki, has bodily experienced the cruelty of a "world without compassion." She became a vegetarian. She states, "I realized that being a vegetarian is a political practice." Because of her highly developed sensitivity towards every life, there are times that she catches herself by surprise. Now, her artistic project is mixing freely with her daily life. "All these things happened as I engaged in the dog project." I am touched by her words, sensing how art has now fully left the gallery, the ethical 'principles' the political 'proclamations', and is now spreading as an aesthetic sense into the micro-experiences and actual sensations of everyday life.

The feminist future and the future of feminist art, which Yun Suknam believes in, are 'still' in the process of formation. In this period where post-feminism is welcomed and feminisms are vigorously attacked, Yun Suknam`s project questions, in a way both surprisingly firm and surprisingly gentle, what should be the agenda of feminist art and what fundamental principles, forms, and truth claims that it should possess.

Herbert Marcuse stresses that the 'aesthetic dimension,' given to an artistic product by its form-principle, is a special quality of art functioning as a moment of 'freedom.' If this statement is still true, then the questions that Yun Suknam, who steadfastly refuses the title, 'godmother' of South Korean feminist art, poses through her 'Wood-Dogs' project are: What it is that we need to be free from? For what? And what kind of affect we need to revive in order to accomplish this freedom?

(translated by Cho Seung-bae)

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