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## **Jesse Chun: *SULLAE* 술래**

*OCT 2020*

By *Diana Seo Hyung Lee*



Installation view: *Jesse Chun, SULLAE 솔래*, Yeh Gallery, New York, 2020. Wall: *new moons*, 2020. Graphite on wall, surveillance mirror, 18 x 6 inches each. Ground: *untitled*, 2020, a functional concrete stool.

**On View****Museum of Contemporary Art**

September 1 – 15, 2020

Toronto

**On View****The Yeh Art Gallery at St. John's University**

September 10 – November 25, 2020

Queens, New York

Jesse Chun interrogates systems of power, which necessitates an interrogation of language. English, the “common” or “universal” tongue, is often at the forefront of Chun’s practice.

Chun’s new video *SULLAE* 술래 (2020), on view virtually through the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto, part of *Shift Key*, guest curated by Daisy Desrosiers, and a large-scale three channel installation part of *Jesse Chun: SULLAE* 술래 at the Yeh Art Gallery at St. John’s University, takes her interrogation its furthest point thus far—an undoing of language the artist calls *unlanguaging*. It is not aimed specifically at English, but positioned against meaning, patriarchy, production, and the colonial agenda.

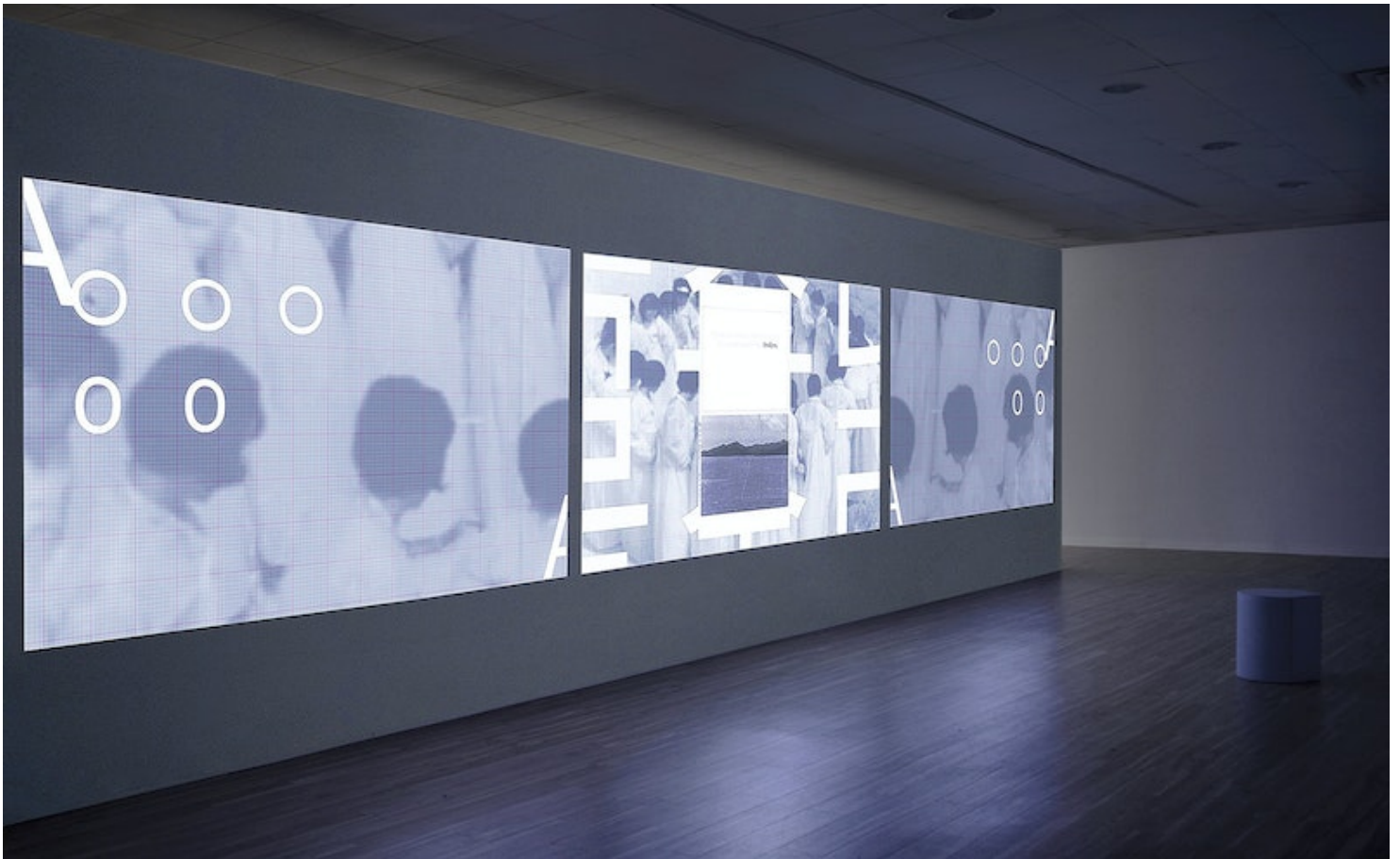


Jesse Chun, *score (for unlanguageing)*, 2020. Graphite, watermarks, paper, aluminum frame, 13 x 16 inches

*Sullae* (술래) is a reference to the traditional Korean song and dance, *gang gang sullae* (강강술래), performed by women during a full moon to bid for good harvest. While holding hands and singing in a circle, one singer leads the women in song, the women responding with the refrain *gang gang sullae*. Though seemingly joyous, the women participating would not have been able to, in their everyday lives, sing, speak loudly, nor leave the house at night, in the patriarchal society of ancient Korea. This dance was a license for their one release.

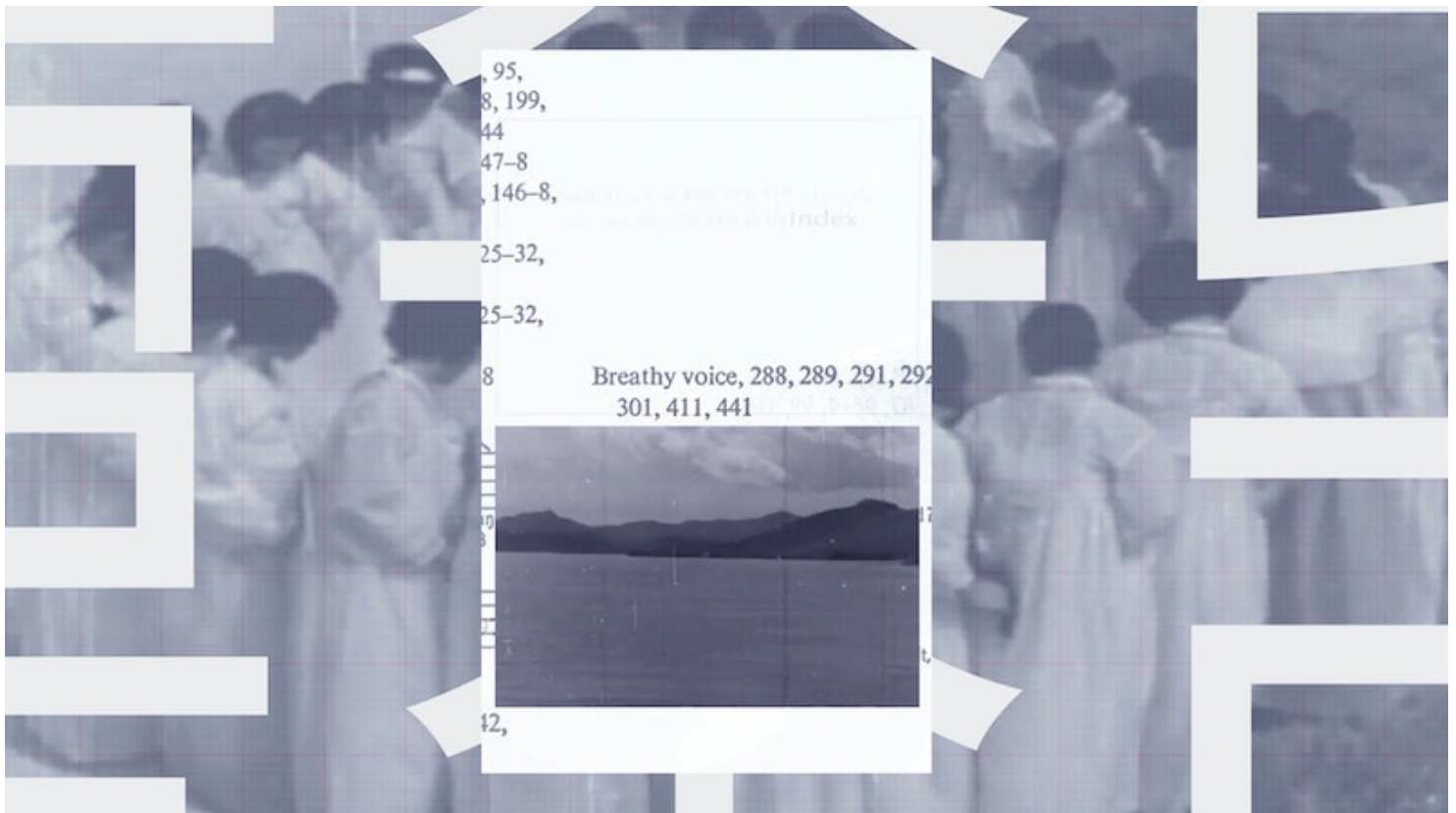
Chun's *SULLAE* 술래 parallels the circular formation of the dance through its immersive, large-scale three-channel installation—though even in the single channel version on view for MOCA, the circularity is maintained as Chun is attentive to the movement and the shapes that form within the screen. Even with a marker such as traditional Korean dress, the dancers appear like anonymous specters in grayscale—the overlay of footage causes the viewer to flicker between seeing and not seeing. The movement seen in the video is like a pulse, a horizon in a landscape, or punctuations for the audio of the breathy, shushing sounds audible while the women spin.

Dissected forms of language also appear but are not legible. Even the landscapes are placeless—though the video's overall lyricism may suggest a nostalgic "homeland" for Chun, there is no pinning it down. This type of placeless meandering applies to everything we see and hear. Is it Korean or is it English that we are seeing and hearing? Is it even language?



Jesse Chun, SULLAE 술래, 2020. 3-channel video, 6 minutes 25 seconds, voiced and voiceless consonant of the English language, hangeul (한글), and English text, images, index pages from intonation books, white noise, word censor bleep, dimensions variable.

Every encounter with history is mediated through Chun's vocabulary of mistranslations and re-authored mechanisms of power. Visually, she uses etched watermarks in bureaucratic documents, grids for writing exercises, and index pages from intonation books teaching correct pronunciation of English. Sonically, she uses clips from YouTube videos of English language classes repeating voiced and voiceless consonants, white noise, and word censor beep. Therefore, *sullae* remains in some sense, as unknowable to Chun as it is to the viewer, a mediated experience. Chun does not venture to tell the story of her ancestors in first person narrative, or use their language with ownership. She allows the history and the language to remain opaque to her, true to Édouard Glissant's call for the right to opacity of "the Other." It is in this opacity that *sullae* gains its power, unencumbered. This distant relationship to one's own history and language deeply resonates with Koreans. The country has been victim to violent invasions of land, which also meant their beliefs, traditions, and language. During the longest period of occupation by Japan from 1910–1945, Koreans were prohibited from speaking their own language and many of their artifacts and archives were destroyed and pillaged.



Jesse Chun, Jesse Chun, *SULLAE* 술래, 2020 (video still). Single-channel video version, 6 minutes 25 seconds, voiced and voiceless consonant of the English language, hangeul (한글) and English text, images, index pages from intonation books, white noise, word censor bleep, dimensions variable.

A small drawing hung perpendicular to the video installation at Yeh Art Gallery is *score (unlanguaging)* (2020), where we see broken, segmented, stray forms of language weaving through a grid made of watermarks from bureaucratic documents. Framed in shiny metal that



alludes to certifications, Chun's *unlanguaging* is not an irresponsible one where meaning is unmade in any way she likes—she confronts all current systems, both in content and context. Chun's *new moons* (2020), installed opposite the video installation, comprises one security mirror hung askew with two graphite drawings that appear like shadows of the mirror. Hung at an average height rather than high up and tucked in a corner like most security mirrors, this is an ineffective tool of surveillance. In relation to the video, the presence of this glossy moon feels somewhat mournful. The traditional moon dance of unleashing repressed emotions is juxtaposed with a fake moon—alike in shape, but not in actuality. The mystical and mythical moon, a divine presence where prayers were attributed, has not been spared of colonial influence.

Throughout *SULLAE* 술래, circles keep reappearing. To the Korean reader, it is the consonant “ㅇ” (ieung), or in English, the letter O (or perhaps it is the numerical 0). If one would like a visual of *unlanguaging*, this is it—forms of language emptied of meaning, full of holes. Through these works, Chun asks: what would it look like, what would it sound like, to go inside language, to dig a hole in its surface, loosening it up? And where would the digging take us? Not to a known *somewhere*, but a diasporic in-between—of language, of land, and of body.

## Contributor

### **Diana Seo Hyung Lee**

is a writer and translator based in New York City