

IM Heung-soon. Pathologies of modernity and gender violence

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For many of us, the first encounter with the work of IM Heung-soon (Seoul, 1969) took place during the last edition of the Venice Biennale (2015) where "Factory Complex" (2014-15. 95') was presented and for which the artist was awarded the Silver Lion, as Promising Young Artist; and even though he already had built a career as an artist in Korea, this award provided him with a promising future ahead. This documentary had been previously screened at the Busan Film Festival in October 2014 and subsequently Okwui Enwezor selected it to be part of "All the World's Futures" exhibition, a project that was sensitive to the global economic crises, and to the uncertainty, insecurity and panic brought by an upcoming future that is the continuation of a system that seems to perpetuate itself, constantly renewing the knots of conflict that have ceased to be regional or local to affect the overall system that regulates the global balance. In fact, the project's main idea intentionally included the relationship between art and politics as a priority, as well as those works that were susceptible to contextualize themselves from this partnership in order to debate the origin of the questions about the role of art today, which obviously can not be excluded from the social movements or the society that is its expression. In fact, Enwezor already knew the work of the artist, as he selected him to be part of the Gwangju Biennale back in 2008. On this occasion Enwezor chose IM's work for its coherence and for considering him a crucial example when dealing with the question of the role of art and its purpose, which for the artist can only be understood as social art. That is to say, art fulfills a social function and its practices are conceived as an instrument of intervention and transformation of society. For IM Heung-soon art is the product of a system and of a social organization which builds forms of representation throughout history that are linked to cultural identities inhabiting geographies which in turn are built on a particular cultural heritage and tradition that simultaneously generate new perspectives in the field of art.

In "Factory Complex" the artist underlines the urgent need for new categories of analysis to emerge, as well as the application of different public policies and the need to give a new meaning to women's citizenship. The artist aims to highlight the principle of equality and the value of diversity through the denouncement that makes itself visible through the flow of language which acts as the vehicle of a story in which women are the main characters. Therefore he asks women to speak as he sees this act as a useful exercise for their emancipation. The contribution of this documentary initially adds to the one made in 2003 by Jen Chen Chieh in 16mm, "Factory" (31'09"), where he referred to the movements of the labor market in Taiwan during the Cold War and how his country became one of the largest "low-cost" production centers in the world, only until the 90s, when a cheaper production shifted to other geographical

areas of the world. However, unlike IM Heung-soon's work, despite of bringing groups of workers, who seven years earlier had had to leave the factory where they had worked all their lives, they don't speak to the camera, thus imposing an eloquent silence that in turn and without the use of words acts making visible their condition.

Through the gathering of these micro-stories obtained as the result of discussions with the witnesses and protagonists of domestic and everyday exploitation and inequality, IM Heung-soon creates a narrative that expands from the local to a whole society dominated by a single economic system derived from global capitalism. "I think -he said in an interview- that many Asian nations share a similar history, in the sense that they fought against the West or were dominated by the West in the process of colonization, the Cold War and the control of natural resources." The subjects with whom he has shared his project and those to whom he has paid attention to are the survivors who lead the successive diasporas in search of a better life from the 70s to the present; and the women, who are the section of the population hit socially in the hardest way, since they have been the biggest victims of labor exploitation within the three decades that followed the Korean War. The urgent need for a rapid reconstruction of the country, as it happened elsewhere in the world, enforced a wild economic growth, thus ignoring the legal and social status and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. "Factory Complex" is the culmination of a trajectory that includes community work with different groups of working women participating in workshops organized by the artist, in which the right to speech is substantially recognized as an inalienable instrument of empowerment. The latter is essential not only to improve their wages and reduce their dependency, but also for the consideration of their right to gender equality.

After the exhibition of IM Heung-soon at New York's PS1, with "Staging the singularity of memory" àngels barcelona has opted for the presentation of this piece and the two-channel video-installation "Reincarnation" (2015, 23' 34"), his latest project, by which he continues to claim special attention to women, with the recovery of fragments of local history that is, simultaneously, global to the extent that affects millions of women worldwide. This is the first exhibition that the artist has held in a commercial gallery because his social activism has always distanced itself from the market, but it has been the initiative of the gallery, and not that of a museum, which has allowed to present a body of work that otherwise would have never been shown in our country. The inclusion of the artist in the gallery's program has been surrounded by a sudden interest in his work and has opened horizons to a type of art and art related practices, whose hybridization highlights the value of its interdisciplinary character.

Bringing the work of IM Heung-soon to the local public benefits the interest for the kind of international art that belongs to other geographies, which usually are not taken into account, or only very sporadically and very slowly, in our most common scenarios, museums, art centers and other facilities, due to the existing veiled ethnocentrism that hides behind its apparent denial. This time, the step taken by the gallery has been foregone by previous actions, such as the exhibition that acted as a tribute to Harun Farocki (1944-2014) after his death and the one it was held by this same artist a few months before his death, which consolidated his position. For Emilio Álvarez, the director of the gallery, is not only relevant to show the work of IM Heung-soon at present, but to continue a commitment to new ways of understanding the function of a gallery of contemporary art, contributing to the presentation of projects that are often left out of the regular programming of most exhibition spaces with similar characteristics.

Both "Factory Complex" and "Reincarnation" show the rapprochement of video art to cinema, as a practice that takes on the investigation of the moving image, which for half a century has been already done in artistic practices and the approach that from the field experimental film has been confirmed in the other direction. And most importantly: to IM Heung-soon, having previously experimented with video, the medium of documentary film has allowed him perform an in-depth exploration of those subjects that are considered essential to the history of the daily life of his own country. The stories he deals with often remain confined to the private sphere, with absolutely no impact whatsoever, despite their importance, in the case of the life of people, of a community and of the wage sum that is crucial for economic growth and welfare society. In his first feature documentary film, "Jeju Prayer" (2012), over 90' he recorded the uprising that took place in March 1948 on the resort island of the same name, following Korea's struggle against Japanese colonialism and the US attempt to divide the Korean peninsula. The intervention of 3000 soldiers and a paramilitary force tragically ended the protest movement, killing a fifth of the mutineers. One witness interviewed by IM Heung-soon, whose husband died in the uprising, describes some of the facts that were concealed or falsified until the 1990s. Following the accounts of this survivor, who tells us that she stills sleeping with a saw under her pillow to ward off the ghosts, the impact of the massacre left no witness indifferent. Already in his previous video works "Basement my Love" (2000) and "It's not a Dream" (2011) the artist reveals the impact of the production system in the lives of those who manage to survive in the limit of extreme poverty.

On the occasion of the artist's trip to Barcelona, to attend the exhibition of his last two works, I had occasion to approach him twice at àngels barcelona gallery. Whilst reviewing his artistic career, one realizes the consistency of his structural framework and the objective he pursues by using the testimonies of those who are close to him, in order to give visibility to the stories that share the common experience of

subordination and inequality perceived everywhere in the world. Both works consecrate the artist and the type of practices that up until now he has so far been dedicated to, in order to give a sense of what we mean by the kind of art that can not be separated from life or from those to whom it is intended and that he considers its main spokespersons. In this way he resumes the contact with a public who has no voice, and with a participatory art practice that features the involvement of individuals, whose life is the only thing that counts for him; therefore IM Heung-soon has managed to make a statement against social inequality and discrimination. The first fostered by the unbridled capitalism in developing societies; the second, as a result of the above, and which in turn is based on the existing hierarchy between men and women, fostering the understanding of a system of power relations that consolidates the subordination of the latter in all aspects of life through personal and collective norms, values, paradigms of identity and a variety of cultural practices.

In order to explain why he doesn't understand art in a different way and his insistent dedication to the communities of women who are hit in the hardest way by social imbalances, the artist usually insist on his origins and the role played by his mother in his training and vision of the world. She becomes all the women who have been victims of gender violence. I would say that she is present, in a deliberately obsessive way, throughout his entire career and thus she becomes the reason for a kind of working practice that right from the beginning is considered as a set of interventions, in which discrimination and social inequality become visible within the gender narratives develop by the victims of subordination, who are defenseless against the reprisals which they can be the object of in case of rebellion. These rare practices, contrary to what certain legitimizing discourses want to makes us consider, are consistent with their origins and condition. But what is even more important is that they are real. His personal experience and the constant rubbing against exploitation and poverty in his own family have been decisive for the artist - his mother worked in the textile industry under conditions that today would be unacceptable, even though they remain the same in other parts of the world to which, in order to reduce costs, much of the global production has moved to; whilst his sister worked as a clerk in a department store, in the clothing and food sections, under similar circumstances.

The two-channel video installation "Reincarnation" is inspired by the Korean women whom the artist met at Tehran who, after the Vietnam War, emigrated to Iran. These were women who made up one of the great diasporas of the twentieth century during the conflict, moved to this country to be hired in order to entertain the Korean or American soldiers. Within this economy of war, their role ended with the withdrawal of troops and most of these women went to Iran in search of a better life, when Tehran was a thriving city and seemed a preferable alternative destination than going back to their own country. On the two screens in which the work develops, the artist manages to synchronize two different narrations through the story of its protagonists,

who show the viewer their personal scars and the traumatic footprint left on them. This 2-channel video installation shows Vietnamese women who experienced the Vietnam War in one side and Iranian women who experienced the Iran-Iraq War on the other. The impact of the images wants to do justice to the personal dramas, which are often ignored and have no visibility, lived by women because history did not take them into account and did not consider them as subjects with a voice which in turn also contributes to create it.

IM Heung-soon's first exhibition in a European gallery takes place in Barcelona, but this precedent will not change neither his practice nor his projects, but it would rather allow him to develop and expand what he has been doing up until now. With the documentary "Factory Complex" he has managed to reach an audience that otherwise he would have never been able to communicate with. It took him three years to finalize and release the work, two of them were spent researching the topic he wanted to address through the narration of its protagonists, obtained from more than fifty interviews and recorded images; and a whole year was dedicated to its editing. The narrative construction responds to the horizontal alignment to which he subdues a story that is rhizomatically composed, and in which cuts, superpositions and re-encounters abound, trying to avoid the verticality of what happened in time; and thus the succession of images is marked by a logic that is confused with the invisibility of the factors contributing to the concatenation of the existing power structures. His reference and model is always his mother and the labor exploitation that victimized her, his sister and the other women working in the textile industry during the 60s and 70s, acting as the protagonists of the spectacular economic growth that took place in South Korea during the recovery period coinciding with the war's aftermath and the division of the country. This was the time when the country began a fast growing industrial development in the textile and metallurgical sectors, and increasingly in the automotive, chemical and technological sectors. The narration is built from the stories told by the women, whose employment history is characterized by precarious conditions and labor exploitation, regardless of their profession or trade, extending to the whole society. The film shows the endless working hours, unfair dismissals, the low wages that contribute to inequality and poverty of a working class that has paradoxically contributed to the modernization of a country like Korea and the globalization process of the Asian subcontinent.

The artist, best known in his own country than abroad, is increasingly becoming more popular within the international film festival circuit and in the art scene. Cinema is a medium that favors narrative options and is also the kind of art that reaches a wider audience. As we have already mentioned, very often, the approach to cinema by visual artists finds reciprocity in those independent filmmakers who are inclined to the experimentation that is characteristic of video art. On more than one interview, IM Heung-soon has declared that the origin of his work can be found in his own family -

his mother and sister- acting on behalf of all the women exploited by a system that has discredited the right to life of the disinherited. These women's working conditions in factories, that nowadays have run empty and obsolete since they have been replaced by others in countries with developing economies, such as in Cambodia or Bangladesh, go far beyond what is tolerable and thus history repeats itself again. The unhealthiness of the workplaces, the diseases contracted by workers and the pressure they undergo to achieve a level of productivity beyond all conceivable are the facts that the artist has in mind, especially when it comes to denounce what should not be accepted under any circumstances.

For IM Heung-Soon, this way of understanding art should incorporate individual and collective narratives that correspond to particular experiences and the history of a country, which usually is officially constructed regardless of the ordinary individuals who build it. But, he manages to gather realities that are interrelated by their social status, group, community and social class to which they belong. The figure of the artist's mother represents the world and all the stories of exploited women and those individuals who come from the most vulnerable sectors of the population. The artist has been consistent with the conviction that the artistic environment is inseparable from everyday life, a mainstreaming which is based on human stories prompted by a production system which in turn silences them. From this perspective, for him art should be an instrument to invoke social justice by denouncing the subordination of the voiceless, resulting in a story that exposes itself to the world; a world where the common stories of a social class, after having helped to reach growth and progress without the recognition of this contribution, are gathered. The artist's mother is the representation of all the injustices committed with impunity in the name of economic progress and social change, not only locally, but globally. Therefore, the artist's dedication to practices with different communities and groups so far has to do with the conviction that art can contribute to social change and make possible other possible politics in order to ensure their emancipation. More than being the proofs of a kind of social activism, the artist has worked with different collectives in order to involve them in the strategies to achieve common goals, by interacting with each other, and by showing the need for a class consciousness, to claim the rights they are entitled to have. These practices have been consistent with a challenge to the prevailing economic system, one that legitimizes the exploitation and inequality based on the assumption of growth, indiscriminate progress and a welfare society, from which the victims whom he wants to pay attention to, and with whom he sympathizes, are excluded.

By surpassing the more experimental character of video art, "Factory Complex" presents itself as a narrative and visual exercise, which highlights the urgent need to reconstruct history, as many times as needed, through all the evidence that can be rescued in order to reveal women's oppression in the labor market; the repression of

which they are subjected to when they rebel and organize protests and the precarity that characterizes its economy. IM Heung-soon aims to do justice to this collective that is always excluded, whose social responsibility weakens those who are part of it, contributing to the identity politics that perpetuate their role and the stories that are indifferent to them which derive from a discriminatory image policy. By performing practical exercises, the artist has worked with these groups on a daily basis, encouraging them with strategies based on interaction and participatory involvement in order to exchange roles and reclaim public policies that favour gender equality and that are dependent of the State and all those agents who must contribute to their empowerment.

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