

**A Dialogue Between Sunmin Park And Hyun Jeung Kim:
About 'How to Remember Times'**

This is an email correspondence between the artist Sunmin Park and curator Hyun Jeung Kim while they were preparing for Park's exhibition *How to Remember Times*, which was planned to open in August 2020, and Park's new work *fa, ra, Thurs., Sat.* (2021) for the exhibition.

July 19, 2020

Conversations with you have always inspired me; they have always given me a chance to rediscover and summon the moments that would otherwise have nonchalantly passed me by in my daily life. I think this interview is even more meaningful to me because there has been a slow build up to this moment and we finally have an opportunity to prepare an exhibition *How to Remember Times* together this year. I am planning to ask you some questions about what I found curious while looking at your works, including *fa, ra, Thurs., Sat.* that you have worked on for this exhibition.

When I first met you it was 2006, when you had finished your study in Germany and started working in Korea. Your work – consisting of newspapers, light bulbs, and elements of light all in harmony – was tranquil, I remember how it looked like a poetic image to me at that time. It might be good to start by asking you a question that I have always wanted to ask you: You studied Biology in Korea and went to Germany, and you have been working as a visual artist based in Korea. How have these diverse experiences been incorporated into your work?

July 19, 2020

Thinking about it now, I guess things I have found interesting in my life became parts of my work in various ways. These days I started making poems with headlines from newspapers again. It reminded me of when I was deeply into the pleasure of poetry when I was eight and first started writing poems – it was like an experience of my inside connecting outside. Back then I thought I would become a poet one day. Poetry is still very important to me as a literary genre that helps me imagine imagery.

I had another dream when I was little. I was fascinated after watching a documentary about the deep sea and wanted to explore there in the future. And at school, I could not connect what I liked with what I was studying. At my parents' suggestion, I decided to study Natural Science, and I was also swayed by my fellow students when they were selecting their major, depending on their grades. I chose Biology after a process of elimination, getting rid of what I didn't want to do and what I couldn't do. However, I always knew that I could derive pleasure from art and that I would even be good at it if I tried, because of the pleasant memories of extracurricular activities – including art classes – from my school days. But, in reality, I studied Biology at university, reading books written in English to study. It was only then that I had a strong urge to make art again. So I had to study again to enter a university with a different major, which wasn't straightforward.

When I first went to Germany, I was on my own most of the time. I had a lot of spare time, which was quite boring. That time made me an outsider who observed rather than met people and did something actively. So it was then, when I was observing the city I had settled in, the nature I came across in the city, it often captured my attention. That experience of just watching things surrounding me, at the time that felt like it would never end. I continued studying in Rosemarie Trockel's class, which didn't have any restrictions. My observation started from something superficial and aesthetic, but the more I wanted to know, the wider my interest got. So my reading and research started with botanical books and illustrations, and then expanded to insects. It wasn't learning from a curriculum provided by the university, but just a fun, imperfect and strange learning experience where I found my own way, on my own at libraries or botanical gardens. So I think there were many gaps where I could freely

imagine and be connected with the work expressed visually. At that time, I always agonized whether such contrived attempts could be art, but perhaps that was the only way that I could do it; whether other people approve or not. The more I observed my surroundings, the more I was attracted to nature and its constant changes, without a narrative created by people, and I found it more interesting to see and capture the changes rather than that narrative. That was the beginning of my body of work, observing and recording pigeons, insects, or plants for ages – sometimes for years – and interpreting them to understand more.

found poetry series (1999 -) made using newspapers, which was a linguistic project, was something I did in the very beginning of my life in Germany; it was an attempt to contextualize strange words I collected from newspapers in my own way. Because watching something changing around me for a long time was sort of building a relationship, I could link my interpretations – understanding or misunderstanding – in the relationship to my work. Then I invented a “plant code” for the *code* series (1999-) to make a bizarre language with which I could communicate only with someone, with symbols that are familiar to me in a time when I didn’t have my own language in a foreign country; that I tried to deconstruct the context of strange society printed with newspapers to create my own context. Both started from my desire to communicate with the world while living a solitary life.

July 23, 2020

Dear Sunmin,

Thanks for your reply.

As we shared our ideas during the preparation for *How to Remember Times*, my thoughts always came back to poetry – an artistic medium that was commonly found in your work. Whenever I saw your work, I was reminded of that. So now I am mesmerized by your childhood story about poetry.

The reason why *architecture of mushroom* (2019) at the viaart, Jeju, moved me to tears despite myself was perhaps because I was empathizing with your unique sensibility. I think *highway geometry 2* (2015) was also an example of your fast-paced visual poetry. I was really impressed by the expression in your previous email: “The nature I came across in the city.” Your work seems to have the power to observe the peculiar and unfamiliar nature in cities and the invisible relationships that derive from it. Nevertheless, over the last 20 years, you have been writing poems with a variety of materials (newspaper, language, image, photography, video, installation, sound) and styles.

Therefore, you are often introduced in Korea and abroad as an artist who works in various fields and mediums. Some artists don't like to limit their work to specific mediums – what do you think? I also want to know if you have any particular concerns with each work. If so, what are they? Because you're very busy with work, I think you can focus on your recent works.

Best regards,

Hyun Jeung

July 23, 2020

Not long ago, someone asked me the same question; I answered that, to me, different mediums are like various colors in a palette. Because I approach mediums like I select the colors I need for my paintings, even if it is an unfamiliar one, I go through a process of trial and error over and over again to achieve what I want to do with it. Despite that, I don't think I fear new mediums. Maybe that is why I don't look into the materials and techniques that I need for my work, photography and film, and beyond that, phenomena derived from newly developed technologies closely – and try to learn them

although I am very interested in them. Rather, I prefer meeting experts with those skills, chatting to them and learning something unexpected through the process of trial and error. Sometimes I misinterpret the context of skills which, in turn, results in my work. In order to enjoy those misinterpretations, I don't spend loads of time learning a technical process in much detail. I spend more time researching to connect strange things with subtle and unpredictable clues. I think that is why I became more organic in using diverse mediums arranged in a palette. I go through quite an organic process where hands and machines overlap, part, and then overlap again; synesthetic mediums that connect or exclude each other. Even if the end product is a video or sound installation, various mediums and techniques – drawings, texts, photos, and references for a number of tests, and then drawings, photos again and observation and so on – are used during the process. And each step happens one after another so no one knows when it will be done. During the process, different mediums are attempted, abandoned, and then attempted again if needed until they become something I want them to be, or until I see something I was curious about.

Therefore, honestly, I am not sure what genre of art my work belongs to. Will it belong to a certain genre eventually?

I believe what is important for me when using diverse mediums is whether such organically connected complex relationships in the process of creation can be sensuously perceived in the final work. I disagree with the way that explains the entire process in detail to make the audience understand. I believe a process that moves along in an interesting way and stops at an appropriate point can fascinate the audience. Even if the reason cannot be explained clearly, a truly interesting work spares time, filling the gap with the subtle attraction, evoking a lot of thoughts, free appreciation, and pleasure. In other words, rather than detail the entire process or a narrative about the subject, the important thing is: "Whether a sensory transition embedded in the work can make the audience stay more than three seconds in front of it?" If so, I think the work is a success. Knowing all the steps an artist has taken is not the answer to the appreciation of the work. If a work touches the audience's imagination, I think the work starts dwelling in the audience, which means it is given a life. The shift of artistic imagination from the subject of creation to the subject of appreciation is contemporary art to me. The power and direction of audiences, who will hit the ball of art that I throw, will all be different. I think it's important how to throw the ball loosely and softly to make it attractive to hit.

July 24, 2020

Dear Sunmin,

Thank you.

The final lines in your message touched me and made me think. "The shift of artistic imagination from the subject of creation to the subject of appreciation," and "The power and direction of audiences, who will hit the ball of art that I throw, will all be all different. I think it's important how to throw the ball loosely and softly to make it attractive to hit."

Curators go through a similar process. But in my case, I get more confused and hesitate in front of decisions where there are more possibilities. I assume artists keep a wide spectrum of possibilities open for the audience. Now, writing this message to you, I am thinking again about what the position is of 'mediators' who connect art and the audience, and what that is supposed to be. I am thinking of your works exhibited at Instant Roof; the video installation *BIG eats small* (2018) and *insidetuo* (2018) where "loosely and softly" works for me. They were the works that destroyed my prejudice and made me the most curious. I was wondering, what kind of unfamiliar relationship triggered you to start working on them. I'd say a new "sensory transition" took place inside me when I was met by the works. I think I tried to connect the angles, structures, and the sign that says SOS in *insidetuo* – along with the novelty of space – quite artificially through my senses. At the same time, they made me think

once again that you are fearless in dealing with diverse genres and mediums. I think that was the "fascination" and the "attraction" of contemporary art to me. The reason why I asked you about genres in my last email was because I thought you were an artist who is freer than others in terms of genre or medium, so I was curious about your thoughts. It wasn't because I wanted to define your work within a certain genre.

Following what I said, now I'm curious about what you're currently working on. Could you share what you're focusing on? Whether it's completely new, or whether it's expanding the existing body of work to add depth. Also, I wonder if you have any memorable works from the beginning to the present. Was there a time you experienced a philosophical shift in your work?

Thank you!

Hyun Jeung

August 2, 2020

Dear Hyun Jeung,

I wanted to get back to you right away because I liked your reply as well as questions sent to me last week, but I couldn't sit in front of the computer due to a lot of things. Even now, I'm on a family trip – not sure if I can call it a holiday or not. But I woke up early this morning so I am writing to you in peace. Being an artist, which is one of those jobs where you truly need time alone, is often like being on a psychological holiday – to get out of a complex routine and be totally absorbed in my own work. After writing that, now I think it's quite strange to work while resting mentally in quiet times. Maybe I don't really know how to rest; at home and in my studio, I have a different kind of work and a different kind of break, but strangely interlocking, conflicting, and perhaps complementary. So I can't remember the experience of taking both a physical and mental break. Maybe it's a kind of occupational hazard, or merely a bad habit. At any moment, in any place, the possibility of work is switched on, so my brain and senses are always tense.

Thanks for mentioning *insidetuo* in relation to “loosely and softly”. It is one of my works made of many complex and strange transitions, a lot even for me. I had restricted conditions, and a process to take a detour or overcome the restrictions became the work. The exhibition was held in the smallest space I had ever had a show before, and it was a two-person exhibition, with fellow artist Kibian. Despite the initial excitement of the initiative, the restriction of the space was unusual to me so I thought that I would need to offer the indoor space – the main exhibition space – to Kibian and that I needed to use the outside space. I found a corner of the mini kitchen, which was tiny in the small gallery (which is named Instant Roof and nicknamed “tiny wall show”) and very attractive somehow; I thought it was the most beautiful space in the gallery and reckoned I might be able to do something there. The small kitchen of the small gallery had small and cute objects (thanks to the taste and efforts of director Gihyun Park) – I believe that I responded to the minimal space and the beauty of the objects.

Another attraction is where the gallery is situated; located in the small alley almost inaccessible to people, the gallery provides stools outside in the alley so people who view the exhibition – which doesn't take long at all – can sit down and have a chat with each other, looking at the gallery; the friendly atmosphere was impressive. And that was why the alley outside the gallery and the wall caught my eye. So I started attempting to link the inside to the outside, having the mini kitchen and the wall as the base of my work. *SOSpalm* (2002-2009) and *sosPALM* (2000–2009), two pieces that shift the relationship between inside and outside, were reinterpreted for the space; the plant *Dracaena Marginata* in the original works was replaced with growing ice. The small refrigerator in the mini kitchen was removed (I'd like to send my gratitude once again to the director Park for **her** cooperation regarding the burdensome process) and instead a specially designed ice maker took the space. So the

ice maker kept producing ice during the exhibition, which lasted for about a month. Thinking back, my own interpretation of the work is slightly different from my original intention; now I think the plant in the original work, which is difficult to spot changes in because it grows so slowly, was replaced with another object, which is ice that grows more quickly. Also, the idea to take out ice usually frozen in a freezer with a set temperature and to create ice that freezes at room temperature is kind of connected to the relationship between inside and outside, which I wanted to deal with through my work. Anyway, unlike my interpretation now, what I wanted at that time was creating an object that constantly changes its form and status. That was because, in comparison with the fact that everything in the universe changes without an exception, I felt frustrated by my stubborn ideas that were not changing. *BIG eats small* came from a discovery during the process of making a structure with a plastic sheet and photos of the cement wall of Instant Roof, which was test printed for drawing, in order to not flood my studio while experimenting with the ice maker. I was watching the structure that collected water drops and found the movement of the drops interesting. In addition, the ceiling lamp in my studio at Sewoon Sangga was reflected on the drops so they looked like faces with eyes. The process of these tiny or large similar looking drops slowly rolling down because of gravity, and combining, looked like a movement of falling faces that eat or are eaten by each other, so I started filming. I used a phrase from one of my poetry works *the mind's ear*, which was presented at the Seoul Mediacity Biennale in 2014.

Preparations for the new exhibition *How to Remember Times*, which had been on track with excitement until recently, has suddenly been suspended. I learned that unexpected circumstances can have such a huge influence on people only after the outbreak of COVID-19 that stopped almost everything, restricted people's mobility, and shook up the massive network that is our society. Sharing updates with fellow artists in Germany and Mexico, we had sarcastic conversations about how this disaster spread across the world, and how no one could be an exception, about what we could do, and what on earth art meant during the pandemic. We didn't end up finding a clear answer. But when I think about it, I wonder if we were ever able to give a clear answer to that, even before the pandemic. I think it's important that we, who used to believe that we could make things happen for sure and control everything, realize that the idea was just a mere misunderstanding. Passing through the first half of 2020, when no one could predict the end of the pandemic, I don't think it took long to think about what I could do or what I would do: getting immersed in the present in front of me and doing what I can do now. It's not that what I can do now cannot fundamentally guarantee my future so I don't need to do it; but because the future is almost the only absolute which is unknown – like death which is a mystery to all of us. What attitude we hold about the present is the only important thing. In other words, the fact that our plans can be stopped is not different from the fact that I can die at any time, so the suspension of the exhibition was not surprising for me. Of course it was unfortunate.

The other exhibition I was preparing has also been temporarily suspended. So I think I got an opportunity to look back at the process of work for half of a year. I am not sure if that is good or not. Perhaps that is something changeable depending on how you look back at this time in the future, long after this period. Remembering and judging a time is bound to be constantly changing depending on the time after that – it is the root of my new work *fa, ra, Thur., Sat.*, which I have been preparing for the upcoming exhibition. It is quite surprising that it coincidentally links to the reality we are facing at the moment.

In the second half of this year, I will prepare the exhibition with a good amount of time and slow observations as well as some new projects, including the preparation of my monograph, the conceptualization and direction of space for the pre-launch program of Seo-Seoul Museum of Art, and the site-specific commission for a company space that I'm in discussion with. I'm going to prepare for my solo shows at the end of 2021 and early 2023 with a long-term view. I am grateful to be able to do intensive and fast-paced work for the projects happening in the near future, at the same time with something I prepare for with a long-term view and in-depth research; they have complementary dynamics which I enjoy very much. Preparing for the shows next year and the following year at this point may bring unpredictable changes, but regardless, I expect the opportunity to prepare with a

long-term perspective will be a good time to deepen the context that I began exploring for my solo show in 2015.

I was planning to work abroad in order to expand the depth of my project, researching various relationships between civilization and nature as well as in the journey from expanding cities to primitive nature. But in the time when almost the whole world is under lockdown and the importance of safe distancing is regarded as a key measure, I have a fundamental concern: isn't my curiosity to get closer to primitive nature nothing more than the selfishness of civilization and an abuse of nature? Nevertheless, I think I will try to understand this changing world by making an effort to figure out if it is a straight path or a detour; a plain word or a metaphor; and an experience or a dream in the remaining time. It's scary and exciting to have a new blank sheet of paper; what new time and space I'm going to be headed for in the passage of art on which each step to explore, study, and understand the world becomes a work that poses a question, which somebody feels connected with. I wonder what time we would pass and how to remember the time and what meaning we would give to the past looking back on this correspondence with you a few years later. Perhaps the question of this prophetic project of *How to Remember Times* will unfold naturally, struggling in between the time that has been suspended and the future that will not be at all easy.

In the midst of this unusual climate, between the strangely long monsoon season and the heatwave, I hope you stay healthy inside and out.

From Busan, with best wishes,
Sunmin

August 3, 2020

Dear Sunmin,

I am imagining you writing the email in the heatwave after the monsoon has gone (perhaps) in Busan.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts on COVID-19 and what's happening surrounding it in your day, when you are always confused whether it is a break or work.

The postponement of the exhibition *How to Remember Times* you mentioned in your email made me think about what decisions we should make with this current situation. But all of these seemed quite natural from my selfish point of view.

I also think the exhibition is the beginning for me to take to see everything anew. The time spent together with you, who willingly decided to participate in the exhibition; the time that I wished to go into depth with you about the topic I had wanted to make an exhibition with; the time I had to quickly make decisions – multiple layers of time cluttered in my head. “The COVID-19 Emergency Support for Artists” I am currently working on makes me think of post COVID-19. It is entitled “The COVID-19 Emergency Support for Artists,” with the subtitle “Art Vaccine Project.” The project, which started in April, was extended to November. It makes me ponder how to support artists this year, how to curate exhibitions after the pandemic, and so on. I think it's very natural for all projects to be 'undetermined' at the moment. I also find myself wandering around without direction in anxiety, obsession, and compulsion. It feels like I'm swimming somewhere I don't know.

Like the conversation you had with your fellow artists, we curators also continue conversations that cannot be concluded. In the situation where online exhibitions are becoming more common, even I wonder if we should go back to museums and galleries when I view virtual exhibitions. On the other hand, I am quite lucky to think about all these things. I think many exhibitions with thought-provoking topics are being made even in the small-sized spaces, which inspire me. That's why I feel pressure to be busier. There have been a lot of discussions about time, and I think I have been

following it without any doubt or much thought. Whether it's more natural, or if I should twist it a little more and have the courage to live in a more event-oriented time, or a new concept of time, I think I'm not able to untangle my thread about the questions. Similarly, is the time I planned *How to Remember Times* and discussed with you about *fa, ra, Thurs., Sat.* really a coincidence...? As you said, a new assignment will be given at the point when we restart preparing for the exhibition, which has been left at a time of postponement and uncertainty.

I think it's time for me to abandon all the existing frameworks of my reasoning and re-orbitalyze them. Rather than waiting for things to get better, the bigger concern for me is about how to set my attitude. So my time in the future, including work as well as exhibitions, break, and the way I spend absolute time alone, will be completely changed. I think it's the time I need to get ready to accept all those changes above all.

From the second half of this year to 2023, I can see your calendar is filled with various projects. At the same time, I'm thinking of the sound of *fa, ra, Thurs., Sat.* you have shared with me. There is a story that's too beautiful and plaintive to think that it's a coincidence that this music only consists of Fa and Ra was created in this time. Now that I have no choice but to stick to the present, ironically, I keep drifting back to the memories of the past. As you said, I hope that you will show the context you began to unfold in 2015 more in depth through your solo shows in the future. In addition, I think I will be thinking more about what our correspondence was and what our future exhibition was and could have become. I think your current concept of space directing sound and time can all be connected together. The discussions around the world that the coexistence of machines and humans, and that technology could create a utopia, which had been conducted with confidence, seems to have slowed down a bit. At this time, when I think I should go back to basics to prepare myself for the paradigm shift, not just with my head, but with my whole body, I believe it's the time for you to bring out the topics of your work that you approached toward their essence that you have been thinking about for a long time ago. I'm looking forward to a conversation that you will share with me in the time in 'between' and another 'between'.

And these days I have been thinking of the *highway geometry 2*.

As I recall the video, I think about the things that we miss, and the phenomenon that everything explodes. Unlike the photography work with the same title, there are a lot of things invisible in the video. The very point at which such accumulated time collides creating a roar! I think now is such a point of destruction for me.

Now my question is: what do you think your vocation is? You explained quite a lot in your previous email, but I am curious to hear more details.

Global warming, climate change, and the news that the monsoon will last longer and a typhoon is coming – all of these make me think we are living in unpredictable times.

Always wishing your wellbeing – both body and soul – so that you have no difficulties in working on various projects.

Thank you,
Hyun Jeung

August 4, 2020

Dear Hyun Jeung,

I am thinking about the weight of the word “vocation.”

I am not confident if I have an understanding about my vocation. But perhaps I have had a clearer answer as to why I make art for the last few years. I recently found my works from the mid-90s so I think I can say it's been about 25 years since I started working on art, but I have felt why I do this more clearly than before only during the last decade. That is probably because it is a learning process to understand myself and my life that is connected to the world. The more I create works, the better I understand my previous works, which used to be vague, by obtaining appropriate words and making explicit relations after a while. There was always something I couldn't explain beyond my understanding so it took a long time for me to understand my own work. It became clearer that more works were created after that, regardless of whether the time was long or short. Perhaps I am an artist who gives an explanation of a work through the following works. That is probably the reason why my monograph was not published earlier, which is quite understandable. I don't think this is what happens to all of the other artists. I just think the process of starting and developing my work and the process of stopping it and the time it takes to reach myself and finally to the audience is perhaps much slower, and not simple. After times of feeling rushed because of the fast pace, I finally came to accept that it was my way. That naturally led me to understand the answer as to why I do art. It's that probably my vocation is to learn about this infinite universe bit by bit, connecting myself and my life, a minute particle, to this vast, fearful world.

I'm worried whether my long answers can be published in the limited space of a book, but I'm glad and grateful that I can grab passing thoughts through your questions and share them with you.

August 6, 2020

Dear Sunmin,

Thank you for sharing your thoughts on your vocation.

Maybe I asked you the question with too heavy wording. I had come to the question of what my vocation was as I read the emails we had over and over again. That's why I asked the same question to you. As I participated in your monograph project, I could look at your work from the beginning to the present more prudently. As you said, "the path of art is mysterious and unknown." I also feel like I am solving the tangled threads in my head as the process of curating exhibitions and meeting artists is repeated. I look forward to the stories that penetrate your work, the focus of your work, and our conversations tracing them continuing like a pleasant journey. Thank you for having the extended dialogue on [How to Remember Times](#), and for that we were able to share our thoughts on the 'times' we are living through from various angles.

I think this will be my last question. I've had a good chance to read a lot of text about your work; many people talked about the link between imagery and language, and time and space, and the blurred line between artificial nature and nature itself. What do you think about those interpretations? Also, I am wondering if you have a work that you feel more attached to, and if so why.

From Suwon, where crickets are chirping after heavy rain. With best regards,
Hyun Jeung

August 9, 2020

Dear Hyun Jeung,

Regarding the interpretations, I think I can see them more clearly when I can read the writings of the seven contributors to my monograph including you. The reason why I wanted to have relatively many contributions for my monograph was because I wanted to get diverse words from others about my

work. Not the way I show what I want to express through work and add my words to explain it, but the way of listening to the words coming out of the mouth of those who appreciated it – I think there is a difference between the language of speaking and the language of listening or reading. In between them is where my work is. My words coming out of my mouth or through my writing to explain it are clearly different from listening or reading the words of others who interpreted and understood it in their own way. And I think it is important to build a bridge with the words of others in the process of that work reaching the audience and becoming a part of the world. I reckon the interpretations you wrote are like a bridge for my work.

And lastly, the work that I'm most attached to – honestly, it is tricky to pick one. But I'm paying more attention to my recent and current work I am focusing on and future works will come in the future. Maybe that's why I keep displaying my works plainly in front of me. And of course, thanks to Anca Verona Mihulet who's trying to analyze my previous works. I've been able to revisit what I did 25 years ago, which I left in my drawer and forgot, and to think about how the signs have been unfolding and been determined over the years. As I mentioned in the previous answers, I didn't know back then but I think it was a process of gaining legitimacy through time. Perhaps the reason why I pay more attention to my current or future work is because I want to know why and what my work means to me.

As you said, I feel that this conversation will be a source and clue of our deeper conversations to come in the future.

At the end of the rainy season, I am looking forward to the arrival of various answers from the contributors who respond to my work.

Thank you again.

On a rainy Sunday, with best regards,
Sunmin