

IN THE BORDERLAND

(Notes on Biho Ryu's *Letters from the Netherworld*)

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*Wind tugging at my sleeve
feet sinking into the sand
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash*
(Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*)

In her book *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, in a section called 'The School of Roots', writer Hélène Cixous imagines a place called 'uncountry' (*de-pays*) where, as she writes, the very idea of country would come undone, and borders and identities, "those invisible lines that stir up wars," would cease to exist. But, the word 'uncountry,' as Cixous says, does not yet exist, and thus we are confronted daily by the violent reality of borders (national, epistemological) which separate, divide, discriminate, include and exclude, protect, limit, segregate and control. That of borders is a question of life and death. It is a matter of death because everyday hundreds of people die in their attempt to cross national and international borders to escape war, famine, torture and enslavement from colonized, impoverished and war-torn areas. On the other hand, however, borders, or borderlands are not simply divides between here and there or us and them; they are also culturally fertile places that sustain life without backing away from its contradictions. Borderlands are spaces of "divergent thinking," where as Chicana feminist poet Gloria Anzaldua once said, "a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet," can be told. What would a poetry of the borderland sound like? What form would art or existence have to take to inhabit the borderland? And if it is true that, as Jacques Derrida once said, "the power of images is the power of death," can we imagine a process of image-making that defines closure, death, and fixity? Can we imagine an image that rather than enacting the violence of representation can heal the world from the presence of so much death, on the streets as much as on media and our screens, today?

Biho Ryu's work *Letters from the Netherworld* (2018) grapples with such questions, in his attempt to find an artistic form to speak against the violence of borderlands without reproducing its violence in turn. By adopting a poetic register, and drawing on and playing with the idea of "mythic resonance," that is making literary and historical allusions to Western and Eastern artistic and cultural traditions, the work calls for an understanding of the act of crossing borders as an existential, political and artistic possibilities. Comprising videos, photographic material, an installation and a sound piece, *Letters from the Netherworld*, reflects on the violence (that of wars and borders, but also the violence of images, and the representation of violence today), as well as the potential of imagining this act of crossing borders, literally and metaphorically, as an opening to life beyond death. The artist opts for a poetic of absence—that is not the same as the absence of poetry, that would be death. It is a poetry that escapes discourse, the violence of representation and it is not fully controlled by the centre and system of language.

In a *Prophet's Words*, a decapitated, levitating head standing against a black background—perhaps a reference to the beheaded Assyrian general *Holofernes* who brought war and destruction to the nations of the West—leans downwards while slowly uttering words such as "dissension, war, misery, tragedy, pain, regret, longing, memories, rebirth, fragments of hope, hoping to find, life, light, the love of the earth, we of uncertain fate." The decapitated head becomes the threshold

between the living and the dead, between war and love. Indeed, the words spoken evoke images of war, death, total destruction while at the same time hinting at the possibility of love, of a different, peaceful fate—one constructed collectively: “together let us seek a way out,” the beheaded head says. These words continue to echo in the video *Kkwaeng Geulang Kkwaeng Kkkwaeng Kkaeng*. Filmed on the streets of various European cities, recognizable by their architecture, individuals of different nationalities and backgrounds stare at the camera holding up a round mirror that winks and sparkles at us as it reflects the sunlight. To accompany this moment is the sound of *kkwaenggwari*, referenced in the title of the piece, a traditional ritualistic Korean music instrument, composed of a small flat gong played with a hard stick, which produces a high-pitched metallic tone resembling the sound of mirror breaking into pieces. The grey coloured images, and the diffuse light produced by the reflection on mirror, makes it difficult for the viewer to clearly discern the features of the individual’s faces. It is as if the artist had attempted to transcend the specificities of each individual— for instance, facial features, colour of the skin or other forms of identification—, by focusing the viewer’s attention on the sound and the diffused light that, like in representation of the Holy Spirit, seems to emanate from the protagonists’ bodies. If a *Prophet’s Words* evokes images of death, war and crisis; on the contrary, the video *Kkwaeng Geulang Kkwaeng Kkkwaeng Kkaeng* seems to celebrate life in the simple, yet magical gesture of holding up a mirror to reflect the sunlight: symbol of enlightenment energy, fertility, and strength. Differences notwithstanding, the two videos propose an image of suspension and in-betweenness: between life and death, the world of the living and the dead; between war and hope, body and soul, the holy and the human, the spiritual and the political. They reflect the artist’s attempt to compose a visual language that can represent this state of being in-between as a possibility for transformation, rather than the impossibility of life altogether. In *Letters from the Netherworld*, Biho Ryu takes on the impossible task to counteract the deadly power of images, and experiments with a process of image making that attempts to free the subject matter from the violence intrinsic to any form of representation—be it language or images. This reflection becomes even more urgent today when considering the abundance of images of death and violence that circulate in the media and which legitimates, if not perpetuates, the very violence those images depicts. How can art counteract this tendency, and refuse to participate in what has been pointedly called “pornography of violence”? If the power of images is, as Jacques Derrida argues, the power of death, because any artistic creation is a substitute for the living, here the artist invokes the power of the poetic—where meaning emerges between the words, the blank spaces, in the breaks, the pauses, the silences, the unsaid and unspoken— to resist closure and keep meaning open.

The multi-media installation *The Beach 36° 96' N 27° 26' E* is a homage to, or as the artist says a mourning for the death of the drowned Syrian refugee, Alan, whose body, face down, was found on the beach of Akyarlar in Turkey, in September 2015. The heart-breaking image of the lifeless body of the young boy circulated widely on media, becoming emblematic of and supposedly “opening the politician’s eyes” to the horror of the Syrian civil war. But, while the image might have awakened the consciences of irresponsible politicians, the violence of that image kept killing the young boy over and over again with each new article or post which reproduced that photograph. Koreans held that if a person had succumbed to either illness or from natural causes outside the comforts of the home, the deceased spirit would roam aimlessly to eventually become a ghost or, *kaekkwī*. Trapped in the endless repetition of the violence of the image of death, how can the spirit of Alan be accompanied, with dignity and respect, to “the other side”? How can his spirit find peace when the daily display of images of violence on media seem to relegate the young boy to forever remain in a limbo zone? Instead of erecting a monument to the memory of the dead, the installation *The Beach 36° 96' N 27° 26'* refuses the rhetoric of presence, or if you prefer, the pornography of violence, and instead affirms art as a space of mourning. A display structure made of sheets of white tarpaulin hosts two video-projections showing aerial views of the sea and of a sea cove. On the floor, laid down on pallets painted white is a series of grey colored photographs which depict details of nature or objects found on the beach: beach bushes, a wooden boat, a large plastic bag and

other objects which have been transfigured by the corrosive force of the sun and the sea salt, and a large scale photograph of a close up of what look like a rock, but in fact is the image of a dog rolling on its back on the beach. It's hard to say what each image represents. The viewer can only hesitate in front of these images, and surrender to the openness of the sign, while being transported, carried away, by the repetitive, rhythmic sound of breaking waves, *Void* (2018). Music becomes a means of transportation, of trespassing, passing through, and pass over, as the artist and the viewer accompanying the dead person in their spiritual journey to "the other side," that is the side of life — a life that cannot be reduced to one meaning, one place, one face. In this respect, Biho Ryu's art is for life; it is "on the side of life" as it insists on the need to keep the process of signification open, where meaning is not reducible to a fix sign. The artist conceives of art as a space of mourning in the sense Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous have argued, that is an interminable event that defies closure and undermines presence. Mourning is a working through the process of signification that resist closure, entertaining an intimate relationship with the poetic.

Letters from the Netherworld is inspired by the myth of Orpheus and his descent into the underworld to save his beloved Eurydice from death. According to Greek mythology, the poet, musician and son of Apollo charmed the gods with his artistic talent into allowing him to cross to the underworld to bring the young girl back to the world of the living. Although, Orpheus failed in his attempt to bring Eurydice back to life, he kept writing songs and poems that spoke of this experience of crossing the border between the living and the dead as a shape-shifting and transformative experience. Orpheus' poetry expressed his belief in the human soul, and its journey after death, which must be accompanied by singing and art making. For the artist, the poet and musician Orpheus represents the possibility of art to sign of love and life in the face of the impoverishing and de-humanising effects of violence and wars. If, in a state of exception, such as the one produced by wars and political, social and humanitarian crisis, law is inevitably suspended, and the law system becomes incapable to provide any relief to those who suffer and have suffered injustices, can poetry heal the traumas and bring justice?