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Twelve

Jeamin Cha

2016, 3-channel video installation, color, 33 min., Korean. **Production company** Jeamin Cha (Seoul, Korea). **Written and directed by** Jeamin Cha. **Director of photography** Youngjik Cho. **Sound design** Morceaux J. Woo. **With** Si Hyun Cho, Sook Hee Song, SungDae Yoon, Donghoon Lee, Yo Han Choi, An Young Shin, Jong Sup Hwang, Sang Jin Baik, Changwan Park, Hyunkwang Jin, Ji Hyun Jung, Hye Young Kim.

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The South Korean Minimum Wage Commission is an entity that negotiates and decides the next year's minimum wage. Established in 1978, the commission's meetings have been held behind closed doors. Thus, we can only assume and imagine the discussion of the 2015 meeting to find out how the 2016 minimum wage was decided. That is, to understand a decision about the present, we have to look back to the situation of a past meeting where the future wage was negotiated. The scenario of the 3-channel video installation *Twelve* is based on the content of a 2015 meeting with reference to various documents. Twelve characters represent the twelve times of the meeting. In addition, a sequentially operating, repetitive machine movement is juxtaposed with the meeting scenes. The work emphasizes the fact that what is called formal, public, and a human discussion is being held only behind closed doors or in a private space, while simultaneously questioning what the future of a nation and its democracy should be.

Cold and Dry

The films of Jeamin Cha are dry. The balanced composition, rendered in cool hues, brings to mind the scales of justice, tipping neither this way nor that. To remain squarely neutral, Cha subdues all the passion of feeling and maintains a stance of cautious observation. This isn't to say that her work is bland or simplistic. She disturbs turbulent storms but does so concisely, targeting their quiet center. Standing at the fiercest height of conflict, she refines her emotions and calmly relays her stories. In terms of theme, most of her works are grounded in a weighty critical consciousness. In taking a critical perspective on society and politics, it would be easy to produce works that are defiant and indignant; just as with strong visual effects, the more dramatic the subject explored, the more explosive and extreme the methods of depiction become. Cha, in contrast, gives her subjects of interest a clear voice while also maintaining a sense of emotional balance that distances her works from the dogmatic or didactic. She foregoes any approach that might be considered even the slightest bit instructive or one-directional in its delivery and constructs a unique *mise-en-scène*. Cha's aesthetic is characterized by a dry feeling of distance and a crisp visual beauty that is neither heavy nor light.

Of course, since the artist is still young, it's not really possible to draw any firm conclusions about the qualities that define her work. It is possible, however, to look at what she has produced since 2010, when she began to present her works in earnest, and roughly categorize these into three groupings. Organized by topic, the groupings are works that address labor issues (*Chroma-key and Labyrinth* (2013), *Twelve* (2016)), works that address mysterious deaths in the military (*Hysterics* (2004), *Autodidact* (2014)), and works that address urban development (*Sleep Walker* (2009), *Mrs. Rottenmeier* (2010)). A common thread throughout her works is the investigation of labor issues in the city. Rather than seek to explicitly develop any broad discourse, she traces each theme back to the level of individuals and their problems, identifying issues relevant to the social discourse in the process.

Chroma-key and Labyrinth (2013) and *Twelve* (2016)

Cha's two works on labor issues were presented at two different biennials in Korea during the same period in 2016. (The two works were featured at *Mediacity Seoul 2016* and the 2016 *Gwangju Biennale*, a notable accomplishment for a young artist). *Chroma-key and Labyrinth*, one of Cha's pre-existing works, was exhibited at the *Gwangju Biennale*. The biennial's artistic director Maria Lind described the piece as one that illuminates the fact that, although modern people live in the online environment, the base of this environment is ultimately physical labor. In *Chroma-key and Labyrinth*, Cha examines the notion of labor in the abstract, behind which the actual process of labor becomes hidden. The film juxtaposes footage of the busy hands of a cable installation worker with footage of the same hands in front of a *chroma-key* set, engaged in busy motion but not actually doing anything. In this way, the artist questions the definitions and significance attached to the labor of workers versus the notion of labor confined within the word "labor."

Cha first met with the cable installation worker when an acquaintance, the head of a labor union, commissioned a video project. The union had been looking for an artist who could take

video footage of a survey on labor conditions that would be sent to the National Assembly. Though introduced casually, Cha's connection with the worker inevitably became a central element of her work. That is, Cha's mode of work, informed by a mature sense of discretion, makes room for a viewpoint that refuses to objectify. She prepares for the production as if making a documentary: meeting with the subject of her film face to face, observing, researching, and communicating with the subject from a close distance, and establishing deep ties with the community. Yet Cha doesn't arrange the information she collects in chronological order. One sees from the footage that she consistently keeps the camera at a fixed distance from the subject. The camera neither strays too far from the worker nor zooms in on him through close-ups. Even when the worker is climbing up and down a telephone pole or untangling cable wires in an alley, the camera remains at the same distance. Cha is careful to position herself in a place where she can identify and highlight a certain feeling within the overall context, articulating problems and creating a thin fissure in a framework that had been considered solid.

Whereas *Chroma-key and Labyrinth* focuses on the act of labor, *Twelve*, a new work that was presented for the first time at *Mediacity Seoul 2016*, focuses on the conditions of labor. Commissioned for the biennial, *Twelve* looks at the negotiation process of the Minimum Wage Commission as it carries out its deliberations for the coming year. The commission's proceedings have been closed since its establishment in 1987. Cha secured, with some difficulty, the records of the 2015 proceedings, which she turned into a script for her film, without added dramatization. Though some modifications were made to the number of people partaking in the meeting and their tone of voice, the dialogue was not altered in any significant way; viewers will feel as if they are watching a scene in a reality show.

A three-channel installation, *Twelve* depicts the commission members acting as mediators on the central screen, with representatives of business on the left and representatives of labor on the right. Twelve meetings are depicted chronologically. The participants' perspectives differ sharply, but aside from a few heated moments it is a low-key affair. When the conflict appears to be intensifying, there's an emotionally rousing shift to a scene of a machine sorting pills. Though the parties to the negotiations have vastly different economic needs and positions on the matter in question, visually the divide is much narrower. This is because the same scenes are repeated again and again in the film, and the distribution of the people across the screens (four per screen) is balanced. With the two sides in opposition and unwilling to compromise on their views, they can only proceed in parallel, unable to agree without mediation. In *Chroma-key and Labyrinth*, featuring an actual worker, and *Twelve*, based on actual meeting records, Cha touches on the value of labor, particularly its unseen abstract elements. Her works are direct investigations that incorporate actual people and events, but by extracting the narratives hidden in them, Cha cuts away the elements of truth and reality.

Hysterics (2014) and *Autodidact* (2014)

Hysterics (2014) and *Autodidact* (2014) are two of Cha's works in which the visuals are more markedly abstract. *Hysterics* utilizes a black light, a tool that is often used in forensic investigations to look for traces of bloodstains around a corpse

after a mysterious death. The camera moves along a track, and blank white sheets of paper, exposed to black light, show blotches of liquids. This is a depiction of the meanings hidden in society. According to the artist, the film's single scene was shot in a single take. Electrical cords and the white paper are clearly visible on the screen to show that the setting has been staged. The artist makes this obvious rather than try to hide it. She also does only minimal editing, presenting things as they truly are, in an abstract reality. The artist, in a state of hysteria, seeks to uncover the truth hidden in a manufactured situation, and she does so without pretense; her quest is to find the truth that lies concealed behind contrived exteriors.

In *Autodidact*, Cha narrates the conversation she had with Hur Youngchun, a man who taught himself forensic science in order to uncover the truth behind the death of his son, who died in 1984 under questionable circumstances while doing his military service. Here, too, Cha depicts the dogged pursuit of a hidden truth that must be exposed as an experience of hysteria. Hysteria, a word with negative connotations because of associations with mental and psychological disorders, is juxtaposed with truth, particularly truth that morality and conscience demand we expose. Through an ironic, contrasting pairing of words and abstract visuals, the artist gives shape to an argument that, due to repression by society, cannot otherwise be expressed.

Art that addresses sociopolitical issues will often take the position of enlightening. The artist will use film, the medium of the camera, to communicate a personal social message, asserting a kind of omniscience; this process of didactic self-positioning, violent in its coerciveness, is what Cha is especially wary of. Cha's preferred mode of operation is to show the truth in stark terms and bring it to light. From beginning to end, her films maintain a tension that doesn't give; at the same time, they target cracks in the viewer's thinking. This aesthetic syntax is rooted in fundamental questions. The artist's attitude toward art is one of persistent self-questioning as to where her focus should lie, and what her grounding should be when producing art that addresses social issues.

"Why do I do art?" "What is the role of art in society?" The stance an artist assumes ultimately becomes the basis for the visual elements and grammar of her art. Cha has said that writing an op-ed or campaigning would be much more efficient ways of arguing her opinions, which is why she stresses that art needs to be a kind of seed, able to make people think about what is wrong with certain situations. The subtle tensions that can be felt in Cha's work, together with the bleak yet not disconsolate way she exposes current issues, are suggestive of where she stands and what matters most to her as an artist.

Lim Seunghyun: "Cold and Dry," in: The Arthro, Platform for Korean Contemporary Art, 2016, URL: <http://eng.theartro.kr/interview/interview.asp?idx=48&curpage=>

Jeamin Cha was born in 1986 in Seoul, South Korea, where she lives and works as an artist and filmmaker. She graduated from the Korean National University of Arts in Seoul (BFA) and Chelsea College of Design and Arts in London (MFA). She has held solo exhibitions and been part of numerous group exhibitions.

Films

2013: *Fog and Smoke* (21 min.), *TROT, TRIO, WALTZ* (12 min.), *Labyrinth and Chroma-key* (15 min.). 2014: *Autodidact* (10 min., Forum Expanded 2015), *Hysterics* (8 min., Forum Expanded 2015). 2016: *OorR* (2 min.), *Hospital* (2 min.), *Twelve*.