

The Voice Falls

Lee Nara

Image Culture Critic and Senior Researcher at the Cinema & Transmedia Institute,
Dong Eui University

The Movement of the Voice

The voice has laid itself down. It moves in rhythm while reclining. Sujin Lee's art is a work of moving and flowing among the voice, spoken words, and language. Lee's translation—the writing and erasing the voice and laying it down—is a work of rhythm. The process of flowing is documented in rhythm and the voice that lays itself down into a mark rises again through breath. It stands up in the rhythm that the translator discovers.

The first thing the audience sees, as they enter the exhibition space of *Language Is Treacherous 언어는 배신하지 않는다*, is a voice lying down. *The Sound of Moskva-Petushki*, a silent, transcribed copy of a text, “leaning against” the voice, comes into the audience’s sight right away. Among the voice, spoken words, text, and language, Lee once again brings the voice to the very front and looks into it—most deeply.ⁱ The work spreads out like an accordion, zigzagging to the length of about 9 meters. This paper-book installation forms a relation with two videos, which are in view when the audience looks to the left: *A Kitchen Reading* and *ephemeras*.ⁱⁱ The installation also makes connections through the voice with *A Sight No Tongue Can Describe* and *Please Read Aloud*, which are in other rooms of the exhibition space. *Moscow-Petushki* (1970)ⁱⁱⁱ by Benedict Erofeev is a well-known literary work from the Soviet era and was *samizdat*, which was written and circulated without the state's approval during the era. In *The Sound of Moskva-Petushki*, created by Lee copying every single letter of the novel using paper and carbon paper, the voice emerges while

conspiring with the silence. The novel follows a vagabond who takes a train that departs from Moscow to get to Petushki, the last station of the line, 115 kilometers away from the departure station. One should reflect that the novel was written with a consideration of the voice in the first place. The idea is supported by the fact that the writer himself referred to this text, which is usually categorized as a novel or poetry, as poetry—a genre of the voice, reading, and self-expression. Two and a half hours is the time it takes for the train to travel from Moscow to Petushki, passing through thirty-five stations in total, and the time corresponds to the duration of reading the text aloud—if done at a regular speed. Also, this novel was *samizdat*, which readers copied with a pen or a typewriter and circulated amongst themselves. If one can call a secretive whisper as an act of attaching the voice to the ear, then copying a secret novel concerning the duration of reading can be regarded as an act of binding the voice to the hand. Walter Benjamin differentiated novels from stories and he wrote that stories also carry the storyteller's experience. Lee's transcribing of the text carries the physical experience of a storyteller named Erofeev, and that of those who produced and distributed *samizdats*. The act of transcribing conveys an experience of the voice.

Part of the long time spent on the transcription process was documented in audio^{iv}, which plainly reflects the nature of an act of writing, and the audio was used for the single channel video *ephemeras*. The video has fragmented images, words, and sentences. However, many sentences in the video, which Lee collected in Kolomna, do not satisfy standard rules of grammar. "она видео она молодая девушка/she is a video she is a young girl" is an example of the Russian-English text, translated and recorded by Google Translate. The artist, who does not speak Russian, utilized the online translation tool to hold conversations during her artist residency in Kolomna, Russia. A rhythm is created along the sound of the paper, pen, and writing. The rhythms on the screen of *ephemeras* and the silence in *The Sound of Moskva-Petushki* form a relation in which "the works might define each other against, beside and at a distance from each other, taking support at the same time from their difference and their simultaneity, and defining, without privilege or culmination, the scope of a *network*."^v

The Physicality of the Voice

In Sujin Lee's work, the voice sometimes disappears. I wonder if she wants to ask, "If there were no voice, would you be able to hear better the words that I say?"

Works utilizing the invisible, spectral, and bodiless voice question the synchronization between the body and the voice or between the image and the voice. They unveil the fallacious nature of the reality in the image, constructed by the voice. The voice has duality: it is an instrument to complement a verisimilous imitation and to cause its failure. Voice-overs and voice-offs, and *acousmêtre* (voice that is invisible; character as a voice)^{vi} in films, accentuate the voice as an anxiety trigger. This ultimately alludes to a split of the subject, the body of the voice. The breakdown of the subject in Lee's work appears as a fracture between the language of the voice and the voice of the body. Lee asks in *A Kitchen Reading*.

"Without the body, would it be easier for you to hear the words that I say? What am I trying to, do? Am I trying to fit my body into this language?"

Lee's video *September* features a native English speaker teacher named September who speaks about an experience in which the body is overshadowed by language and language is forced upon the body by cultural perceptions of the body. This was done in a direct and linear manner—a trait rarely found in Lee's other works. Concurrently, Lee incorporates a style of animation that doesn't conform to the indexical relationship between the body-object and image. She replaces the face, the subject of utterance that constitutes one's existence and individuality, with a contoured image. At the end of the video, the female speaking subject's voice turns into another, similar sounding female voice. The images and sound in *September* create a form in split, in which the subject speaks about restrictions shared among the body, language, and identity as well as the breakdown caused by those restrictions.

Unlike in *September*, in which the artist shakes up the prominent status of

the body as the subject of utterance, she attempts to revive the physicality of an absent voice in *The Sound of Moskva-Petushki* and *Please Read Aloud*. While she was envisioning a project about Artkommunalka, *samizdat*, and Erofeev, Lee learned that Erofeev later lost his voice to throat cancer. Erofeev became a body without the voice and disappeared through the body. Let's go back to the physicality of the voice. By starting from the lungs, vibrating the vocal cords, and arriving at the inside of the mouth, the voice begins to be produced. The voice does not exclusively belong to the inside or the outside. The voice that travels the 'sensory organs' turns into the voice realizing the 'meaning' of the organs, and it is done only when the voice leaves the mouth and reaches someone else's space. The voice, as a sound of the body, always traverses the body to be born. By the crossing, the voice creates the borders between self and other. Vilém Flusser argued that "the speaker's inner space, just behind the vocal cords and just prior to speaking out" is also not a private space but with a "public character," but the space "only become[s] real and so actually become[s] ideas" when words are spoken.^{vii} Lee worked in the space between two voices: the voice in *Moscow-Petushki*, which divides the body's limit and prohibiting boundaries existing outside the body, and Erofeev's voice that was trapped inside his body after throat cancer. Lee does not write in order to decipher the written text, but she writes through physical breaths and rhythms and especially along the sound of writing, which is evident in the video *ephemeras*. The letters filling up all the pages in *The Sound of Moskva-Petushki* evoke an image of the artist's body transcribing the text, and her writing body brings the body of Erofeev to mind. She writes to revive the disappeared body of Erofeev and to let his voice reappear as it traverses the body. It is fair to say that Lee's work allows us to imagine the voice as an event that constructs and organizes space including the body, not the voice as an object placed and assigned within space.^{viii}

Please Read Aloud is a text piece documenting the artist's own story: it is about her failure in communicating what she wanted to say to her relative who was a voice actor. The artist's text ends with "This short piece of writing is a text, a written text, and it is with each letter, typed one by one, in this language that is supposed to be based on phonetics. And I

am comforted by all this so very much." The sentence makes me wonder what in her work brings her such comfort. Lee used a typewriter to create a 'short' piece of text on paper. Her relative worked as a voice actor who inserted their voice into a Western actor's body. Though Lee wanted to invite the relative to participate in her project, she never had a chance to ask the question aloud prior to their death. Therefore, the text piece is concerned with the voice as a kind of *palimpsest*. It is about someone who had to "voice" multiple bodies, and the words inside another person's head repeated over and over. It is also about someone who was alienated from their own body through their voice and another person who failed to make a sound for communication. By typing, "the gesture most characteristic of writing" that connects to thinking,^{ix} and using the characters based on the voice, Lee invites the audience to join in producing the ungraspable multiplicity of the voice and duality of meaning.

The Subject in Translation

It is not just the body that restrains the voice; language does it too. The voice simultaneously intervenes in language as if it were requesting a body. Lee looks at the aspects of linguistic restraints and interventions through translation. Her translation does not follow the narrow definition of translation, which is translating from a foreign language to a native language or from one national language to another. Her translation moves back and forth among the voice, spoken words, text, and language. Lee studied art and began her artistic practice in an English-speaking country, and she has persistently asked how her own identity is made up by her native language. To her, a work of expanded translation has been a way to question the relationship between one's identity and language(s). Her artist book *Hyphen* talks about writers such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Samuel Beckett, and Jhumpa Lahiri, whose works have been written in languages that are not native to them. Undergoing an experience of departing from one's native language and speaking a second language must deepen one's experience of migration and being an "other." However, the writers mentioned above apparently demonstrate that it's not the second

language that restricts one's freedom. Works dealing with translations between spoken words and text as well as the sound and the body instead of translations between one's native language and second language illuminate the following: a second language only reveals the wound cut into the subject; a mother tongue or a language of home cannot ever assure the wholeness of the subject. For example, Beckett surely walked into a language that was not his native tongue to translate an experience of being outside, which is "to feel grow within oneself a desert at the other end of which [...] gleams a language without an assignable subject, a godless law, a personal pronoun without a person, an eyeless and expressionless face, an other that is the same."^x

Sujin Lee's translation includes auto-translation by Google Translate, live translation, re-translation, and repetition as translation. Her translation not only allows one to recognize what is translated but also what cannot be translated. Successful translation sometimes equates to a "successful failure" of translation. To talk about the dimensions of language that are impossible to translate, let's return to discussing Erofeev's novel. The novel's protagonist, an alcoholic, reflects the writer's life. Erofeev was born in 1938 in Petushki and worked as a laborer, without a home, roaming around the boundaries of the Soviet system. The protagonist shares very pointed but absurd stories with people he meets on the train. As the narrative of the book develops, the distinction between truth and fantasy becomes more and more ambivalent. Even if the protagonist recalls Erofeev, this novel only informs the reader that Erofeev's life cannot be translated into a novel. Earlier, I referred to Sujin Lee's work, the transcribed copy of the text as a physical translation. The physical translation displaces an endeavor to represent the life of Erofeev, who once worked at a grocery store in Kolomna, by describing or explaining his life or the narrative of the book. What slips out when an act of representation is attempted and what cannot be translated—one now perceives them in the physical translation done by Lee.

Communal apartments in the Soviet era were where language and text prevailed over watchful eyes and prohibitions and were actively circulat-

ed. Inside those apartments, the kitchen was a place where the largest crowd—bodies with mouths—walked in and out. In this kitchen, the artist reads aloud a text concerning the subject and location of language. The Russian woman sitting next to her translates those English sentences read by the artist into Russian in accordance with the artist's reading. The video *A Kitchen Reading* documents the starting point of a live translation. The translation between the Russian language and the English language, between the cultures, and between the two voices, will be translated again into the structure of another language and rearticulated in the artist's native country. The re-translation may be done in the way the artist describes in the video or it could be done completely different from her expectations. The voice passes through the body, which is a being of temporality, and in time the voice turns into something perceivable. While being surely perceptible, it is closely associated with the attributes of the body. Therefore, the voice always changes and is in a danger of vanishing. Translating the physicality of the voice is translating the time engraved on the voice. It is an experience of time.

The Silence in Rhythm

I have previously mentioned that Sujin Lee's translation is a kind of rhythm. When translation is engaged with the body and the perception of time, it becomes a rhythm. As one sees in *ephemeras*, translation is rearranging fragments of language and images, broken off from the whole, into a rhythm. Lee's translation, after all, is transforming language into poetry. It's a work of creating a voice that reads poetry. Turning language into poetry is not about embellishing the language of everyday life. The sentences in *ephemeras* are from casual conversations, translated by Google Translate, and those in *This is a story for small children. a true-life love story* are example sentences extracted from a dictionary. Shaping everyday language into poetry is discovering a language of home, which is absent at home,^{xi} and searching for one's native tongue that is not native.

A psychiatrist who believed in Lacan's argument that the voice is the object of primordial loss declared that the voice resembles a fracture and

a pit and it soars up from the abyss of silence. The origin of the voice is unknown and the voice is always fragile. The voice gathers words and attempts to cover up its own deep void of the abyss. However, the only thing that can point to this void is also words.^{xiii} It seems that Lee's translation is about discovering those words directing one to the void. In her work, the silence of the abyss is sounded out and turns into a voice. In *A Sight No Tongue Can Describe*, a work asking questions about the language of poetry, one watches the letters passing over the background of which depth is unmeasurable. One listens to two voices speaking in silence. The voice does not always ask to be understood through intelligence. However, the voice always asks to 'listen.'

ⁱ Examples are *One Horse or Two Horses? (In a Hungry Voice)*, *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Project*, and *This Voice*. In *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Project*, Lee uses the voice to speak about Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. While collecting materials about Cha, Lee interviewed Cha's friends and researchers, and while doing so, she asked them to describe Cha's voice or text, or read aloud her work.

ⁱⁱ The three works by Lee— *The Sound of Moskva-Petushki*, *A Kitchen Reading*, and *ephemeras*—are the results of the translation she conceived and executed at an artist residency named Artkommunalka, near Moscow, Russia in 2018. Artkommunalka was used as a communal apartment in the 1960s during the Soviet era and is now a place housing everyday objects from that period. The works artist residents created are also kept in the apartment with those objects. Lee copied the text *Moscow-Petushki* with a ballpoint pen on paper and used two pieces of carbon paper to create two more copies of the text. Thus, there are three copies made in total. Lee shows the first copy made by hand connected to the first carbon copy like an accordion. She plans to have the third copy bound and sent to Artkommunalka.

ⁱⁱⁱ The original title is *Moscow – Petushki*. In the 1970s, when it was written, the book was circulated as a *samizdat*. The text is usually categorized as a novel, but is sometimes presented as a poem, novel, prose, or prose poem. Benedict Erofeev himself referred to the work as a poem. In this text, I used the term "novel," which is the genre generally assigned to the work. However, as I clarify in my own writing, this text by Erofeev definitely belongs to the genre of the voice, removing itself from the convention of novel. It resembles a story and is post-representational. This is the point where one should consider how Lee's work is related to Erofeev's text. *Moscow – Petushki* was first officially published in Israel and later in many other countries. It has been published as *Train Bound from Moscow to Petushki* in South Korea. Translated by Jongso Park, Eulyoo Publishing, 2010.

^{iv} "Writing does not mean bringing material to a surface but scratching at a surface, and the Greek verb *graphein* proves it. Appearances are deceiving in this case. Several thousand years ago, people began to etch into the surfaces of Mesopotamian bricks with pointed sticks, and according to tradition, this is the origin of writing. It was about making holes, pressing through a surface, and that is still the case. Writing still means making an in-scription. We are concerned not with a construc-

tive but with a penetrating, pressing gesture." Vilém Flusser, translated by Ahn Gyu Chul, *Gestures*, Workroom Press, 2018, 31.

Lee created a sound of friction between the body, paper, and pen through writing. Lee's writing using carbon paper is also a kind of writing that creates pressure and inscription on a number of surfaces.

* Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 19.

^v M. Foucault, "distance, aspect, origine", n° 17 (1963), *Dits et Écrits*, en 2 volumes, Gallimard, coll. « Quarto », 2001, p. 306.

Recited from: Taketa Hironari, translated by Sangwoon Kim, *The Aesthetics of Foucault*, Hyunsil Munhwa, 2018, 61.

* Michel Foucault, "Distance, Aspect, Origine," in *The Tel Quel Reader*, ed. and trans. Patrick French and Roland-Francois Lack (London: Routledge, 1998), 102.

^{vi} *acousmêtre* is a term that Michel Chion used to explain the (almost magical) power of the voice in sound film. Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma*, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1982.

^{vii} Vilém Flusser, *op. cit.*, 45. * Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*, 29.

^{viii} Jean Louis Chrétien, Préface, Denis Vasse, L'arbre de la voix. *La chair, les mots et le souffle : le sujet naissant*, Bayard, 2010, p.13.

^{ix} Vilém Flusser, *op. cit.*, 33. * Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*, 21

^x M. Foucault, "La pensée du dehors", n° 38 (1966), *op. cit.*, p. 562.

Recited from: Taketa Hironari, *op. cit.*, 37.

* Michel Foucault and Maurice Blanchot, *Foucault, Blanchot: Maurice Blanchot, the Thought from outside*, (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 48.

^{xi} The video *A Sight No Tongue Can Describe* ends with two different Korean translations of the line, "No poetry is home": "But poetry is not home" and "But poetry is not found at home."

^{xii} Denis Vasse, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2.

Translator's Note: I used existing English translations of the publications mentioned in the essay if they were available. I sometimes chose to use direct quotes in my translation even when the writer of the essay didn't. I followed the citation style that the writer used for her French and Korean reference. French sources were kept as is and cited in French and Korean sources were translated directly from Korean to English in the endnotes. The information about the English translations I cited follows the Chicago style and is indicated with an asterisk (*) in the endnotes.

I used a third-person pronoun that is gender neutral such as "they" and "their" in some places. I placed in square brackets the ellipsis and all the letters.