

Research on the Development of Sound Art in Asian Countries: On “Sound Effects Seoul” Series

(Interviews with Ji Yoon Yang and Chulki Hong)

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As one of the significant sound art exhibitions in the late 2000s in South Korea, this paper outlines “Sound Effects Seoul” series (“SFX Seoul”). The authors have been engaged in research on the development of sound art in Asian countries, and have already interviewed the director of “Around Sound Art Festival” in Hong Kong, Yang Yeung, and published an article on the Festival.¹ This paper was constructed from interviews with one of the directors of “SFX Seoul,” Ji Yoon Yang and one of the participating artists, Chulki Hong, in Seoul on July 26 and July 28 2016. The authors express their profound appreciation for their kind support.

“SFX Seoul” has been held three times in Seoul (2007, 2008, and 2010) and has also branched out to “Sound Effects Taiwan 2010”. This series was directed by Baruch Gottlieb, a Canadian-born media artist, and Ji Yoon Yang, an art curator currently working as the director of Corner Art Space. “SFX Seoul 2007” was described as “The first exhibition that actively introduces Sound Art to Korea,”² with the series focusing on the different aspects of sound art practices by domestic and international artists.

The first section of this paper examines the antecedents of “SFX Seoul” in the mid-2000s, in which Hong discusses his experiences with sound art. A brief history was also given in Yang’s essay, “Korean Sound Art,” in “SFX Seoul 2007” catalog.³ The second section of this paper gives details of the 2007 Seoul sound art exhibitions. 2007 could be seen as a significant milestone in sound art in Seoul as there were three international sound art exhibitions held by domestic institutions, including “SFX Seoul.” The final section surveys the subsequent development of “SFX Seoul” series

and the changing sound art situation in Seoul since the late 2000s.

1. “SFX Seoul” antecedents

This section discusses the sound art scene in Seoul in the mid-2000s. First, the activities of “SFX Seoul” directors are examined, and then the general music and visual art scene in mid-2000s Seoul are discussed. It also considers the institutional background for the development of sound art in Seoul at the time.

1-1. “SFX Seoul” Directors

After studying computer art at the School of Visual Arts, New York, Yang got to know Gottlieb at the Graduate School of Communication at Yonsei University where Gottlieb was an assistant professor and had been delivering regular lectures on sound art since 2005. Gottlieb had trained as a filmmaker and had produced and hosted an experimental radio show on CKUT-FM in Montreal from 1990 to 1997. When he started working in Seoul, he had stated that he had a plan to hold “a Sound Symposium.”⁴ After completing her MFA at the university, Yang was employed as the curator for the Alternative Space Loop in 2006. There she organized a series of performances called “335-Orch.” Gottlieb held a series of sound art workshops at the Insa Art Space in 2007. They then spent two years selecting participating artists and discussing how to develop “SFX Seoul” exhibition.

1-2. Music scene

Yang, in her paper “Korean Sound Art,” discussed the noise music scene in the area around Hongik University in the mid-2000s. Some of the musicians such as Hong later took part in the sound art exhibitions.⁵ There was also a distinct club music culture in the same area, at which there were also some art spaces such as the Alternative Space Loop and SSamzie Space.

Absorbing contemporary foreign movements from magazines such as *CMJ* or from record stores such as Tower Records, Hong entered Seoul’s improvised music scene with noise-making objects in the early 2000s. At that time, Yukie Sato was instrumental in organizing the “Bulgasari” monthly events from 2003, at which Hanjoo Lee and Alfred Harth played, and also introduced Tokyo improvisers such

as I.S.O. In 2005, Hankil Ryu, who had started his career in an indie rock band, launched a monthly electro-acoustic-improvisational music event, Relay, and was joined by Hong and Joonyong Choi, the co-founders of Ballon & Needle records. There, various sound media and electronic equipment were employed to create music, such as turntables without cartridges, skipping CD players, watch springs and typewriters as well as conventional musical instruments,

In her essay, Yang outlined the variety of musical backgrounds that were involved in the burgeoning sound art movement:⁶ Kiwan Sung from an indie rock band, Line 3 Butterfly, and KEAMS (Korean Electro-Acoustic Music Society) from contemporary music.

1-3. Sound art exhibitions and artists working with sound

Several Korean visual artists working with sound, who later participated in SFX Seoul, were active in the mid-2000s. Youngsup Kim studied sound-visual art under Christina Kubisch in Germany and participated in “Sonambiente Berlin” in 2006. At “SFX Seoul” and “Sound Art 101,” Kim showcased his porcelain shaped objects made from audio cables. While attending a master’s course at the Korea National University of Arts, Youngeun Kim held a private solo exhibition, “Listeners,” at the Insa Art Space in 2006 and also exhibited her sound-oriented video work at both “SFX Seoul” and “Sound Art 101.”

Now we overview the sound art exhibitions held in Seoul from 2000 to 2007.⁷ There were a couple of solo exhibitions held during this time. Kichul Kim had a solo exhibition at the Insa Art Space, “Hae-in” (2000), from which some of the work was consequently added to the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art collection. Project Space SARUBIA also held some solo sound art exhibitions such as “Space Tuning” (2001) by Yun-Kyung Lee and Gook Im’s solo exhibition (2005). A Czech-born artist, Klega, had a solo exhibition in the Alternative Space Loop in 2003. It is remarkable that Total Museum of Contemporary Art held a group sound art exhibition in 2002, “Tangible Sound,” which was organized by a Japanese curator, Takashi Azumaya.

1-4. Seoul sound art situation

Hong-hee Kim outlined the development of alternative spaces in the late 1990’s Korean art scene as follows:

In fact, however, Korean alternative spaces were an autogenic cultural movement that arose in response to the conditions of Korean politics, economics and culture in the late 90s, especially the IMF crisis, which entirely differentiates them from other alternative spaces in Asia or around the world.

In 1999, nongovernmental alternative spaces such as Loop, Pool, and Sarubia opened their doors through the collaboration of artists, critics and curators. In the following year, Insa Art Space was initiated with governmental support, similarly Ilju Art House opened under the auspices of Heungkuk Life Insurance (Ilju Art House is currently closed). Furthermore, the Ssamzie Art Project, which was begun in 1998 by Ssamzie Ltd. to encourage cultural activities during the IMF era, was reborn as Ssamzie Space in 2000 (Ssamzie Space closed its doors in March 2009).⁸

The sound art movement in Seoul in the mid-2000s appeared to be anchored to these developments. “SFX Seoul 2007” was supported by the Korea Foundation, Arts Council Korea and Seoul Foundation for Arts and Culture (although one of the exhibition venues, the Total Museum of Contemporary Art, is a private museum).

Kim said that the artists exhibited in these alternative spaces tended to value new media art and multimedia arts because of its unique communicability. They “responded to the spectacles of the everyday and focused on mass consumption culture rather than the sociopolitical reality of the time.”⁹ In her interview, Yang pointed out that the Korean government at that time was interested in supporting mixed media performances or interdisciplinary artwork as part of their cultural policies, which might have played a part in shaping the sound art characteristics at that time such as sonic media-based, multi-sensory and social distance.

2. Sound art in 2007 Seoul

In 2007, three international sound art exhibitions were held in Seoul — “Sound Art 101,” “SFX Seoul,” and “The Art of Listening” (to be exact, they were an exhibition, a festival and a workshop project, respectively, but this paper calls them exhibitions for convenience). This section first describes each of these exhibitions in chronological

order and then briefly compares them.

2-1. Three sound art exhibitions

“Sound Art 101”

April 24-June 17 at Ssamzie Space

The first curator, Hyunjin Shin, said that the aim of this exhibition was to introduce sound art to the general public.¹⁰ “There have been several sound art exhibitions in the past and more exhibitions are being organized. Despite the fact, sound art still remains in the remote territory for general public.” The title clearly displayed this intention.

The works were divided into three categories: electronic music, works between music and visual arts, and sound works in the visual arts. Shin considered sound to be “the common denominator of both contemporary electronic music and multimedia installation works in the visual art field.” Some of the works were listened to through headphones and each work was accompanied by a video describing the work.

Participants:

Jungju Ahn, Jaeho Jang, Youngjun Choi, George Chua / Chee Wai Yuen / Alwyn Lim, Gazaabal (Jinwon Lee), EGNEKN (autonym, Ken Montgomery), Sangtae Jin, Youngeun Kim, Youngsup Kim, Johannes Maier, mimiZ (Yoshihisa Suzuki, Kensuke Tobitani, and Satoshi Fukushima), Ryo Takasaki, Ami Yoshida + S.A.S.W. (Sato Minoru), Anne Wellmer, Gregory Whitehead / blackhumour (Frazer Hall).

“Sound Effects Seoul 2007”

September 7-October 5 at Yonsei University Media + Space Gallery, Total Museum of Contemporary Art, and Songwon Art Center

The subtitle of this exhibition series, “The Ubiquitous Aural,” seemed to relate to Gottlieb’s international views and his previous job as a radio producer. In his curatorial note, he compared the Korean art scene with the Western and Japanese

scenes.¹¹ The curators regarded this exhibition as an international survey of sound art.¹² They invited two foreign curators: Minoru Hatanaka, who had curated international sound art exhibitions in ICC, Tokyo, and Georg Wechwerth, who had organized “Sonambiente Berlin.” Wechwerth also joined in the curation of the “SFX Seoul 2007.” The theme of the exhibition was “Potential Meaning of Sound” (the first SFX Seoul subtitle for the series), which appeared to imply the investigative nature of the exhibition.

Yang argued “(t)his exhibition is a challenge of how to exhibit sound art at a place that is designed for visual art.”¹³ The curators employed various exhibition methods at the three venues — sculptural installations in the conventional art spaces, outdoor installations, site-specific works in a house being demolished, and two-dimensional works with sounds. They also held a workshops conducted by participating artists.

Participants:

Doojin Ahn, Davide Balula, Dan St. Clair, Jean-Pierre Gauthier, Michael Graeve, Sabine Groschup, Chulki Hong, Kanta Horio, Robert Jacobson, Jaeho Jang, KEAMS, Youngeun Kim, Youngsup Kim, Hangjun Lee, Christof Migone, Hatanaka Minoru, Werner Reiterer, Philip Samartzis, Sigtryggur Berg Sigmarsson, Tetsuya Umeda, Miki Yui, Georg Weckwerth.

“The Art of Listening”

November 5-December 15 at Insa Art Space

“The Art of Listening” was a project made up of three workshops: “A Little Bit” by Byungjun Kwon, “Sound, Architecture, and Environment” by Mark Bain, and “Hearing Perspective: Think with Your Ears” by O + A (Bruce Odland & Sam Auinger). Insa Art Space also conducted several sound-oriented activities in this year, some of which are described as a part of this project: exhibitions titled “Landscape” and “Tongue, liberated!,” artist talks by Cristina Kubisch and David Michael Digregorio, a screening, “Visual Sound,” and performances by VJ Kwon & Primary and The Barton Workshop, among other things. The journal of the space, *Journal BOL 006*, also featured articles on “Resonance.”

The curator, Sung-eun Kang, explained that the focus of the project was “sound-listening” rather than “sound-making.”¹⁴ She argued that current culture

was visually-oriented and people living in a metropolitan city were constantly harassed by all sorts of sounds, particularly from electronic devices. Therefore, “we will introduce sound that is available in our everyday lives but has not been truly recognized.” The workshop format certainly appeared to be a suitable format to achieve these aims. The catalog of the project included the diary of a workshop participant.

Participants:

Byungjun Kwon, Mark Bain, O + A (Bruce Odland & Sam Auinger)

2-2. Overview of the sound art exhibitions in 2007 in Seoul

All three exhibitions were conscious of their role of being introducers of sound art to a general audience as well as the necessity to fit diverse practices into existing schemes, i.e. into general arts categories (“Sound Art 101”), conventional art spaces (“SFX Seoul 2007”), and workshop formats (“The Art of Listening”). Some artists participated in more than one exhibition. It can be inferred that each curator paid attention to the other exhibitions; at least, Yang referred to the others in her essay.¹⁵

3. “Sound Effects Seoul” series and after

Gottlieb and Yang held in the subsequent “SFX Seoul” series in 2008 and 2010.¹⁶ How did sound art in Seoul change during and after these exhibitions? This chapter first traces the development of “SXF Seoul” series and other sound art exhibitions after 2007 and then discusses the changing sound art situation in Seoul on the basis of interviews with Yang and Hong.

3-1. Development of “Sound Effects Seoul” series

“Sound Effects Seoul 2008”

August 5-26 at Croft Gallery, Art Space Hut, and Soongsil University

The theme of the second “SFX Seoul” was “Radio,” and it consisted of FM radio broadcasts, exhibitions, a seminar, and a workshop. Yang explained that the

curators had fortunately discovered an empty radio frequency in Seoul and got permission from the KT&G's building in Hongdae to install an antenna on the top. The program contained not only live performances but interviews with artists and theorists and experimental shows such as Vaseline Project and Lezpa. The show was also streamed through "SFX Seoul" website.

Gottlieb had had a great deal of experience as a producer of radio art, and Yang described why this theme was chosen for the second of the series:

[O]ne of the critiques we got from the 2007 show was that the audience was really puzzled because there was nothing to see because it was the first time they had seen or experienced a sound art exhibition. So, they complained that it was not communicating. So for the second one, we said, okay, we will communicate as much as we can under the umbrella of sound art. That is how we started the radio show.

Participants / Radio Program:

Aeon, Rui Ang / Jeremy Fernando / Jeremy Fernando, Soowhan Choi, Sangmoo Chung, Jared Davis, Jamie Drouin, Matthias Erian, Fantastic Four, Inevitable Delivery, Yeong Gang, Sung-Min Hong, Shiu Jin, Saneh Kang, Young Kang, Ana Kim, Changju Kim, Gyujung Kim, Heeseon Kim, Kyujung Kim, On Kim, Seung-Young Kim, Alex Kotch, Byungjun Kwon, Kkot-dabang, Tetsuo Kogawa, Gerard Leckey, Chang Lee, Daeil Lee, Haewon Lee, Jieun Lee, Tae-Hoon Lee, Lezpa, Makeshift, Pelléas et Mélisande, Richard Pilkington, Radio Fashion Show, Skt Project, SOMURAL, Song to the Siren, Star Wars Project, Kiwan Sung, Vaseline Project, Allen S. Weiss / Brandon LaBelle / Jonathan Sterne, Yangachi, Yasung ui Kott Dabang.

"Sound Effects Seoul 2010"

8 January-13 February at Space Hamilton and KT&G Sangsang Madang Gallery

The theme "Sound Specific" was a derivative of "site specific." Yang said that the curators wished to go back to installations and everyday sounds as the last exhibition had been quite ephemeral. Therefore, they selected works such as Geoff Robinson's field recordings of the Seoul soundscape, Seung-Young Kim + Yoon Seok Oh's

recorded sounds of a broomstick sweeping the venue, and Seulgi Lee's performance in which she repeatedly lifted and dropped common household objects on the floor.

The "Festival concept" was based on logic similar to that for The Art of Listening, in that the visual was excessive but transient, and in contrast, the aural was subtle but constant. In addition to these elements, it referred to "[t]he weakness of sound work," meaning that the sound works were vulnerable to penetration by the local soundscape; therefore sound art practice "has a propensity to take as its starting point the pre-existing audible context of its implementation."

Participants:

Alice Hui-Sheng Chang, Eunji Cho, Chulki Hong, Heeseon Kim, On Kim (Feat. Jeong U Choe), Seoungyoung Kim, Seung Young Kim + Yoon Seok Oh, Seulgi Lee, Geoff Robinson, Yangachi (Feat. Hankil Ryu, Euy-Hyun Kwon).

"Sound Effects Taiwan 2010"

March 24-27 at Tainan National University of the Arts, Taipei Contemporary Art Center, and Dogpig Art Cafe

"SFX Taiwan 2010" was derived from and shared the theme with "SFX Seoul 2010". It was a 3-day performance event (not exhibition) featuring Chulki Hong and Alice Hui-Sheng Chang.

Participants:

Alice Hui-Sheng Chang, Dino, Chulki Hong, Kueiju Lin, Chao-Ming Tung, Pineapple, Fujui Wang.

3-2. Sound art exhibitions after 2007

Many of the artists who participated in "SFX Seoul" also had solo exhibitions, such as Seung Young Kim's "Walk" (The Savina Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011), Youngeun Kim's "The Units of the World according to; Semicolon" (Project Space Sarubia, 2011), and On Kim's "Surfaces of Listening" (Gallery Factory, 2012). Yang also continued to curate sound art exhibitions in the Corner Art Space with artists such as Hangjun Lee and Joonyong Choi and Chulki Hong's "Celluloid Extended Phonograph: Goo (球/口) of 24fps/15Hz" (2011), and Kichul Kim's

“Elastic Deformation” (2013). Simultaneously, many new artists were emerging. From 2010 onward, large international sound art exhibitions in Seoul began to increase, including Christian Marclay’s “What You See Is What You Hear” (Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, 2011), “x_sound: John Cage, Nam June Paik and After” (Nam June Paik Art Center, 2012), “Acts of Voicing: on the Poetics and Politics of the Voice” (Total Museum of Contemporary Art, 2013), “Through the Listening Glass” (Total Museum of Contemporary Art, 2016) amongst others.

3-3. Changing Seoul sound art situation

In her interview, Yang described the sound art situation in the late 2000s. By this time, Yang believed that sound art was being recognized in the visual art scene, which was evidenced by the growing number of sound artists and the growing awareness among visual artists of the significance of sound. Several video artists began to collaborate with sound artists despite the fact that they used to treat the sounds as supplemental to the visual. Hong also believed that audiences were beginning to cross over the boundary between visual arts and music freely.

Hong mentioned that there were also changes in the way artists perceived these developments. For example, Hankil Ryu started to collaborate with the artists from other backgrounds, especially poets and writers from the 2010s, and Hong himself has collaborated with filmmaker Hangjun Lee since 2006. Yang also pointed out that young sound artists tended to be interested in pop music and culture. Similarly, even public museums began to invite popular musicians and DJs. She added that the connotation “sound art” has become blurred these days because some popular artists who want to be regarded as artists call themselves “sound artists.”

Discussion

The preface to *Journal BOL 006* described the features of South Korean sound culture¹⁷ and mentioned that a French geographer, Valérie Gelézeau argued that the speakers in an apartment complex in South Korea were related to the military dictatorship legacy, as follows:

Even though the majority of announcements are not related at all to anything life-threatening ([...]), people expect a decisive moment to come as long as they are in a state of panic. For those of us living in Korea, the latent sound is endlessly expected.

Each sound culture has its own characteristics, which are often closely tied to a particular society. With this in mind then, how did the sound art exhibitions discussed in this paper reflect the characteristics of the South Korean sound culture? Hong-hee Kim claimed that the alternative space movement, which arose within the Korean art scene in the 2000s, was entirely different from similar movements in other countries.¹⁸

Yang told the authors an interesting background story to “SFX Seoul 2008” in her interview:

As Korea had a very long history of dictatorships from the ‘70s and ‘80s, the government was strictly controlling the radio. Usually, in other countries, there were pirate radio shows being broadcast from universities or campuses, which was not the case in Korea. In Italy, there were hundreds and even in Montreal, Baruch was doing this; however, most were usually university based. In Korea, it was totally forbidden. President Roh Moo-hyun’s was more liberal and gave permission to open up very small local radio stations in Seoul.

But then in 2008, President Lee Myung-bak became president and was totally capitalistic, the very opposite of President Roh. Because Lee Myung-bak cut the support budgets for community radio stations, these radio stations were struggling which was why we also collaborated with them.

People who produced radical radio programs on Mapo FM also appeared on “SFX Seoul 2008” broadcasting; however, community radio culture in Seoul was very vulnerable to the political environment. In contrast, as the live Internet streaming culture was emerging globally; for example, “Ustream” was launched in 2007 and “SFX Seoul 2008” used both media. This was one of the cases where Korean sound art was faced with the ambiguity of South Korean globalization in a specific way.

Notes

1. The authors only use “sound art” as a general noun referring to art that uses sound. For our understanding of the term, see NAKAGAWA, Katsuhi and KANEKO, Tomotaro, “Research on the Development of Sound Art in Asian Countries: Interview with Ms. Yeung, Yang” in *Tokiwadai Journal of Human Sciences*, vol.2, no.1, 2016. p.90.
2. Ji Yoon Yang, “Potential Meanings of Sound,” in *Sound + Art: Between Music, Media Art and the Simple Act of Listening*, Baruch Gottlieb and Ji Yoon Yang eds., Seoul: Misulmunhwa Publishing co. 2008, p.37. [Hereinafter the catalog is referred to as *Sound + Art*.]
3. Ji Yoon Yang, “Korean Sound Art,” in *Sound + Art*, p.10.
4. Baruch Gottlieb, “Listening and ‘the Ubiquitous Aural’: SFX Seoul 2007” in *Sound + Art*, p.18.
5. Yang, *op.cit.*, p.10.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Nam June Paik was also related the development of sound art, as he produced several sound pieces—*Random Access*, *Schallplatten Schaschlik*, *Klavier Integral*, etc. — for “Exposition of Music-Electronic Television”(1963). Nam June Paik Art Center and Talbot Rice Gallery co-curated an exhibition, “Transmitted Live: Nam June Paik Resounds” in Edinburgh International Festival 2013. Therefore, he could be considered a Korean sound art pioneer. Unfortunately, we were unable to find any references to Nam June Paik in any of the international sound art exhibition catalogs in 2007 Seoul. The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, held an exhibition, “Memories of Wuppertal,” in commemoration of the 1st anniversary of Paik’s death in 2007. It focused on the “Exposition of Music-Electronic Television” and described it as “the very first solo video art show” (*Memories of Wuppertal*, Seoul: The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, 2007, p11). However, this does not necessarily mean that Paik was not connected to in sound art at that time. Therefore, this paper leaves this as an open question.
8. *Ibid.*, p.93.
9. Hong-hee Kim, “Art in Korea since the late 1990s: Arrival of the alternative space, emergence of the new generation artists and changes in the topography of art” in *Double Fantasy: Korean Contemporary Art*, Tokyo: FOIL Co., Ltd., p.92.
10. Hyunjin Shin, “Sound Art 101: from funny, abstruse to something of horror,” in *Sound Art 101*, Seoul: SSamzie Space, 2007, p.3.
11. Gottlieb, *op.cit.*, pp.20-21.
12. Ji Yoon Yang, “Potential meanings of sound: Curatorial statement - 3” in *Sound + Art*, p.36.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Kang Sung-eun, “The Art of Listening” in *The Art of Listening*, Seoul: Insa Art Space of the Arts Council Korea, 2007, pp.7, 9.
15. Yang, “Korean Sound Art,” in *Sound + Art*, pp.9-10.
16. On the informations of these exhibitions, see “SFX Seoul” website [<http://sfxseoul.org/> (Accessed in 2016/11/17)]
17. “BOL 6,” in *Journal BOL 006*, Seoul: Insa Art Space, Arts Council Korea, 2007, pp.6-7.
18. Kim, *op.cit.*, p.92.

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