

YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES

CLOSE YOUR EYES

ENET





Το Εθνικό Μουσείο Σύγχρονης Τέχνης επιχορηγείται από το Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού
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CLOSE YOUR EYES

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**Don't Close Your Eyes:
The Flash-ing Art of Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries**

by Jessica Pressman

Within the first few seconds and the first flashing screens, you know you are seeing something explosive—something decidedly new but also familiar. The numerical countdown, harkening back to early cinema, appears and is followed by the declaration: YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES PRESENTS. Then it hits you: the bold text, the charged, flashing prose, and the heavy beat. Glued to the screen, unable to look away in fear of missing something, you are spellbound by Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI). And you are not alone.

YHCHI is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed collaborations in the new media art world. Their work generates buzz on blogs and bulletin boards across the Web; it is taught on university syllabi and inspires scholarly articles. Their work has been exhibited in numerous museums worldwide, including the Whitney (New York City), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Getty (Los Angeles), the Tate (London), the Pompidou (Paris) as well as at the Venice, Sao Paulo, and Istanbul Biennials. Last year, YHCHI presented its first international solo show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. The current exhibit, held here at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, showcases YHCHI's ability to enthrall: to stop people in their tracks and compel them to read.

All of YHCHI's works share a simple but sophisticated style and form: sleek black text in capitalized Monaco font flashes against a stark white background, speeding in synchronization to jazz or electronic music. In recent years, YHCHI have started creating their music making them musicians, writers, artists, and choreographers of the multimodal performance. YHCHI build their works in Flash, a proprietary software program (by Adobe) for creating animations. Flash is the standard platform for web-content; it is usually used to produce extensive interactive, multimedia animations. However, the first seconds of YHCHI's work make evident the fact they use only a nominal percentage of the software's capacity and instead pursue a retro-aesthetic that foregrounds typography and narrative content. Their works explore diverse subject matter and subjectivities, including a close reading of Ezra Pound's first two cantos, a political critique of North Korea's dictator posed in starkly sexual terms, and experiments in stream of consciousness. These narratives contain meditations on our digital age and promote reflection on the implications of global capitalism, the politics of translation, and the pitfalls of identity politics in a networked era.

Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries is the name of the artistic partnership comprised of Young-hae Chang, the self-proclaimed Chief Engineering Officer, and Marc Voge, the duo's self-styled Chief Information Officer. Adopting the language of the capitalist marketplace for their artistic collaboration, YHCHI suggest that their work is a merger of high art, with its serious, "heavy" affect, and the popular culture and mass-production of "industries." The artists live in Seoul, Korea, but their works are web-based—inspired by and accessible on the Internet. The works are available on the artists' website free of charge and in a variety of languages. A visit to their website imparts a sense that the oeuvre contained therein engages

with and speaks to a globally networked, multilingual readership—one created by and for the Internet. In narratives that straddle the local and the global, the specificities of life in Korea and the experiences of living in a global network connected by the World Wide Web, YHCHI revel in and critique the culture of the Web. Rather than embracing the Web wholeheartedly, YHCHI use their location online as a position from which to launch artistic acts of immanent critique. Part of this critique is evident in the way YHCHI artfully present themselves, adopting a guise of anonymity that they see as constitutive of the Internet: "Distance, homelessness, anonymity, and insignificance are all part of the Internet literary voice, and we welcome them" (Swiss [n.p.]). This is not the model of the Internet that we have come to know: a vehicle for self-promotion, social networking, and capitalist service. Instead, YHCHI offer an alternative way of reading the Web and art presented on it. They do so by rejecting the primary characteristic of the Internet: interactivity.

Lack of interactivity is a central aspect of YHCHI's artistic strategy. In his essay contained in this catalog, Mark Tribe relates how YHCHI's nearly lost their Webby award (in 2001) because some members of the jury thought the work "has none of the qualities that distinguish net art from more traditional forms." Yet, it is precisely the way in which YHCHI challenge the most "distinctive qualities" of their art form that renders their work powerful and important.

Chang explains, "My Web art tries to express the essence of the Internet: information. Strip away the interactivity, the graphics, the design, the photos, the banners, the colors, the fonts and the rest, and what's left? The text" ("Artist's Statement" for "Woven Maze"). Rather than the content of advertising, pornography, and social networking that constitutes the majority of Internet content, YHCHI want their audience to focus on the medium that enables these messages: textual language. However, any reader of YHCHI's work immediately recognizes the challenge of trying to focus on the flashing text. The words speed by, and there are no options to pause or slow the work. Control over reading pace is stripped from the viewer, leaving her staring wide-eyed and unblinking at the screen, struggling to make sense of the text fragments flashing by. YHCHI's works are growing increasingly longer (consider that *Dakota* [2002] is nearly 6 minutes long whereas all of the pieces for this exhibit are over seventeen minutes). As the Internet—and, indeed, digital culture in general—grows increasingly interactive, YHCHI's rejection of interactivity grows more apparent as an aesthetic strategy that demands acute, prolonged attention and rewards careful reading and rereading.

YHCHI's work may seem simple at first glance but upon further and repeated viewing the work exposes its layered depths and implications. Indeed, YHCHI's art encourages reconsideration of the terms and concepts we use to define our experiences with art. Their Flash-ing works blur the line between reading and viewing (which is why I have been alternating between the words in this essay) and complicate such categories as literature, film, and art. YHCHI's work defies categorization as high or low, modern or postmodern, art; and, when

read as literature, it challenges distinctions between prose and poetry because YHCHI's flashing text is both narrative and is punctuated, rhythmic meter. In addition, the fact that YHCHI is a partnership between two individuals defies common assumptions that an artist or author is an individual genius expressing his/herself in isolation and instead promotes awareness of the collaborative aspect of artistic creation. Further, the fact that YHCHI's collaboration is comprised of a Korean and an American disturbs categorizations based on nationality: is this Korean art, American literature, or something altogether different? YHCHI's oeuvre straddles and complicates these divisions, encouraging reflection on the state of contemporary art and the means by which we practice such reflection.

As good art is supposed to do, YHCHI's Flash-based works hold up a mirror (or a screen) to the viewer and challenge you to read and reread your world. The two main works contained in the current exhibition promote such reflection in starkly different narratives that collectively illustrate the power and poignancy of YHCHI's new media art.

THE ART OF SLEEP

The Art of Sleep is a mediation on the state of the arts by an insomniac narrator. Near the beginning of this long visual soliloquy about what art is, where it is located, and what it does in the contemporary world, the text blares, "TRUTH IS, - "MØST PEØPLE / CØULD GIVE / A DAMN ABØUT / ART." This conclusion serves to bond the narrator and the reader into a small minority of people who do "GIVE / A DAMN ABØUT / ART." The text continues, "ASK SØME GUY / IN THE STREET / IF ART IS / WØRTH A DAMN, -HE'LL GIVE YØU / A SMACK UPSIDE / THE HEAD JUST / FØR ASKING." The reader, like the speaker, is not just "SØME GUY" off the street, but, rather, an enlightened individual who cares about art. Having made this connection between the artwork and the viewer of it, *The Art of Sleep* then segues into an exercise in logic that lays out a foundation for an aesthetic theory.

The argument develops as similes turn into metaphors: "NØT, ART IS / LIKE A DØG, / BUT, ART IS / A DØG" (emphasis in original). The sleep-deprived speaker comes to the conclusion that everything is futile and therefore, "THEN ART IS / FUTILE, TØØ." This is not as a bad thing, though, because if "ART IS / FUTILE" and "EVERYTHING / IS FUTILE," then "EVERYTHING IS ART." With this realization, the narrator continues, "THE REST / WAS A PIECE / ØF CAKE. - ART WAS / A PIECE / ØF CAKE. - NØT, ART IS / LIKE A PIECE / ØF CAKE, BUT, - ART IS A SLAB / ØF BELGIAN / CHØCCØLATE CAKE." This long digression in associative thought soon becomes a clear assertion of artistic genealogy: "THE IDEA IS / AS ØLD AS THE / URINAL- (WHICH, / IS ART)." The invocation to Marcel Duchamp and his ready-mades (in the second decade of the twentieth century) situates YHCHI within an avant-garde movement that challenges convention by questioning what art is and should be. Thus the relevance of YHCHI's insomniac narrator: he is trying to wake the world, and the art world in particular, from its slumber. Visitors to the National Museum of Contemporary Art's exhibition space experience this clarion call loudly and visually.

CLOSE YOUR EYES

The work's title demands and describes something you cannot do: how can you close your eyes to YHCHI's flashing text and powerful prose? How can you turn away from the increas-

ing panic of a man waiting for a subway train who panics at the approach of a police officer? And yet, the narrative implies that you do close your eyes to people like this man who suffer because of their appearance: people pulled out of lines while waiting for trains and planes, people who might or might not have appropriate documentation but are, regardless, taken in for questioning. We close our eyes to the plights of our neighbors, legal and undocumented, suffering the injustices of racial profiling. *Close Your Eyes* is a terrifying testimony to the war on terror told through the streaming thoughts of a law-abiding, passport-carrying citizen who fears the state of which he is a member. In it, YHCHI expose their power to deliver powerful cultural critique with subtle deftness.

The music begins with four snaps, and the first screens implicate you, the reader, in the terror of the diurnal scene:

YØU'RE MINDING YØUR ØWN BUSINESS, / WHEN SØME GUY IN A UNIFØRM - /
MAYBE JUST A WHITE SHIRT / WITH A BADGE ØN IT - / SNEAKS UP FRØM BEHIND /
AND INVITES YØU / TØ STEP ØUT ØF THE LINE / AND FØLLØW HIM INTØ / WHAT
TURNS ØUT TØ BE / A WINDØWLESS BACK RØØM.

Although this work adheres to YHCHI's minimalist aesthetic, it presents a striking, new direction for the artists. YHCHI have often included political critiques in their works, but the subject of concern has changed. Midway through the work, the screen is penetrated by the large letters forming "AH!" The word stands out from the rest of the text by way of italics, grayscale, and slight shaking movement.




Figure 1 and Figure 2: screenshots from *Close Your Eyes*

In this moment, a male voice penetrates the soundtrack, exerting a prolonged "ah!" that reverberates with the quivering "AH!" onscreen. The human voice stands out from the music and introduces multiple interpretations: is this voice crying out in pain or pleasure? Additionally, the voice adds a hint of middle-eastern tone and aurally implies another possibility: is this the muezzin calling faithful Muslims prayer? *Close Your Eyes* thus subtly invokes the usual subject of unwarranted searches in public spaces in our own age: Arabic and/or Muslim citizens. Trapped in the mind of the suffering narrator, the reader experiences the anxiety of waiting as the lengthy piece demands that you, the reader, stand in line next to

other readers in the exhibit space. You line up before the screen and wait for a relentlessly linear narrative to, hopefully, deliver a justice-filled conclusion. You stand before *Close Your Eyes* –and before other works by YHCHI– with eyes open, and read a work that, in turn, opens your eyes.

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