

Junebum Park: Playful Miniature in Art of Video

As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village.

INTRODUCTION

Junebum Park is a video artist who is both deadly serious and yet surprisingly playful. All of his works from 2001 to the present demonstrate his unique visual, conceptual, and media-specific structural characteristics. Park's distinct artistic approach can be summarized as an exploration of formalism, a distortion of scale and temporality, and an examination of the viewer-author relationship. His analysis of formalism is thorough and ascetic because his premises are simple and straightforward and do not allow much embellishment or deviation; the frame is fixed, the focal length stationary, and the sound, if there is any, non-theatrical. Scenes we encounter in his work, such as a high-rise apartment complex, a parking lot, or a street corner of a busy commercial district, might be shot in unfamiliar cities. However, the phenomena we see in the works are all very familiar. Park's editing exposes such phenomena, of which, he reminds us, we are a part. The artist tweaks reality, and truth is brought out of illusion that is cleverly embedded in his video work. Rather than employing cinematographic refinement to erase the trace of editorial manipulation, Park focuses resolutely on video's hand-made quality and on how its core operational functions allow personal involvement in projecting the image of the world. In short, Junebum Park's video art is reality of his own making, and yet, it is very accessible to today's YouTube-oriented viewers because of its formal simplicity, hand-made quality, and above all, the artist's innate playfulness.

Playfulness and laughter generate explosive energy in human consciousness. They instantly break up our existential dread of the everyday and transport us to a different realm. At first glance, Junebum Park's video work seems to be a string of nonchalant one-liners. However, beyond this superficial appeal of his work lies poignant social commentary made without any trace of loftiness and didacticism. Quick run-through of some of Park's videos let us see the unique worlds filled with such commentary whose revelatory nature is at the core of his art.

I Parking (2001 – 2002)



Fig. 1: *I Parking*, 2001 -2002, single channel video, 5' 25"

In his early works, such as *I Parking*, Park intervenes with run-of-the-mill daily scenes by inserting the presence of an imagined higher being, or “the creator” of the scene. A fixed frame of the video camera captures a bird’s-eye view of a parking lot directly from above. Two enormous hands appear from both the left and right sides of the frame. They control the movement of the cars and people; pushing people forward, picking cars, parking them or driving away, and so forth. The presence of these busy hands is invisible to the Lilliputians in the parking lot. The picture plays in fast-forward pace, comically intensifying the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Eventually, viewers notice slightly awkward and hasty movement of the hands, and realize the illusion created by the artist: the camera is shooting the parking lot from far above, and the hands are intervening that shot from a much closer range to the camera. The reality of the scene is then exposed; the control belongs not to “the creator,” but to the Lilliputians below. From a sociological perspective, *I Parking* is about the collapse of “carceral culture” in a modern society in which its inhabitants follow social norms after internalizing awareness of surveillance by authorities.³ Emerging from this work is the comedy of anarchism and a sense of desperation on the part of authorities seeking to gain control.

Moreover, the attentive viewer detects that the left hand belongs to a woman and the right to a man, in fact, to the artist himself. The presumption of a single “creator” falls apart. Each subject involved in this projected world is immersed in its own act. There is no single mind unifying the activities; rather, this world is a precarious coexistence of various disconnected

consciousnesses. Through a simple focus on the pedestrian scene of the parking lot, Park mischievously presents social and human relational dynamics in contemporary society.

Making an Apartment (2005)



Fig. 2: *Making an Apartment*, 2005, single channel video, 3'

Made during his stay in Shanghai in 2005, *Making an Apartment* is another example of mischievous intervention of the artist/creator, this time, in the urban landscape populated by high-rise apartment buildings. Giant hands busily construct a new apartment tower in an already overcrowded location. This video essentially documents the making of a photo-collage, yet at the same time documents the reality of the city in which construction of modern buildings is a common sight. If *I Parking* revealed schizophrenia of the society at large, this video shows us the monotony of the global urban environment. The artist repeatedly adds floors to the apartments. This mind-numbing routine directly reflects the cut-and-paste aesthetic of land developers. The video is anticlimactic as we see only the same building, the same landscape, and the same fast pace of development. We stop expecting much in the end. Only with attentive viewing, can we escape this boredom, perhaps with a slightly self-critical laugh. The apartment tower being built by the artist is literally an exact replica of the existing tower on its right. The humor triggers the shift of perspective, and the viewers suddenly see how they have been desensitized to a stream of visual information in the media world.

Recent Works: *A Heavy Fire* (2007), *Leaf Spring* (2008)

Fig. 3: *Heavy Fire*, 2008, single channel video, [minutes?]

Fig. 4: *Leaf Spring*, 2008, single channel video, [minutes?]

Miniaturization has been Junebum Park's tour de force as evident from the earlier works. By scaling down the world in his work, he allows the viewers to see it from a larger perspective, literally and figuratively. The works from the recent years continue to be created with this unique approach. However, Park is beginning to cast light on such themes as conflict and warfare, and the works not only carry humorous visual commentary on the troubled world but also suggest a sense of danger.

For example, endless warfare and territorial conflicts in various parts of the world today serve as the subtext for works such as *A Heavy Fire*. It focuses on a BB gun that relentlessly fires at the tires of what appears to be a non-military truck. Set low to the ground, the camera angle creates an illusion of a troupe of miniature soldiers engaged in combat. The assault is, however, merely annoying rather than fatal as the vehicle suffers no damage. The futility of war is succinctly implied in the form of the work; the video is edited so that the same scene plays again and again, and the firing continues without any reason and change in condition just as wars in our real world inexorably recur.

In *Leaf Spring* the effect of miniaturization is maximized, and for the first time, Park experiments with a cinematic pan that starts from a close-up and climactically ends with a wide-angle shot. The scene opens with a focused view of a leaf spring on a wooden miniature of what appears to be some kind of wheeled vehicle. Slowly, the spring bounces up and down. The movement appears subtle, organic, and even meditative; in other words, there is no element suggesting agitation. The camera gradually zooms out from the leaf spring and reveals the source of its movement. The spring belongs to a miniaturized police van being pushed from its side by a group of half naked men, also shrunk in size, apparently in an effort to overturn the vehicle. The props are distinctly hand-made as the images of the van and the people are simple cut-outs of photographs, but the rocking motion of the leaf spring gives surprising realism to this

setup. Viewers may immediately recall recent media coverage of street demonstrations in Seoul, and this association turns the skewed world of video into something familiar.

Conclusion

Artists rely on media. Today, the use of video is especially common. It is used as an extension of an artist's hands, just as a paintbrush is an extension of a painter's hands. Video is also a child of what media critic Marshall McLuhan called "the electric age" in which our consciousness is constantly stimulated by electric technology.⁴ McLuhan analyzed that in the electric age the focus is less on the mechanical mass production of materials than on the fast and wide distribution of information. This media revolution caused changes in contemporary psychological structures and social mechanisms that are difficult to understand insofar as we live within those structures and mechanisms. In short, video allows compression of time and space so as to provide a false sense of accessibility and immediacy to a large number of audiences.

In presenting this theory McLuhan was resolutely utopian, believing that such psychological and social consequences brought about by new media had much potential for good. He stated: "As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree."⁵ Video could awaken the consciousness of the viewers and make them feel involved in the happenings of the world. In this sense, video is also an extension of our eyes. Junebum Park's video, then, is not only about what it shows but also about how its composition mimics our relationship to visual information; we see the microcosm of the world. Park's playful miniaturization ultimately represents the unique ability of video to compress information.

Visual compression of scale and time is Junebum Park's play with the medium of video, and he often carries on this play with stinging commentary on various aspects of reality to which we tend to be oblivious. His work does not make any grand statement. However, the artist seems optimistic that viewers will eventually become aware of the situation. Indeed, "[t]he individual most likely to prevail [at play] is the one who believes in possibilities — an optimist, a creative thinker, a

person who has a sense of power and control. Imaginative play, even when it involves mucking around in the phantasmagoria, creates such a person.”⁶ Park is on a serious mission to present uniqueness of his video art. But, he also knows that fulfilling this mission means always remaining in a state of play.

¹ Marshall McLuhan, “Understanding Media,” from *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (Concord, Ont.: Anansi, 1995), p. 150.

² For concise introduction to Park’s video art, see *Videos: June Bum Park* (Berlin: Koch und Kesslau, 2004).

³ The term “Carceral Culture” is defined and explored by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

⁴ McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, p. 149.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁶ Robin Marantz Henig, “Taking Play Seriously,” *The New York Times Magazine* (Feb. 17, 2008), republished at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/magazine/17play.html>, p. 11.