

Staying with the Trouble

Sun Yung Shin

We in the United States live in a time of frequent mass shootings, of increasing hate crimes and the resurgence of neo-Nazism and other forms of white supremacy and domestic terrorism. The United States has the dishonor of holding a mere 5 percent of the world's human population but 25 percent of its prisoners. We produce one-quarter of the world's garbage and are the world's biggest arms dealer. No rational person could look at us and say that we are not in trouble. And the trouble of the United States becomes the trouble of the world. All artists working now are breathing in these fumes. All artists recombine the DNA of their times with the idiosyncrasies of their own obsessions, which become the bright burning fuel for their visions.

In her essay "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene" (published in *e-flux*, 2016), scholar Donna Haraway (of the famous "Cyborg Manifesto") asks: "What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social?" One of her answers is: "With all the unfaithful offspring of the sky gods, with my littermates who find a rich wallow in multispecies muddles, I want to make a critical and joyful fuss about these matters. I want to stay with the trouble, and the only way I know to do that is in generative joy, terror, and collective thinking."

The five artists in this year's Art(ists) On the Verge (AOV) are, with their work, staying with the trouble of our times (including our multiple possible futures) and invite the rest of us into their collective thinking. Through this group exhibit, visitors can experience the communal joy of artistic generation—of creation in the face of various human-caused destructions visited upon us and our fellow life forms. Through the participatory nature of their projects, they welcome our spontaneous (and perhaps even hopeful, wildly unpredictable) interactions across various axes of human senses and sensibilities.

I see this exhibit with its individual installations as five cartographies of startling intimacies, exploring the edges, tensions, and inner realms of relationships, whether with the sky, communities, the idea of abundance, the secreted private self, transitions of all kinds, including the boundaries of time. We can investigate these worlds presented to us as constructed systems, as temporary spaces where we can experiment with rules, roles, symbols, and unfinishable complexities. These five artists are not presenting answers but rather futurities by offering surprising terms with which to experience the body in space, the senses in time, the technological shaped by the human and the nonhuman.

Artists traffic in the language of the finite in a daring contest with the infinite. Elements in the finite column are many—the body, materials, time to create a product for consumption, and so on. Elements that are infinite include the imagination, language, patterns, the capacity for love and for dreams. Artistic efforts are a dialectic between order and chaos, or finitude and infinitude. Artists shape materials and space in order to gift us with the opportunity to touch into infinity.

Lindsay Halleckson's *You Are Sky* evokes the richness of solitude by exploring the idea that we are not separate from the sky and atmosphere; there are *layers* but no hard barriers between us. Halleckson declares, "What we call the sky reaches right down to the ground that we stand on. We are actually breathing sky. The sky's molecules fill our lungs and populate each of the cells in our bodies. We *are* sky."

Halleckson, who double majored in studio art and art history in college, wasn't always interested in working with the sky as part of her artistic projects. She says she was definitely not an "outdoors" person, but six or seven years ago she had a residency in northern Minnesota, and there, "immersed in nature," she developed a greater appreciation of "the beauty that's all around us." A couple of years ago, for a show at Artistry in Bloomington, she "wanted to explore parks around the state and got more interested in the weather than the landscape." She began thinking about the sky—and atmosphere—and "how it connects us, through history, and across the globe."

One of Western civilization's essential understandings was that "nature" should be tamed and harnessed for humanity's benefits, and capitalism advanced the idea and practice of extracting from nature to create goods and seemingly endless profits for a select few. In her artistic practice, Halleckson "think[s] about domination of the landscape, a culture that tries to control the outside world and make it very sterile." Evoking the dynamism of the natural world, Halleckson's use of color gradients and her technique of extending paint from the edges of the canvas to the wall embody her fascination with "subtle differences in the color [that are] time-of-year specific."

Confronting climate change is not just for scientists and policy makers, asserts Halleckson's work, which incorporates scientific data and offers these data to community members through multisensory art. Her project gives us the time and space to contemplate how "we're part of this closed loop system: what we do to one part affects us in other ways." Nature is not a static backdrop for human activity; we are interdependent. The patterns and tensions Halleckson creates and recreates in her art allow us to experience the delicacy and force of our relationship with this sublime but limited system in which we all exist together.

As an artist, **Essma Imady** is concerned with, among many other things, the phenomenon of muscle memory as it relates to place, culture, authority, subjugation, and comfort. The title of her work, *Thoughts and Prayers*, suggests that we take a closer look at certain rituals of empathy and grief, as well as attendant issues of distance, sincerity, and dis/connection(s). Imady said that she was recently surprised when she went "to Syria in 2018, for the first time since 2011, [and] was really thrown [because of] the muscle memory that still existed inside of me, it was really strange. Even if the chaos and elements of structural oppression were apparent in Syria, there was still a comfort in that because of that muscle memory." She recognized why she has felt awkward in the United States for the past nine years—a perhaps unasked question that was answered by her body.

The politicization of our human, social existences is unavoidable, although those belonging to dominant groups protected by various forms of power do not have to

reckon constantly with those lived, daily realities. Border crossers often have a heightened awareness of how our bodies are read, surveilled, and policed. Inevitably some or much of this disciplining becomes internalized, or at least memorized for survival. Imady is interested in religion and politics and how their interrelated rituals form muscle memory—and then how we come to embody those lessons. Art allows us distance through formalism; the artist describes her work as about “becoming a witness and less of a participant in order to think about it.”

Lessons, which are often accompanied by rules, are basically about power, about who has the power to force another to conform to certain norms. Norms involve groups, forms, and control. Imady acknowledges this tension: “I’m not trying to be nefarious, but there is a nefarious undertone to form and group, and to have something exclusive between [such as an art installation] that could also be fun and playful, and a social experiment.”

A citizen of a state is always subject to authority, and Imady said that her installation “emphasizes the submissive role of the citizen, and compliance, and the absurdity of asking somebody to do something without a justification. [This will be] a space for people to think about that.” The role of the necklace in visitors’ participation represents for her a personal significance: “where I grew up, external symbols of who you are and what you believe are so important. They are external symbols of belonging, a very beautiful thing in my life and also a very nefarious thing in my life.” *Thoughts and Prayers* will allow visitors to experience the emotional resonance, whether “fleeting or long lasting,” of our own and others’ bodies in complex relationships to power.

Kathy McTavish’s installation *Swarm* harnesses the eros of the algorithmic, the intelligence of the swarm, and the cyborgian creativity of artificial intelligence. In “The Uses of the Erotic,” a chapter from her important and influential book *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde writes, “There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. . . . The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings.” I think Lorde would be proud of McTavish’s orchestral, multimedia, web-based installation that is tentacular in the

Harawayan sense, witnessing trouble, resisting, morphing, flowing, regenerating itself from itself.

When I asked McTavish about Lorde's ideas and how they might resonate with her own work, she responded generously, "The radical enactment of lesbian erotic connection remains so relevant in today's continued war on women. Lorde's uncompromising insistence on a multiplicity of self (an all-ness :: an and-ness) as a black, lesbian, mother, poet, warrior, lover :: her insistence on not only an existence but an erotic flame :: a thrivance :: a continuance :: a relentless flow :: a river :: a naming :: a brilliance — shaped me and my community, to be sure . . . I feel more like I am seeking the infinite line :: a longing for something just out of reach. It is that physics of desire that fuels my work, and Audre Lorde's work has always been a touchstone for me."

The "we" and the "I," as in the collective and inherited wisdom and rules of a beehive, are in a constant dance, and McTavish's art seems like a real-time choreography of this kind of organic intelligence. Her work traffics in multiplicity that weaves in and out of itself. What I see in her project is a poetics of data that is alive in the way fire is alive, flickering, light giving, able to grow infinitely if given enough space and air. Hypnotically beautiful and yet partially alien, an element we need but can also misuse, one that can often exist without us.

Artificial intelligence poses an existential threat to humanity and our actual and illusory control. But what if it shows us other ways of being and other futures of the senses? The uncanny eros of code, of *mathemagic*, of digital pollination, of cyber spellcasting—and how it may allow us to merge our consciousnesses with another kind of intelligence—is one gift of McTavish's art.

The word *migrate* means to pass from one place to another. While the etymology seems to focus on the beginning and ending places, for many migrants the passage(s) are dense with meaning. **Khadijah Muse** is a multimedia artist who uses public spaces to create openings for people to gather, to strengthen a sense of community, and to have conversations. Muse believes that these conversations that occur organically as a result

of participating in her installation will lead to solutions. Her art is about the necessity and the fruitfulness of our relationships, including how we engage both with the world and with our inner realities.

The interactivity of Muse's project *In Between* began before the work was built and assembled. Muse interviewed people on their experiences of migration—"people leaving or moving because they had to, because it was a dire situation." She discussed that she wasn't seeking explanations about *why* people had to leave, but instead what happened after they left, and what wisdom they carried with them or developed along the way. Muse seems to resist presenting migration journeys as linear or as about any predetermined course. On the idea of the *in between*, she said, "I always have a hard time with titles. I was thinking I was initially going to call it *path*, but it was more than that, the moments that are in between and what happens then." Dedicated to community building, the artist sees her work as a way of gathering people for rich conversation about issues in the community, which she deems a type of community service.

With tens of millions of people on the move in the world right now, creating urgency to issues of mass migration, displacement, and dislocation, *In Between* offers exhibit visitors the opportunity to reflect on their own moves and perhaps their relationships to others who have experienced migration. Muse's incorporation of personal and collective knowledge of migration heightens our awareness of the losses and gains that occur in between, and after, departures and arrivals.

Does Your Shoe Have a Boy Inside? by **Chris Rackley** is an investigation into spaces of seclusion, privacy, and estrangement that can occur inside the "larger cultural phenomenon of the shopping mall." The mall can be a place of prismatic, overlapping alienations and, for Rackley, as a child, it was also personal. He spent many hours playing in the back of the shoe store where his father worked, and his incorporation of shoe boxes in different scales in his installation are about work and elements of his childhood: "the dioramas are about me and the boy I was . . . the father figure having to do labor as a show of love . . . part of the reason I was at the shoe store all the time is

because he worked so much, [it's an] expectation he felt from his father, and from the capitalist culture we had, all the work, all this busy-ness."

As an artist, Rackley continues to live within that space of busy-ness. "I've inherited that tendency to be overly busy," he said. "One of my colleagues in the fellowship said that I will usually find the most difficult way to accomplish something." All the AOV projects include some kind of technology, some form of constructed system or systems. Rackley's fabrication in *Does Your Shoe Have a Boy Inside?* makes me think of the ancient roots of the word *technology*, which is *tekhnē*, meaning "art, skill, craft in work; method, system, an art, a system or method of making or doing." Rackley's methods produce "access to this hidden realm," a childhood realm that is a kind of parallel world to the adult world; his father was selling shoes in the front of the store while he, young Chris, built a fantasy world in the warehouse, a place of repetition, a labyrinthine space of mass manufactured goods, ready to wear by strangers coming and going.

With this installation, Rackley wanted to "bring humanity into [the mall] . . . these structures that are dehumanizing . . . [I wanted to] do something artists do, [which is to] take something and flip it." He goes about making this space of enchantment and transformation by activating our sense of the uncanny, of a context that is almost right but not quite like reality or our expectations. Rackley explained how he "chose three stages [of the installation] so it places the audience in different points of view. You go from the god's eye perspective all the way to being a small person in a shoe box. This is a way of destabilizing your relationship to the size of the objects; creating the familiar but unfamiliar."

Taking elements from childhood and recreating them in a controlled environment, in an abstracted, decontextualized arena, assumes the power of the (re)creator. Rackley explained: "Freud writes about the uncanny, the repetition compulsion, which is some behavior or a form of relationship you learn in childhood and you want control, and you repeat it in adulthood, [which creates] *déjà vu*, [when you're in] a foreign context and something feels very familiar." The impersonal

becomes personal through the passing of an object from warehouse to individual consumer. Though the object remains the same, its meaning is transformed through the monetized intimacy of ownership.

In our current moment of constant selling and purchasing mediated by digital technologies and invisible currency, Rackley wonders if, by invoking the archetype of the storage facility, he will make visitors to the exhibit think about “Amazon warehouses [and spaces] other than shoe stores. The repetition of generic objects is [ironically] evidence of something very human.”

Lindsay Halleckson, Essma Imady, Kathy McTavish, Khadijah Muse, and Chris Rackley are bold futurists here in this space, bringing their visions to material reality, creating structures and negative spaces for our bodies, minds, and spirits to travel through, moving from one constellation to the next, allowing art to change us from the inside out.

Together, we are always on the verge of what is yet to become. The future of our species and life on earth is uncertain, and the emergency is already upon us and the other species that are victim to our industrial, capitalist externalities. But the story of Life is still unfolding.

Because art can contain and multiply anarchistic, emergent energies, our collective future is a Borgesian forking path. These ways into new worlds offer an abundance and generosity that flies in the face of authoritarian fundamentalisms, as wilderness remains an inexcisable primal, mysterious force in our species. Art speaks to our often dormant wildness. It shows us ourselves so we may change before it's too late. Art helps us survive. Culture is a precious technology. These artists are staying with the trouble, and for that I am grateful.

Sun Yung Shin has written three books of poetry/essay, including *Unbearable Splendor*, winner of a Minnesota Book Award, and *Skirt Full of Black*, which received the Asian American Literary Award for poetry. She has edited two anthologies, including the best-selling *A Good Time for Truth: Race in Minnesota*. With poet Su Hwang, she codirects the community organization Poetry Asylum.

