

Conditions of Senses and Healing for the “Sophiens”

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“Each soul knows the infinite—knows all—but confusedly.” - G. W. Leibniz¹⁾

The claim that “each soul perceives the infinite confusedly” by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), a philosopher who led Germany’s Enlightenment, was originally made in order to compare the finite human’s sense and perceptive ability with those of God. Therefore, it is difficult for Leibniz’s claim to attract the attention of people living today. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that humans are unable to perceive sounds from their external environments independently, but ultimately perceive them unconsciously is worth listening to. According to Deleuze, unlike Freud, Leibniz did not see the unconscious and conscious as confrontational.²⁾ He explained the unconscious as something that did not confront the conscious, believing that sounds stored unconsciously could coexist with sounds obtained from each consciousness. Based on this logic, all conscious senses would be placed under the influence of the unconscious. Moreover, all human senses seem clear in themselves, but can never be objective or universal. Humans always sense things confusedly.

Yoon Youngseok has dealt with the illusion of humans since the late 1990s, unusual for a Korean artist. His typical images, which use the lenticular technique (a print technique enabling the viewer to perceive 3D images without the use of glasses or a lens), give the effect of making the same object appear differently according to the position of the viewer. In this exhibition as well, war images from a computer game, witnessed by the artist accidentally at an internet cafe, appear beyond the screen with the letters ‘G O D’. While the religious world is a transcendental one, which cannot be sensed with ordinary senses, the world in the game stimulates our senses even more realistically than reality. They seem to belong to different realms, yet they are similar in that they demonstrate not the certainty but uncertainty of human senses. This is because the virtual reality in religion or the game display leads us to consider them more real than reality through faith and imagination, respectively, but is not physical substance.

Furthermore, in this exhibition, the artist deals with the issues of his body and senses in connection with the theme of introspection. The installation with a gigantic head and thin limbs placed by the entrance—AHIO: Artificial Human Illusional Object—and the installation Crying Needle, which is small but surrounds spectators with a strange noise, both take off from episodes related to the artist’s own senses or body. That is to say, through this exhibition the artist very honestly confesses the incompleteness of his physical functions and sensory organs. How have my body and senses confused and interfered with my perception of reality? And above all, how should I cope with the images and sounds that confuse and scramble my sensory organs?

Condition of Sense 1: The Rear-View Mirror of AHIO

For the exhibition title Yoon Youngseok invented the word "Sophiens." It is a combination of "sophist," referring to the mainstream intellectuals of ancient Athens in Greece, and "sapiens," referring to humankind living today. Literally, it can be interpreted as the "sophist human species." The term "sophistēs" has been cited traditionally with the purpose of satirizing the intellectual class of Athens, armed with excessive logic, or logic for the sake of logic, as in the case of the comedy *The Clouds* by Aristophanes.³⁾ In this play, the father, who is the main character, facing an enormous debt, sends his son to be educated by a thinker teaching logics; however, the son becomes an intellectual that is useless in real life. In the end, the father physically attacks the institution of the sophists.

While "sophiens" is a word invented to warn today's generation, which has reached a saturated state of logic and discourse, the work AHIO placed at the entrance of the exhibition space refers to the human with an enlarged head and a weakened body—a self-portrait of the artist himself. Though the metaphor is somewhat direct, the self-portrait, in which the head, dealing with thought and perceptive activity, and the thin limbs stand in contrast, reminds one of a mollusk (octopus, squid, etc.) or an alien. The support structure, which functions as the legs, seems particularly unstable, as it is too thin and long. Mirrors, resembling exploration scopes, are attached to the ends of the long legs, reflecting scenes within a limited radius surrounding the self. Moreover, his arms and legs seem too weak to run around experiencing something directly.

The rear-view mirror attached to the bottom of the ankle traces back to a personal experience of the artist on the Autobahn during his education in Germany. Driving on the Autobahn without a speed limit at night, cars that seem far away can suddenly approach from behind. The warning "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear," written on the side view mirrors of a car, since served as an important guide for the artist, who had begun to deal with the relations between his body and objects. After all, spatial sense of space has a close connection with physical movement. Football or basketball players, who are often referred to as object groups in experiments on sense of space, continuously predict and measure the distances and positions concerning themselves, their opponents and targets. Sometimes they even measure spatial distance based on tactile experience rather than visual sense, or situations excluding visual means.

The side mirrors attached to the ends of AHIO's legs are activated only when the head tilts and moves. This evokes the fact that humans' sensory experience is closely related to the body. However, the angle the exploration scope, attached to the thin limb, can reflect is very limited. Here the process of sense using the body appears different from the exploration process known by phenomenologists. The body is no longer able to move actively, and in fact becomes a

"burden" that limits visual experience. In an age filled with information, and images that can easily stimulate the various senses, AHIO presents the pathetic current state of the artist and contemporary people, or this era's "sophiens."

Condition of Sense 2: The Ballerina's Foot

The relationship between the body and the senses has often appeared in Yoon Youngseok's previous works. The series *Give and Take* (2007) was inspired by a basketball player's practice of shooting based on the sense of distance acquired by his body, without actually seeing the hoop. Then what about the example of a ballerina? The artist's interest in the movements of the ballerina began from his memory of the ballet classroom, which was next to the sculpture studio when he was attending a high school of the arts. After witnessing the feet of a ballerina, which had become deformed due to excessive training, he decided to use this as subject matter. Embodiment of beautiful motions requires severe practice time to the extent of being inhumane, which is all imprinted in the body. In *Ballet Exercise*, where the ballerina does toe standing with ballet shoes, the seriously bent feet and legs ironically seem very natural.

We must note the fact that the ballerina's physical movement is not only decided by external environment or situation, but also takes place in a state transcending the realm of consciousness. As the basketball player shoots the ball before he sees the hoop, or even without looking at it, the movement of the ballerina also does not go through the natural process of conscious reaction, involving stimulation and reaction. It is difficult to think that the ballerina's dance only takes place through the serial process of listening to the music, seeing other dancers, the brain providing the body with certain information, and the body giving the order to move. Rather, the highly trained body of the ballerina reacts and moves prior to the stimulation given from the outside.

Therefore the process of sense through stimulation and perception is secondary, similar to the way the ballerina's feet have become insensitive to most stimulation due to calluses. While 20th-century phenomenology stressed the importance of the body in order to understand the subjective and variable conditions of senses, the ballerina's body is activated in a completely different way. In the cases of AHIO's weak body, or the ballerina who demonstrates highly trained physical movement, the body is an important medium of sensory experience; however, the relation between the two is by no means mutually complementary in the artist's works. In Leibniz's words, humans' senses operate not only consciously, but also unconsciously.

Condition of Sense 3: Nonexistent Sound, Tinnitus

In the case of the artist, who has experienced a ringing in the ears for a long time, a large gap exists between physical external experience and sensory experience. After injuring his ear during

youth, Yoon has suffered from tinnitus for more than 30 years, and wanted his “somewhat pathological emotions to become senses, and those senses to become sculptures,” in this exhibition. It can be said that the emotional difficulty experienced by the artist, as he “misheard” non-existent sounds and ultimately isolated himself from external stimuli, enabled him to look at not only the body and senses but also at emotions and personal healing.

Installed in Exhibition Hall 3 are a “genetic code ACGT” sequence printed on a gigantic ear figure, and an image of a stained world map on a protruding plane in the middle of the gallery. Meanwhile, spectators hear an unknown sound surrounding them, coming from the installation-sculpture Crying Needle, with covers over the sharp ends of a huge needle, hanging from gigantic floating balloons. To cut to the conclusion, the tinnitus occurring only in the artist’s ear is combined with contemporary music and played in a public place. Yoon explains that his ears are almost completely closed toward the world. The image of the ear, existing as an independent entity, separated from other external organs, plainly demonstrates the current state of the ear of the artist, who has isolated himself to the utmost from external stimulation.

Of course this does not mean spectators will be able to share the artist’s personal experience of tinnitus. Ringing of the ear is a very subjective and personal experience. This is because it is a sound that does not actually exist, experienced by the one with tinnitus symptoms on his own, and is perceived through various routes and for various reasons. That is why many cases of tinnitus are ultimately treated through counselling. In the case someone experiences ringing or other sounds in the ear, the key to treatment relies on how to deal with the problem psychologically and emotionally.

Hence, Yoon Youngseok’s The Scenery of Inner Ear series, as suggested by the title, is a fully subjective and hypothetical work. After all, the auditory experience of tinnitus is not from an existing stimulation from the outside, but a disability or error created in the ear itself. We can assume that the artist used his transformed condition of sense as subject matter—something that was created as the artist made efforts to overcome or forget about a certain sense, like the transformed body of an athlete. If so, what does it mean to intentionally make a sound that does not even exist so as to have spectators perceive it? What questions does the experience of tinnitus pose to us with regard to physical conditions and senses, and emotional responses?

Conditions of Creation

“The mind is a subject that science has failed to understand.” - Yval Harari⁴⁾

“Emotions of anxiety or despair that the age of pure art, pure avant-garde, which emerged in the early- and mid-20th century, will never return to humankind, came as rather sensitive feelings

through my ringing ear. The feeling and the question, 'if emotions about pureness could be made into objects, could those emotions be saved?' was alive in me, and the landscapes and forms emerged from such times of emotion." - Yoon Youngseok

Sensory errors of humans are by no means unfamiliar subject matter in contemporary philosophy or aesthetics. From phenomenology to psychoanalysis, media theory, materialist sociology and cultural culture criticism, constant efforts have been made to deconstruct human senses and perceptive processes, which have so far been understood objectively and universally. Such attempts all tried to explain human senses not according to absolute experience or objective samples, but in terms of subjective and varied situations. Moreover, this also resulted in revealing the irrationality, errors and laziness of human senses. Artist Yoon Youngseok's exhibition also focuses on situations in which important conditions of the senses and the body are transformed and distorted in social or personal dimensions. The AHIO with an oversized head in the society of excessive information, the body of the ballerina, which reacts unconsciously even before sensing due to high-level training, and the artist's own ears, which subjectively perceive sounds that do not even exist, are all closely related to errors of the senses or the body, which enables human sense.

But there is another reason for revealing the personal situation, which cannot but cause sensory errors. If the current human civilization's system of development has excessively focused on humans' reason or perception, while ignoring emotional and subjective variability, from the artist's point of view, tinnitus is the way to recognize that one's body or senses can never serve as means to communicate objectively and universally the explainable reality. It is from here that he attempts to find new artistic possibilities. In a way he is demanding that spectators reflect on their processes of rational judgements, which they make with the information obtained through their own bodies and senses. Of course such a state is an important process of healing for the artist, both symbolically and physically.

The artist's attitude, wanting to admit his sensory errors, and embrace the emotions generated from the process itself, is already being reflected in philosophy or today's art scene to a certain extent. The reason 17th century pioneer Leibniz's text interested Deleuze was because it revealed the fact that in the history of Western philosophy, an interest in human unconsciousness, confusion and error existed at the basis of Enlightenment, which trusted blindly in human reason. Deleuze has emphasized that affection, which is a subjective perception and empathy achieved through sense, is a core part of artistic experience, which cannot be provided by rational persuasion or logic.⁵⁾

In this event, can Yoon's tinnitus immerse the spectators into such a state? This is indeed a difficult question. Above all, though the positive attitude of accepting errors as momentum to

"turn around fate for the good" may be practically helpful, I am still unsure where this can ultimately lead spectators or society. Furthermore, people living today are already exhausted from large and small messages of healing, being poured out from various literature on psychology. Therefore, in an age where subjective and sensuous bliss is already being reenacted on the Internet in the form of diverse "small but absolute happiness," the weight of the question presented by Yoon is by no means light. As we drift along, where will embracing our sensory errors take us? Can accepting our own errors and subjective, variable emotional states truly transform us into honest and humble human beings?