

# Byeong Sam Jeon. Revisiting the Social Conventions of Everyday Objects

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Byeong Sam Jeon, Portrait.

# BYEONG SAM JEON

## Revisiting the Social Conventions of Everyday Objects

**A**fter the Korean War (1950–1953), my home country of Korea was divided into North and South. Almost everything on the ground was destroyed, and the survivors suffered from extreme poverty. To rebuild their lives, men in South Korea worked in construction, and women worked in the textile industry, making clothes and shoes. The young man and woman who would later become my parents were no exception.

Born into a working class family, I was fascinated by playing with the materials that were left around the house, including rough bricks, structural wooden frames, and leftover cement sacks in the garage, in addition to the fashion magazines, rolls of silky fabric, and boxes of vividly coloured buttons in my mother's sewing studio. One day, as a child, I made a miniature building out of scraps of cloth and wooden sticks by stacking books and magazines. I also made a long dragon's tail by repeatedly joining wooden blocks and nails with thread. When these abandoned materials were combined into one piece, they became my first series of small sculptures.

My curiosity about everyday objects kept growing. When I was at art college, I wondered if the ordinary local bus that I rode every day could become an artwork if I turned it vertically. This gave the bus a new life; it became the sculpture *Dreaming Bus* (2001). I placed a bronze cast of myself on top of the vertical bus instead of sitting inside. Today, in Taean County, Korea, countless visitors ride buses to see this bus. The project demonstrates that anything is possible if one can imagine it in art, which I strongly believe.

In another example, entitled *Miscommunication* (2003–2005), I prompted people to rethink the conventional meaning of everyday conversation with common hand gestures. For this interactive installation, I re-engineered an old cassette tape recorder. Two participants faced each other, wearing rubber dishwashing gloves, which had sensors. The installation recorded the participants' voices and altered them, based on the movements of the gloves, and played them back at the same time through the speakers. The participants heard their manipulated voices. Misconception and confusion arose as their hand gestures interfered with communication. When they tried to continue the conversation, they realized they had to close their mouths and stop moving their hands, which placed them in the ironic situation of being allowed to talk but unable to do so in the same way they do in everyday dialogue.

Most of us use physical gestures as well as sound when communicating, and even though these gestures and sounds have specific meanings in particular contexts, we are often confused by them. By exploring the connection between movement, sound, perception, and meaning, this piece confounded people with unintended miscommunication.

For *Beautility* (2015), I used everyday objects in a similar way as for *Dreaming Bus* (2001) but with a different methodology. Instead of realigning a single object, I rearranged a large quantity of one type of object. The playful installation synchronized 1000 volunteers on a large grid, each holding a pink or white umbrella. Functioning as on-off digital pixels, the volunteers opened or closed their umbrellas, forming amazing square flower patterns that are best seen from above. People who watched the video of the work often thought it must have been performed by a team who had practiced together for months. In reality, all the participants met on site for the first time, without knowing their mission. They rehearsed for only for few minutes and then created an almost perfect participatory human installation with everyday objects.

How was it possible? I integrated a gamification method into the piece. Our planning team designed twenty image patterns with computer simulation tech-

nology and made a game card for each volunteer. The cards displayed numbers 1 to 20, combined with an O (open your umbrella) or an X (close your umbrella) under each number. When the host on the front stage shouted a number into the microphone, each volunteer checked the card around his/her neck and opened or closed their umbrella accordingly. In this way, 1000 strangers had fun together, while I completed a new interactive artwork.

People often refer to one of my well-known artworks, *CD Project* (2015), which turned an abandoned factory building into a shiny mega-artwork by decorating its 180-meter-long by 32-meter-high outer wall with approximately 500 000 compact discs (CDs) from around the world. At night, the CD wall is transformed into a giant media facade with a matrix of 30 000 LED lights hidden between the CDs. This site-specific installation explores creative urban restoration in a technology-mediated era. It also aims to bridge the gap between humankind and the environment by repurposing the electronic waste that we have generated for decades. The factory, one of the three biggest of its kind in Korea and a symbol of industrial modernization in the city of Cheongju, opened in 1946 in the centre of the original downtown. It was an important workplace at the heart of the community and provided hope for people with tough lives, until it stopped operating in 2004. When those people unexpectedly lost their jobs, they left the area, and the city centre rapidly declined. The giant empty factory stood neglected with peeling paint and broken windows until 2015. When I visited it for first time, numerous pigeons were living inside, and I heard that crimes often occurred in the area.

I was lost in thought about the building's complicated emptiness. As an artist, what could I do for the people who remained in the community? I was struck with a simple solution when I opened a messy desk drawer in my studio one night and noticed a stack of dusty CDs in the corner. They had my memories and history stored on them, music and photos I had stored for many years, but I was unable to use them because I no longer had a CD player. Even my laptop no longer had a CD-ROM drive. New technology, such as USB flash drives and cloud storage, had replaced the old in a flash.

I realized that the memories stored on those abandoned CDs resembled the empty factory. Their purpose had evaporated, but these useless objects were evidence of their time. What if I could collect CDs, not only from my studio but also from all over the world, to cover the facade of that giant building? I imagined a lively, shining building with people returned to it. The discs reflected light, yet I could write notes on their surface. I decided that the building and the CDs would be combined and live again as art. That was my starting point.

Collecting CDs, however, was not as easy as I expected. No one wanted to give them to me, because the memories they contained were too valuable, although, ironically, they were not replayable. When the CD owners started to share the memories that were on the CDs and to understand the concept behind the work, collecting the CDs became easier. Over six months, 27 912 volunteers from thirty-one cities in nine countries sent us CDs with notes written on the surface. It took 489 440 CDs to cover the factory. The wind sets the CD facade in motion, flashing and shimmering like iridescent fish scales. At night, the installation is transformed into an LED media screen, displaying memorable messages submitted by the people.

The most recent and last work I want to discuss in this essay is the participatory kinetic sculpture *O* (2016), which is installed permanently at the Gimpo International Airport in Seoul, Korea. The shape of the sculpture, which spins on a turntable, was influenced by the traditional moon jar. The jar symbolizes simplicity and modesty. Its natural outer line does not follow an ideal oval trajectory, and its oblique axis gives it a unique charm. The white surface is a combination of 900

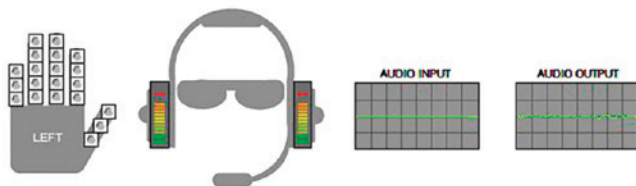
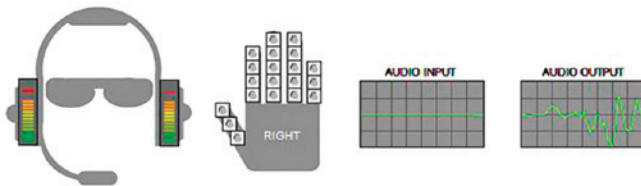


## MISCOMMUNICATION

version 2.0D

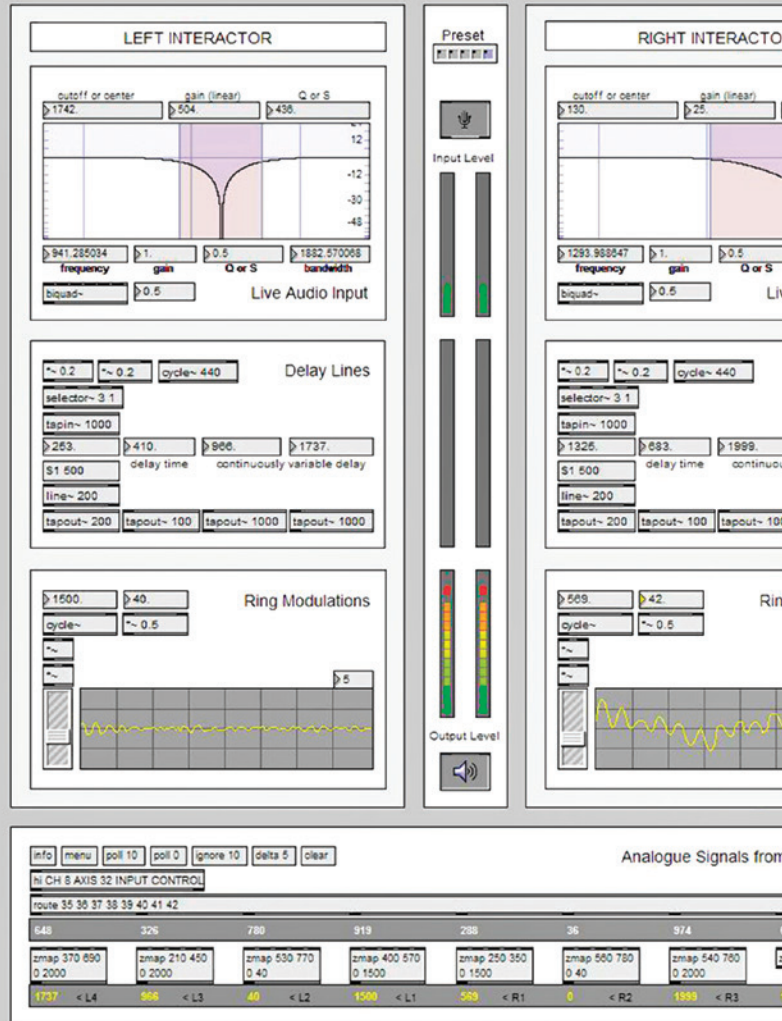
### INSTRUCTION:

1. Put on HEADSET, DATA-GLOVE and SUNGLASSES.
2. Have conversation with guesters. (Focus on the sound not on your vision.)

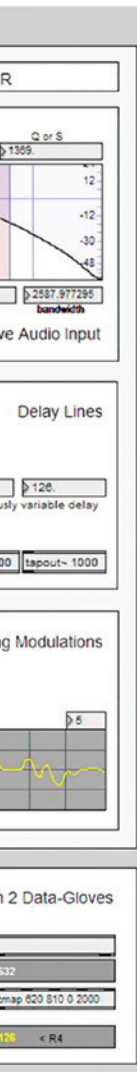


The series of "Miscommunication" address the issue of language barrier. To communicate with each other, most of us use sound as well as physical gestures. Even though sounds have specific meanings in their particular contexts and uses, we often experience communication barriers with one another. This raises an important question: How can we fully understand each other? By exploring the connection between movement and sound, meaning and perception, this piece allows participants to indirectly experience the communication barrier through the chaos of sound and language.

Byeong Sam Jeon, 2005 / [www.BSJeon.net](http://www.BSJeon.net) / [byeongsam@gmail.com](mailto:byeongsam@gmail.com)







Byeong Sam Jeon,  
*Miscommunication*,  
2003–2005.









Byeong Sam Jeon, *CD Project*, 2015.  
Building and 500,000 compact discs (CDs)  
from around the world



three-dimensional steel plates and 200 000 coin-sized, mechanically flipping discs that are white on one side and blue on the other. Before LED technology replaced them, these were commonly used in airports for public signs. I was interested in this outdated technology and how it might be elegantly transformed into a public sculpture. The rearranging pixels show portraits of people visiting the airport. Anyone can upload his or her portrait onto the surface of the jar through its front kiosk. The uploaded photos are searchable and replayable.

Why did I make it? The airport where *O* was installed is a memorable space for me. My mother cried there and waved goodbye to her husband when he went to Saudi Arabia to make money, as one of many construction workers in the late 1970s. In the post-war period, South Korea made a strong effort to earn foreign currency, so the government and companies exported human resources, especially construction and mine workers. Five years later, when we were reunited, my mother and I hugged my father in the same place where we had said goodbye. I believe that airports hold dreams, longing, the nostalgic memories of the time before separation, the hope of return, and happy reunions. I wanted the beautiful Korean moon jar to symbolically contain the world's hopes and dreams.

Some people may think that the artworks I create are elementary. This is true, in that the components of my work are often ordinary objects, such as umbrellas, CDs, neckties, boxes, or motor vehicles that anyone can acquire. The objects are seen every day, just like the pile of bricks in my childhood, but what makes my work unique is the magic when these objects are rearranged, repurposed, and given special meaning through an artist's point of view. Everything that I see and capture in life is valuable to me, and that has become my main inspiration.

Over the past two decades, all I have done originated from a wild curiosity. For example, after I became known as a contemporary artist, I have always worn a suit and necktie to formal events. This is typical for men at social gatherings. But why does everyone wear only one necktie at a time? Last month, I questioned this practice at a conference where I encountered hundreds of men, all wearing one

tie. That day, those men with ties became funny to me. As soon as I was home, I opened a drawer and inspected the shapes and colours of my thirty-two neckties. Then, I tried putting them all on at once. It looked ridiculous but also beautiful. When they stopped functioning as conventional neckties, they gained a different aesthetic and meaning: one necktie was conventional, but multiple ties were a symbol of freedom. Each of my projects examines a different theme, but all experiment with or revisit the social conventions of everyday objects. Every object has a story and hidden meaning. While my art is simple, it starts a dialogue with everyday objects, extracts a story, and makes them enjoyable. Revisiting things that are taken for granted is one of the most fulfilling games I play.

Byeong Sam Jeon

**Byeong Sam Jeon** is a South Korean artist known for his sculptures made with everyday objects. He holds a Master of Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Master of Science degree from the University of California, Irvine. The Ministry of Science, ICT, and the Future Planning of Korea announced him as the representative of a convergent species of person: *The 2014 Homo Creaens*. For two decades, Jeon has presented his work worldwide, including at SIGGRAPH (USA), ISIMD (Turkey), AsiaGraph (China), ArtBots (Ireland), Salon (Cuba), LIFE (Russia), Netfilmmakers (Denmark), SIAF (Japan), TMCA (Korea), and SIGGRAPH ASIA (Singapore).





Byeong Sam Jeon, *Beautility*, 2015.



Byeong Sam Jeon, *CD Project*, 2015. Building and 500,000 compact discs (CDs) from around the world.









Byeong Sam Jeon, O, 2016.  
Kinetic sculpture, Gimpo International  
Airport in Seoul, Korea.