

## Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 3

### Bora Yoon and *Ommah*

National Gallery of Art

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host, Celeste Headlee. Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music. We see a photo. We walk around a sculpture. We taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint. But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting. When we listen, what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that convergence. In every episode, you'll learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Today's piece of art is a little different because it already has a soundtrack. Nam June Paik's *Ommah* is a multimedia installation. You're hearing what it sounds like right now. And you'll hear more about what it looks like in a moment.

For artist and composer Bora Yoon, *Ommah* sounds like home, but not one that's easy to describe or even one she's ever known well. Bora is fascinated by what she calls "cultural blood memory," the idea that deep within us there's something that recognizes the sounds and the music of our people. She tapped into her own blood memory with percussion instruments that are native to the Korean peninsula and manipulating those instruments to make them entirely her own. But before we dive too deeply into that, let's explore the sights and sounds of *Ommah* with the Gallery's own Harry Cooper.

HARRY COOPER: My name is Harry Cooper. And I am the senior curator and head of the Modern and Contemporary Art Department at the National Gallery of Art.

CELESTE HEADLEE: If you wouldn't mind, pull up a picture of this artwork in your mind. What does it look like?

HARRY COOPER: This looks like a garment, a silk garment. Kind of a pinkish salmon color. Very, very fine, old looking. Hanging from a stick I think a bamboo stick on a gallery wall. And behind it is a TV monitor. What does it sound like? It's loud. It's loud at times. It sounds like a few young women or girls playing games and crying out the word *ommah*, which means mother in Korean. And then, there's music, and bouncing balls, and banging drums, and sounds kind of like feedback at some points, and static, electronic music. It's a kind of collage of all kinds of sounds.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So the hanbok is the traditional garment in Korea. But this one is small. It's for a young person, right?

HARRY COOPER: Right. Apparently, it's for a young man. And it may be hundreds years old or so. You can definitely see the picture in the TV screen through the garment. It's a color program. So the color kind of shines through. But it's not the same as just watching it directly. That garment is like a screen. It's really like a second—it's translucent. It's a very thin, fine kind of silk. And one thing that I sometimes notice is that there's a pattern, a kind of interference pattern, a maurey pattern because you're looking at one

screen through another screen. And I'm sure that Paik was very well aware of that and was actually interested in those kinds of effects.

BORA YOON: My name is Bora Yoon. And I am a composer, vocalist, and sound artist.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Why did you choose this particular piece? What drew you to this piece?

BORA YOON: Oh, wow. This piece has always fascinated me. I remember seeing it, and it just instantly struck a chord in me. And I wanted to get close to it and understand it more. And then, finding out that it was actually his last video sculpture also—made the year before he died in 2005—was also kind of fascinating because the maturity of artists' work when they get towards kind of an overview of their career and their canon, I think, just has an interesting kind of aerial view to it. And the fact that its title is *Ommah*—means “mom” in Korean, or “mother”—I just thought was very kind of personal and also something that's a title in his mother tongue. So all of these things kind of tied together to me to just investigate further. What is the traditionalism that's in this piece as well as kind of his take on what *ommah* means?

CELESTE HEADLEE: Well, if this piece is partly about what *ommah* means, what does it mean in all of its various meanings and significance is in the Korean tongue? What does it mean, especially to you?

BORA YOON: *Ommah* is usually the first word kids say. I know that in every language, it's always ma or *ommah* or *umma*. It's very instinctual for that reason. I just find it interesting that he's returning back to such a nascent memory. Also this idea of the mother tongue, or the motherland, or this idea of where we come from is kind of all involved in that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: How did you even approach the idea of responding to this piece that already uses music and sound to convey a message?

BORA YOON: Well, first, when I looked through the National Gallery of Art's offerings, I immediately went to the time-based art because to me so much of art is about—while it is a product that lives, that was made, at a certain time and because it's not replicable, and also how it's valued.

But the fact that this is time-based, I immediately kind of gravitate towards that because it has more dimensions than just the visual or the sculpture, the dimensional. It has linearity. It has looping. It has layers. And so I just immediately gravitated towards the elements that are in this piece. So, the ball bouncing or the beat and the rhythm. That kind of that goes from very sparse to sometimes frenetic.

And then, I also noticed that the video loop has a lot of different aesthetic forms where sometimes the image is zooming in and zooming out. Sometimes it's twirling. Sometimes it's kaleidoscopic and swirling around. Or it's doing a half screen thing, where half the image is moving and the other half is still. Or that it's actually spinning on that vertical axis.

Those are the musical things I was responding to. How can I take the ball? How can I pick the drum? How can I take this idea of rhythm and this idea of visual rhythm that he's playing with? And so this idea of abstraction and this idea of framing device came into mind. The salmon garment that's in front is a male garment, yet it's called *Ommah*. And so to me, that really brought together for me this idea that is central in the Korean philosophy, this idea of balance, this idea of female and male, of Earth and heaven. And so I was kind of drawing some parallels between *ommah*, and this idea of motherland, and mother tongue and really started to explore this idea of blood memory and this idea of cultural blood memory.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Some of the responses I had while looking at *Ommah* was also, how do I get the textural feeling of that abstract moiré pattern? This is actually the silk of a Korean *hanbok*. Speaking of timbres or visual imagery that really strikes a certain era or time, the Korean *kkwaenggwari* is a very prominent instrument in Korean traditional music. I mean, there's a lot of symbols and a lot of gongs in a lot of different Asian cultures. But this *kkwaenggwari* is probably a very signature Korean sound. And this is what it sounds like.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And I kind of in the spirit of how Nam June would take the TV, and take all these kind of traditional things, and always just mash them together in a really unexpected way—he'll just ka-chunk a big old magnet on the side of the TV and start warping the image—I always think as a composer right now how to extend the techniques of something that's always seen in a traditional light, I guess. And so I am taking the *kkwaenggwari*—

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I'm taking the *kkwaenggwari* and putting it in a bucket of water halfway through to be able to get this idea of a voice to come out of it. I'm excited about this idea of, how do instruments tell a story? How are they quote, unquote verbal? Or how are they narrative in a way that's beyond words?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Like *Ommah*. Like how to take that *ommah*, that ah pa pa, and be able to translate that into, how can I bend this metal, then, which is normally unbendable? But when you put it in water, it filters the resonance. And it starts to bend what is normally not seen as malleable into the soundscape.

And then, I'm looking for other kind of timbres that go with that. So, different found metals like this one.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So, taking all these different found metals and tuned sounds. This is just actually a rice bowl from your normal Korean restaurant probably and finding ways to be able to bend metals, put metals together in families that make sense. This is a Tibetan bowl that, when struck, would sound like this—

[STRIKING SOUND]

But, with some water in it at the bottom, can actually kind of sound akin to a talking drum.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So trying to find ways in which tonality and instruments can become lingual is something I was really responding to when I watched *Ommah* because it has such a narrative quality even just from kind of the cry of the mother and this idea of, what are the sounds that we respond to instinctually? What are the things that kind of go together, are grouped together even as timbre families?

In Korea, "Arirang" is the oldest song that there is. And every Korean knows it. And it is different from region to region. And I find that fascinating. Gangwon-do has a different "Arirang" than Jeolla province has a different "Arirang." It's the same melody and same sentiment, but each region has a different way of

doing it, a different meter. Maybe one's more plaintive and sad. And one's much more funky and kind of sassy.

[MAN SINGING "ARIRANG"]

And so people can tell where you're from by these types of different musical accents in different musical areas. And then you take that out of Korea and then in the diaspora itself, and that aesthetic then starts to bleed in.

[MAN SINGING "ARIRANG"]

I was not born in Korea, but I do resonate with this idea of cultural blood memory. That something that I carry, and I hear that in the aesthetic of traditional music. And so that's kind of the lens I'm going through for this because I naturally gravitate towards found objects and how things go together as unexpected instruments that find each other, how instruments are bound. But then, trying to find their extended families. And what are their other accents that can come in from there?

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder how similar is this to the Paik style. It does seem more sentimental. I'm no art expert, but it seems more sentimental than I'm used to seeing in his work.

HARRY COOPER: Yeah, I wouldn't say sentimental myself. But Paik was so inventive. He did so many different things. His work really runs the gamut of effects. And I think one of the interesting things about it is that it has a lot of his other work in it, actually. The program, the video program, is drawn partly from a filming session where he got these three young Korean-American girls to play these games—bouncing the ball, beating the drum, and so on.

But the video also incorporates work that he had done in the 1970s when he was working on Global Groove, which was a TV experiment for WNET in New York City. And there are also passages of electronic music that he composed as a young man in the 1950s. As I said, it's a kind of montage of his own earlier work. So people who really know Paik might recognize certain things.

And yet it is, as you say, a very, very different piece from most of his other work, I think, because of the garment that's in front. Usually, we see the TV screen very directly, whether it's a TV Buddha piece where the Buddha is looking at its own image in the closed circuit TV, or whether it's one of the robots where there's a bunch of TV monitors that are stacked up in the shape of a figure, or one of his huge wall works with many, many TVs playing coordinated programs, all of those that the mechanics, the TVs, the screens are right in your face. And so this is very different in that way.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: I do think it's interesting when you try to place Paik within sort of the continuum of art and try to sort of evaluate his legacy or how he may have wanted to be remembered. What do you think he thought?

HARRY COOPER: That's an interesting question. I think he would want to think that his influence was not to have started a new movement or to have influenced other artists. He really wanted to influence life. He wanted to change the way we experience life and especially modern life, electronic life, screen life, surveillance life, video life, all of those things that have become so important. He wanted us not to be passive, not to take any of these things for granted, not to think that TV was some kind of reality or that video was simply a record. But he wanted us to interact with these things, to take control of them, to be able to express ourselves through them. Kind of a utopian vision of how people might be able to work with technology. It's an open question whether that's happening.

On the art front, a lot of video art would not have happened without him. But a lot of video art does not look anything like what he did. His video work had such a distinctive look that I don't think anybody would really want to imitate it because then that's just what you would be doing.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Can you talk a little bit about his view of Korea and his identity as a Korean?

HARRY COOPER: Certainly, we see in this piece a real, I think, affection for his homeland, both in the garment and in the video material itself. We do know that he was a Buddhist of a sort. He was his own kind of Buddhist just the way he was his own kind of artist. I think of him in relation to Buddhism and a kind of simplicity, directness in his work—intuition, sometimes.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: How is this work different for someone of Korean descent like yourself than it is for me, who is not?

BORA YOON: I know for myself, when you see a *hanbok* when you hear the word *ommah* being called—even when I'm at the grocery store or even at the park and I hear *ommah* being called, my head just whips around because, no matter where or what distance, you will just know that timbre.

In terms of resonance to people who are not Korean, I think it still is very striking on its own of just something that looks so traditional, but then is also this media element behind it and very kaleidoscopically so.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: I mean, he seemed to have understood long before most other people did the power of technology to move information, how quickly people would become connected to their technology, not just through video, but television and even the possibilities for tech and our relationship to it. How does that express itself, that sort of prophecy to a certain extent? How did he express that in his art?

HARRY COOPER: That's a great question. And absolutely, he was a genius. I think it's fair to use that word. Both as an artist but also as a kind of prophet, he was the first person to use terms like information superhighway, electronic superhighway. He knew somehow that this technology was going to take over.

And yet when you look at pictures of his studio, his SoHo New York studio, it's an incredible junk pile. He gathered and boarded all of this equipment. He connected it up in the most primitive ways, often. He was almost proud of the fact that he was not in any sort of advanced technician. He liked to improvise, to really do things in a low tech way. He didn't mind, though, if some part of a piece broke or became outdated and it couldn't be replaced. He didn't mind doing an upgrade. So he wasn't fetishistic about it. He just was very welcome, I think you could say, to all kinds of technology and welcomed it all into his studio.

BORA YOON: Art doesn't come from a total vacuum. It's usually some tumult or some message that needs to be made. So when I walk into a gallery and see a piece like *Ommah*, I am like, the impetus behind this must have been something really profound. And I just find it interesting that this was his last piece and something that's also usually someone's first word, too.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's the piece Bora Yoon created for us once more, uninterrupted.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Bora Yoon for joining us. When you weren't hearing her make music for us, you heard sound effects and music from Nam June Paik's multimedia work *Ommah*. And you also heard an excerpt from "Arirang" as performed by the US Army Strings in 2007.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

*Sound Thoughts on Art* is a production of the National Gallery of Art's Music Department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, [nga.gov/podcast](http://nga.gov/podcast). If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also, leave us a review wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time. Be well.

[MUSIC PLAYING]