

Lending

Visibility to Emotion

Art shifts in accordance to time. In today's contemporary world, the once distinct domains of art and technology come together in the bodies of work produced by young artists. Here, we speak to New York based Korean-American artist Lisa Park, a burgeoning name in the scene.

By Kames Narayanan

THROUGHOUT THE COURSE of history, the world's constantly shifting cultural discourse has birthed an array of significant art movements: Impressionism in the 1860s sought to immortalise moments of time on a canvas; controversial Dada art movement reared its head as a radical critique of social structures in the 1910s; and later in the 1920s, surrealism reigned supreme in purveying the need for individualistic thought. The perimeters of this list is far extending, perhaps even reaching into the hundreds.

The question of the contemporary art

movement then arises — what governs the art moment of now? The answer is far more convoluted than the clear demarkers of the past. The inexhaustible repertoire of mediums, techniques and platforms available to an artist inherently leads to the production of a widely diverse range of works. While it may not be plausible to classify the contemporary moment within one overarching umbrella, its key influences can be distilled.

Ranking high amongst them is the use of technology. Living in the thick of a digital era, contemporary art and technology have become unlikely bedfellows. Today, the latter is a window into previously unexplored territories where the possibilities for creation are infinite. The intermingling between the two disparate disciplines has entirely revolutionised the art-making process from the medium to its eventual outcome — art has moved far beyond being merely a passive two dimensional canvas hung on a wall for decorum.

In the coming together of the tangible and the non-material, or the real and the virtual, an entirely new domain for art has been conceived. It is a world in which its participants can entirely immerse into an experience and at times, even interact with. Amongst the new generation of artists toggling within this realm is New York-based Korean-American artist Lisa Park.

Park's body of work is designed to render the physiological into visual representations — these experiences often curated through the use of biofeedback devices. For instance, her work titled "Eunonia II" is part of Park's investigation into translating brainwaves into a visual spectacle.

Using data gathered from an Emotiv EEG headset, Park renders a spectrum of emotions into waves that ripple through a network of 48 speakers above which sit aluminum plates of varying sizes filled with water. The intensity of the otherwise intangible emotion comes to motion in what Park calls an art experiment. In a similar body of work, Park has conceived a mobile application to visualise participants' brainwaves before these readings are taken to the speakers as feedback. Her novel take on art has drawn international attention, even turning the head of Swiss watchmakers Swatch whom she has taken up an art residency with in Shanghai next year.

Here, we delve deeper into the artist's body of work that foreshadows art in the years to come.

Top: Lisa Park standing amidst "Luma", an interactive, sound-responsive light sculpture that move accordance to the sound projected into the microphone. Opposite: "Blooming", an audio-visual interactive installation that responds to interaction between participants.

KAMES NARAYANAN: Your art is largely anchored in lending materiality to the intangible. Where does this stem from?

LISA PARK: My works [are] an exploration of human interaction. I think there are layers of complexities in understanding others through verbal and non-verbal cues. What is seen (facial expression, voice tonality, gestures) and unseen (physiological measurements like heartbeats and brainwaves) can be misleading sometimes. I am interested in manifesting invisible inner states into an external representation to let the audience to be more emotionally connected with one another.

KN: Take me through your creative processes. Where do your ideas usually stem from and how do you go about bringing them to live?

LP: We think of creativity as something new and groundbreaking, but the creative process is much like a routine and habit. I sketch or jot down my thoughts and ideas on a book to keep the record. And, I try not to overplan what I want to accomplish when I get down to work. My inspirations come from my surroundings, experiences, and relationships. The rest of the process is editing my thoughts, testing and experimenting, and executing them.

KN: How do you intent for your work to translate to people?

LP: I want the audience to have memorable moments, share positive feelings, and experience psychological and emotional connectedness. Although our globalised world allows us to always stay connected, I think our meaningful relationships are mediated through screens. I question this when making my works. Can we use technologies to create intimate experiences that unearth hidden emotional states?

KN: How have people reacted to your work?

LP: When I performed "Eunonia", I noticed that there was an invisible dialogue between myself and the audience. I was influenced by their presence during the performance, and it affected my brainwave data, which resulted [in] the sound and water vibrations. This result also affected the audience reactions when the sound becomes louder or quieter (vigorous or subtle water movements). It created a feedback loop. What is interesting about using biometric sensors is that it makes you feel vulnerable or connected or both with others, because your physiological measurements are presented into visual or sound art. "Blooming" was the work that I got the most enjoyable reactions from people. I have seen lots of smiles from people when they participated, and some cried during the experience. I think using sensory devices allow us to be aware of our environments and interactions, as well as the experience of others.

KN: In a world that is so largely dependent on technology and connectivity, do you

think that the kind of work that you do could possibly be the future of art?

LP: We are definitely living in this world where digital technology is rapidly developing and embedding itself deeper into our lives. It inspires artists to expand their creativity and open new frontiers. I think technology is a tool, just like paintbrushes. So, artists today are presented with a variety of choices, tools, and techniques to translate their vision and creativity by pushing art forward and defining new paradigms of expression.

KN: Your work brings together something so fundamentally humane and the robotic. What are your thoughts on the relationship between the two and how is this reflected in the work that you do?

LP: We can hardly disconnect ourselves from the Internet and technology. It is a symbiotic relationship. Technology is logical, practical, and data-driven. On the other hand, art is intuitive, and creative. I want to connect art and technology to explore the importance of human relationships by creating a deep sense of connection and overall sense of well-being. So even with the strong focus on using technologies, my work strives to highlight qualities that are innately human.

KN: When we think about the use of technology and art, at times, it can come across as a gimmick for easy amusement. What are your thoughts on this?

LP: It is very common that people question and doubt about interactive art that utilises sensors and devices that are not reliable. I do get this question a lot when I use consumer-available brainwave sensors. Since our brain is complex and it cannot be easily analyse and understood, I think it is valid to question about the accuracy of the data that is detected from the sensor. The reason I did the "Eunonia" performance is to meditate and self-reflect myself. Different brainwave headset companies have their own proprietary software to detect and analyse brainwave data. My work uses these detected data to modulate the volume, pitch, speed of the sound in real-time. And, I use sensors as execution tools to translate my thought and creativity into a poetic representation.

KN: What has been the most tedious piece that you have created so far? Tellme more about the process.

LP: Creating artwork can be both enjoyable and labour-intensive. I would say LUMA was the work that required the most attention and care. It was a sound-responsive light installation that was comprised of millions of fibre optic strands, which are illuminated by internal LEDs that are activated by sound. Collaborated with another artist, Kevin Siwoff, we had to finish assembling fibre optics by hand and installing this piece on a deadline for an exhibition at Red Bull Studios NYC. It was a repetitive and tedious process, but we managed to get the work premiered for the show with the help from assistants.

KN: How do you think you and your works have progressed over time?

LP: In earlier years of my artistic practice, performing and creating interactive works with biofeedback technology has been an interpersonal and therapeutic experience to me. It has been a process of discovery and my art practice becomes a journey of knowing and understanding myself. Lately, I became interested in participatory performances and installations where the participants are engaging with others to create a collaborative music and visuals. For instance, "Heartmonic" was an interactive performance piece that uses the participants as instruments, turning their heartbeats into a symphonic ensemble in real time. It began with a thought, "What if your heart rhythms create music based on your interaction with other people?" I continue to develop works that explore themes of human connection and emotion.

KN: What are some of the other projects that you have planned in the upcoming months?

LP: The latest work I created was "Blooming" and I continue to develop it further. The project highlights the importance of human relationships in our lives through the application of technologies like heartrate wristbands, gesture tracking sensor, and touch sensors. It is an interactive installation of a digital cherry tree that responds to the audience's interactions, blossoming based on their measured interpersonal connections. For instance, if participants hold hands or embrace, the cherry flowers flourish in peak bloom and will even release petals. While participants are experiencing the art work, their detected heart rates, gestures, skin conductivity data become proxies for understanding their intimacy. ▣

