Ahreum Lee

Hopping for Hope or How to Get Lost in Your Own Map

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In trying to find the exact location of the city of Suwon on Google Maps, Ahreum Lee noticed that the application displayed the geopolitical borders of this region differently depending on whether one was in Montreal or in South Korea. This discovery sparked an examination of the methodological and political perspectives that shape contemporary digital mapping and, more broadly, a reflection on distance and disorientation. Began two years after Lee moved to the Quebec metropolis, The Hopscotch Game Installation is the starting point of her thinking about the arbitrary and fundamentally violent nature of the concept of national borders, as well as the nucleus of the exhibition. In this work, Lee plays with the basic premise of the world-renowned game of hopscotch by superposing it on a current world map provided by Google. She uses a Korean version of the game in which a player blindly tosses a stone in the air and the numbered rectangle on which it lands then belongs to them. Like many children's games, winning the game is equivalent to conquering and taking possession of as many places as possible. The video of instructions accompanying this work reinforces a major analogy implicit in the reference to the hopscotch game: the allusion to Canada's colonial history of invading the land of Indigenous people. The video works, installation, and audio piece also attest to Lee's particular focus on Google's geolocation service, which has led her to reflect more broadly on the links that have always existed between mapping, power, authority, and conquest. The visual, sonic, and participatory elements of Hopping for Hope reveal the ubiquity of this app in our lives. How have more than a billion people come to say "Hey Google" when looking for directions?

At the start of the 21st century, Google created a real revolution by introducing sophisticated location and mapping technologies to the daily lives of ordinary citizens. It's easy to forget that the development of Google Maps is closely linked to the technological and scientific discoveries first used in the government and the military.[1] In the context of current geolocation techniques, the tools of aerial photography, hyperlocal images, and access to satellite data have shifted from the private and government domain to the public and profitable one. Google has played a considerable part in this democratic transition by taking technologies reserved for a minority and transferring them to the daily lives of consumers, adapting them to their needs by means of a personalized, playful, visually appealing, and practical service. The parallels that Lee draws between the idea of invasion and her criticism of the way in which power dynamics are embedded in biased technological services applies particularly well to Google. To this day, given that the

1. Google Maps is an extension of the Google Earth software, controlled by Google, a transnational corporation based in the United States. It's interesting to note that Google has set its sights on conquering the universe with similar extensions like Google Sky, Google Moon, and Google Ocean.

American government owns the largest business licence of Google Earth, the intersections between geographical, technological, and cultural imperialism seem to be quite real.

Lee shows that the same imagery exists in different contexts by employing a diverse range of aesthetic registers, such as that of the military, entertainment, pseudoscience, as well as one more immediately present in our daily lives: the interface of our smartphones. The visual vocabulary is varied, borrowing from the graphic universe of online astrology, video games, and open source documentary images taken from Google Street View. These references point to another blurred border, namely the one demarcating our experience of the world, constantly vacillating between the real and the virtual in societies where our daily lives are largely filtered by the interface of the web. Geolocation software transforms our relationship to our surroundings; for the first time in history, it's possible to explore the tangible world through a digital space. Even more importantly, this virtual world map is no longer just a tool for giving us directions; it has become a territory to be explored in itself. But then, how does one understand physical space in this extremely controlled virtual space that is both structured and structuring, and furthermore, how does one navigate it?

Recasting the tangible world in the space of a screen becomes especially significant or disturbing in the context of travel or movement, as relocation urges one to seek new reference points. For those fortunate enough to have access to the Internet, Google or similar search engines are still the best tools for finding a grocery store, bank, or the name of a street. In the context of increased international mobility, as a result of voluntary movement or forced migrations, regions are discovered virtually as much as physically. The Cheok Ji Beop Video speaks directly to the experience of the world through technology, particularly for individuals who can only connect with the places where they used to live through the interface of the web. Lee offers an insightful look at this general feeling of distance and disorientation by making an analogy to Cheok Ji Beop, a parallel science of East-Asian tradition in which people train to be able to fold time and space and teleport themselves from one place to another. Watching the artist simulate this ritual practice, whose name translates as "the way to make the world smaller," with her eyes glued to the phone, we come face to face with our own experience of the world through technology. On screen, the world is flattened, reduced to a standardized, homogeneous space that is limited and modulated by algorithms conditioning what to us appears as real. Hopping for Hope addresses the feeling of unreality head on, the impression of being a mind disembodied from its own existence.

The exhibition title, Hopping for Hope, may seem perplexing, though we suspect it calls for more than a literal interpretation. Although the migration of an individual or diaspora is often associated with the hope for a better life, it is difficult to imagine the experience

through this optimistic term only. While the challenges of the real world can eat away at this notion of hope, perhaps hope ultimately resides in a relationship to the world that is altered and sustained thanks to the many screens in our lives conveying our connections with family, memories of the past, and aspirations for the future.

Ahreum Lee is a multimedia artist and musician from Seoul, South Korea, currently based in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal. Lee began her career as the co-founder and frontwoman of experimental art-rock band Juck Juck Grunzie. After spending nearly a decade producing records and touring internationally, she extended her practice into video and multimedia installation work. Lee graduated with an MFA from the Studio Art program at Concordia University. She was a finalist for the Emerging Digital Artist Award held by EQ Bank and Trinity Square Video (Toronto) in 2019. Her work has been exhibited and performed at Fonderie Darling, Ada x, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, as well as Third Shift Festival (Saint John) and Axis Lab (Chicago). My work is currently at the 5th International Digital Art Biennale at Arsenal Contemporain Art Montreal. She participated in the Emerging BAiR program at Banff Art centre in 2020 and the Impression Residency program at Musée des beaux-arts à Montréal in 2021. Lee is an active member of the QO collective