Rules of the Game:
Between Procedure and Play
from NORRI: A Play Book

Stars etched one by one into my heart,
I cannot count them all because
morning comes too quickly
another night awaits

– *Dongju Yun, "A Night to Count Stars" (trans. Young Gunn Kim)*

It begins with a story. Sometime long ago, DaEun says, people noticed the rhythms of their lives existed as a kind of movement. Seasons, celebrations, all of life and death—each carried itself in its own way. Each withdrew and returned in its own time, cutting its own path through life. Perhaps, at some point, people realized they were part of this flow. Perhaps they realized they could engage and shape it at will. Perhaps they could greet these eternal returns with their own cycles. Perhaps their own movement could be honored and honed. As people gathered to perform these repetitions of repetitions—making a universe of their own bodies—movement assumed new life. Perhaps, DaEun says, this is how we got the thing called dance.[1]

The question of dancing together drives DaEun Jung's work. It is doggedly practical. It guides her as she teaches young movers, and as she leads an ensemble through one of her choreographic scores. But this work challenges the feel-good framing of Dance as Universal Language. For Jung, community is not a given—and it is not synonymous with unity. Born in South Korea and based in Los Angeles for the past decade-plus, Jung's creative education encompasses a wide variety of artistic and cultural influences. She aligns variously with people of many nationalities and ethnicities. Whatever community she experiences is not a given. Rather, it must actively be forged with the people she encounters.

Two of Jung's recent dances, *BYOUL* and *NORRI*, are richly layered experiments in dancing togetherness. On the most obvious levels, Jung combines Korean and American influences to compel audiences across linguistic and cultural borders. But dance styles and source materials are only shadows of a deeper kind of group experience. As *BYOUL* and *NORRI* vividly demonstrate, cultural and national influences can flow freely between one another; they are held together, in place, by so many arbitrary—and very real—rules. Jung, in turn, literally creates her own rules. Her game-structured pieces challenge both dancers and viewers to work together in order to move together. If dance is an expression of life more broadly, Jung seeks pleasure in yielding to its (which?) pursuit.

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1 Conversation with Jung. DaEun and I spoke extensively about *NORRI's* origins and process during my time as an Embedded Writer in Jung's MANCC residency. *NORRI's* creative residency ran between January 9 and 20, 2024.

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In her earliest days as a professor, Jung watched American students struggle to embody the imperatives of Korean classical dance. “[S]haring [the form] in a strictly regimented way didn’t work so well,” she explains, “especially when I worked with dancers from different cultural backgrounds, different movement backgrounds.” She needed a way to invite people into new ways of moving. “I didn’t just want to teach people the shapes or movements of Korean folk and classical dance,” Jung elaborates. “I wanted to share the more internal principles—the modes—of these forms. I wanted to share the principles of these forms on a somatic level. And I wanted the experience to be fun and enjoyable!” What better way to meet resistance than with a game?

Games and game structures captured the attention of some American choreographers after the Second World War. These artists wanted to grapple with the stakes of living in an increasingly networked world. In response, they attempted to approach dancemaking in ways that challenged and decentered their own habits. The language of a burgeoning information age shaped their ideas, emerging through devices such as chance, randomness, and algorithm—all of which artists employed as creative methods. An exemplar of such methods is Merce Cunningham, an American choreographer who (together with his creative and romantic partner, John Cage) established chance and nothingness as cornerstones of his creative practice. Cunningham expected his dancers to be prepared for all sorts of unexpected movement combinations and group configurations, some of which could change from performance to performance. Thus, as dance scholar Carrie Noland explains, Cunningham developed a movement technique that aimed to help his dancers *cope* with the disorienting demands of his work. It was meant to empower dancers to live out his infamous maxim: “The only way to do it is to do it.”[2]

Cunningham’s interest in chance has influenced several generations of choreographers. To this day, many dancemakers devise movement by way of counter-intuitive strategy. Jung notes that her solo *BYOUL* is deeply indebted to Cunningham’s chance methods. Importantly, Jung’s interest in chance treats the *practice* of dancing as the basis of her creative work. In other words, Jung’s interest in games puts her experience as a dancer, performer and teacher on par with her work as a choreographer. Both *BYOUL* and *NORRI* celebrate the deep bodily knowledge Jung has accumulated throughout her career. Euro-American modern dance, somatics, Korean folk and classical dance, and other forms converge and collide within a single dancing body. Jung admiringly describes this melange as “her intelligent body.” In both *BYOUL* and *NORRI,* game structures invite this intelligent body to test its limits, unearthing upon new movement potentials in the process.

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2 Noland, C. (2009). “Coping and Choreography.” *UC Irvine: Digital Arts and Culture* (2009); n.p.

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Algorithms are Jung's main pleasure. For many, the term calls up thoughts of artificial intelligence or social media feeds. Strictly speaking, though, an algorithm is a set of instructions which, when followed precisely, turn a set of inputs into a corresponding set of outputs. Jung's solo *BYOUL,* created with composer/video designer Daniel Corral and composer/vocalist Melody Shim, revels in the sight, sound, and sense of computational precision. The solo is set against a colorful tape grid spanning the stage space, and two video monitors whose screens flicker with various numbers throughout the piece. On this landscape, with Corral and Shim flanking opposite sides of the stage, Jung splinters and re-lays classical Korean dance vocabulary—a mosaic of movement.

BYOUL springs from a section of the poem "A Night to Count Stars," written in 1946 by South Korean poet Dongju Yun. Well-known to many people of Korean descent, Yun's poem ponders a bittersweet yearning called up by the sight of nighttime stars. But *BYOUL* does not attempt to convey these sensations. Instead, Jung treats the text—literally, its words and letters—as an input to be fed through her own choreographic algorithm. To do this, Jung separates every word of the text into syllables, and each syllable into letters. The kind of letter, as well as its position in each syllable, determines which kind of move Jung selects in the sequence. Arm gestures correspond to a syllable's initial consonants; vowels dictate pathways through space; final consonants yield leg gestures. When synthesized, each syllable becomes a single movement. Thus, the text's opening line (*byeol hana-e chueoggwa*), with its seven syllables, becomes seven separate combinations of arm, leg, and spatial movement. Treated this way, the input text becomes a choreographic output—the material of Jung's solo.

Jung was consciously inspired by Cunningham and chance procedure while making *BYOUL*. As it happens, the solo also resonates with other American experiments in dance and game structures. *BYOUL*'s algorithm evokes that of the dance *Locus,* choreographed in 1975 by Trisha Brown. Brown, a younger contemporary of Cunningham's, conducted several explorations into the relationship between movement and text. As Brown writes, "*Locus* is organized around 27 points located on an imaginary cube of space… The points were correlated to the alphabet and a [brief piece of writing]… ."[3] *Locus* treats text as an imaginary map in space, while *BYOUL*'s string of outputs unspools in time. However, both Brown and Jung treat dance as a fleshy kind of computation, a way to process information with one's dancing body.

For Jung, then, the joy of *BYOUL* lay in discovering unusual movements*,* and subsequently learning how to perform them. Even though Jung is deeply familiar with the vocabulary and patterns of classical Korean dance, each of the text's 246 syllables reorganize the form's basic principles in their own way. Like a stone disturbs the surface of a lake, *BYOUL*'s algorithm sends Jung's movement habits into myriad directions.

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3 Mona Sulzman, "Choice/Form in Trisha Brown's Locus: A View from Inside the Cube." *Dance Chronicle* 2.2 (1978): 117-130.

Corral and Shim's score amplifies this experience; Shim's piecemeal melody delivers Yun's text syllable by syllable, while Corral generates a steady cascade of synth clicks. *BYOUL* guides audiences through an incremental alteration of the seemingly familiar—especially among those who recognize and connect with Yun's text. But *BYOUL* does not "translate" Yun's work, whether or not its audience is of Korean experience. Instead, Jung uses movement to rewire Yun's poem. She invites us to read the playfully errant printout.

No matter how familiar Jung becomes with the movement patterns of *BYOUL,* the piece's challenges continue to keep her on her toes. An additional layer of chance procedure further pushes her to remain alert to the choreography's demands: three moments in the 246-movement sequence are modulated by a certain number of repetitions, determined by chance and integrated into the overall sequence. One such moment occurs about halfway through the solo, when Jung repeats two movements ninety-seven times in a row. As she recalls, she scowled at her laptop when she saw the random number generator's response: "Are you sure?"

In performance, the digression becomes a two-minute glitch in an otherwise smooth operation. Even having seen the piece more than once, I'm always led through its sequence one step at a time, and so I almost forget what comes next. I always squirm when we reach the glitch. I wonder whether DaEun will lose count of her repetitions, or if she's keeping count with the numbers on the monitors. I hear others fidget too. But just as anxiety morphs into annoyance, the sequence progresses, smoothly as it started. My chest settles with relief. A few folks laugh. The program continues.

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The pleasures of repetition connect *BYOUL* to Jung's next dance, *NORRI.* Korean for "play," *NORRI* is an hour-long dance for four performers. Performed within the same tape-grid and video-counter world of *BYOUL,* the piece swings between strict control and joyous abandon. *NORRI's* four performers appear as pieces on a game board, though perhaps they are the game players too. The dance's swirl of rhythmic and spatial patterns distinguishes it from *BYOUL*'s meandering stream of solo movement. Just as electric are its to moments of stillness, swaying, and grooving. The work revels in a push and pull between extremes, playing this energetic tension through to the piece's final moments.

NORRI lingers on the basics of classical Korean dance. Like Jung's college students, most of her collaborators had little to no Korean dance training before joining the cast. Fittingly, we might say the piece guides both cast and witnesses through an elaborate game that gradually tests the cast's movement acumen. A simple walking pattern grows increasingly complex over several minutes, eventually becoming a sixteen-movement phrase that returns in various intervals. Further challenges accrue across the piece's seamless series of movement games.

Instead of turning text into dance (as with *BYOUL*), Jung built *NORRI* on a foundational sequence of sixteen classical Korean dance steps. *NORRI*'s choreography zooms in and out of the phrase, allowing nuance to surface as the sequence loops back in various lengths. Sometimes the phrase blossoms into kaleidoscopic floor patterns. Sometimes dancers dig into one or two movements, veering in and out of sync. Sometimes the phrase sends them weaving an intricate border around the grid. In all cases, *NORRI* functions as a close-range study of classical Korean dance. Much like Jung and her students, the dance presents audiences with the challenge of coping with unusual movement.

NORRI's cast must cope not just with the choreography, but with one another. Several choreographic challenges shape this effort. In some cases, Jung's algorithms throw stray steps into larger loops of movement. In other cases, the loops are designed to send the cast in and out of sync. Sometimes the cast takes up two or more loops at a time, creating rhythmic tension and play between themselves, the pulsing electronic score (also composed by Corral), and the vocal accompaniment (also composed by Shim). The group hustles through ever-changing formations at a strict pace. They make several near-misses as they go. Sometimes a movement happens late, or not at all. Regardless, the sequence continues—immediately, on to the next.

On paper, the work may feel cruelly robotic. Yet the dancers seem to gain energy from meeting their demands. Perhaps they are buoyed by the energy of their own intelligent bodies. Perhaps the challenge catalyzes pleasure, even when the puzzling ebbs, in moments of standing or sitting, rest. Imperceptibly, a pair of hips rocks side to side, a head nods to the beat. Soon a full-grown groove flowers, sending dancers bounding and lurching through space. In this world, dance begins and ends with groove. Here, too, groove is rigor. The dancers end *NORRI* by grooving through the base phrase, and it feels like celebration. They sink, yield, reach, and leap into what the movement invites. They bend rules to the feeling of fully-doing. In moving by themselves, for themselves, they move as a unit.

In this way, we might think of *NORRI* a novel sort of folk dance. Corral and Shim's musical score, which sources the Korean *pansori* tradition, explicitly reinforces this orientation toward a culturally-specific sense of belonging. So does *NORRI*'s "Ganggangsullae" sequence in particular. This processional line dance overtly cites the circle dance after which it is named.[4] Its handclaps and clasping gestures cite the folk dance as Jung learned it. Much of her enthusiasm for the harvest ceremony lay in its centering of collective gamely. Indeed, Jung notes that many viewers of Korean descent respond enthusiastically as they notice the circle games and dances. Repetition and patterns may not help this temporary community move as one, but they do help it move together.

What keeps *NORRI*'s cast dancing? The energy of something familiar; the hope of being recognized—maybe. But *NORRI,* like *BYOUL,* does not persist on moments of familiarity. Both pieces begin with standardized sources, like classical Korean folk

4 Conversation with Jung.

dance, and scramble them in ways that can only be discovered by moving one's body. Even as a viewer new to Korean dance, Ganggangsullae draws and keeps my attention. My gaze latches onto the action. I lean in as side-steps and high-fives grow into grapevine patterns. I'm on the edge of my seat, hoping the dancers grab each other's hands before the sequence starts over. They rush past one another at a hair's breadth, and I sigh with relief. It's truly a game. All the while, they are practicing for the next round.

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Practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts have dreamed up many theories about dance's origins. Many of these stories begin like DaEun's, and usually culminate with ballet, modern dance, and other theatrical forms. Dance's 'primitive' spirit lives on, they say, even in the innovations of early twentieth-century 'geniuses' like Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham. To be sure, these dancemakers (and many more) were heavily, often overtly influenced by Indigenous, Afro-Diasporic, Middle Eastern, North African, and South/East Asian cultures. Many dancers and audiences have reckoned with this legacy in recent decades, wondering how modern and post-modern dance might acknowledge its vexed cultural legacies.

Given this context, it's tempting to view *BYOUL* and *NORRI* through an 'Eastern'/'Western' binary. From one perspective, Jung's interest in Euro-American dancemaking practices may help ensure broader success in a global market shaped by Western tastes. From another angle, we could celebrate Jung's embrace of chance procedure as a subtle reclamation of modern dance's East Asian lineages. But when watching these pieces, and when learning about Jung's creative process, the large-scale questions of nation and culture gradually give way to more immediate concerns: how weight shifts from one leg to another, how a group of movers maintain a formation (or don't), how a dance might be treated as a game. Even as *BYOUL* and *NORRI* enjoy their cultural specificities, they ask what any cultural inheritance may teach us about the work of moving together.

As Jung's work vividly demonstrates, the challenges of learning to dance can teach us a lot about how we learn our bodies, how we can learn different embodied values, and what it means to move with others. Dancing may appeal to outside viewers, but they are soon swept up in its action too. Could we say that Jung's work offers us a hope-full politic for living? If I believe what she says about dancing, about dance, then I believe nothing changes unless it changes form. Unless dancing becomes something else—something that won't be held a performance space—it simply remains dancing. But we might be with these dances and learn ways to be together, ways that don't rely on blatant theft or heedless fusion. The work is tiring, and it is thrilling. It is suspended. Where it seems there is nothing, there isn't.