

Today, the Last Night

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This is about my end and the end of us all. On the last night, if only we had known it was coming—if we had realized it could have been prevented—one can only imagine the terrible regret we would feel at such belated awareness. How many of us would wish to rewind time, as if rewinding a film reel, to keep today from becoming the last night? Even if we were to gouge our eyes in repentance, like Oedipus who failed to perceive what lay plainly before him, such lament would hold no meaning in the face of an imminent end. Like Laius, Oedipus's father, we foolishly cling to oracles to approach the future, while turning a blind eye to the unmistakable signs of the present. We turn away from the contours of a future already revealed here and now, casting our hopes solely on a more prosperous, more useful one. Drunk on the wisdom that solved the riddle of "humanity" itself, we slaughter nature, the origin of our existence. Moreover, we fortify boundless frontiers with the blinding madness of firearms and inhale the heat of flames that fuel the power of machines, almost to the point of suffocation. Our shared last night hurtles toward its conclusion—a tragedy stripped of pathos.

I am writing this without having seen Ji Hye Yeom's work, *The Last Night*. Yet, I feel as though I have already encountered it—perhaps because I have seen the images and "lingering words" the artist shared. I believe her decision to share scattered still frames before the video work was an attempt to momentarily arrest the dynamic nature of time in moving images. When identically sized images are presented under the title *The Last Night* without a defined narrative, the deep spaces between them become imbued with subtle signs of a future latent in our present, awakening the last night we call today. By transcending the linear time intrinsic to the medium, the strata of images—perceivable only in stillness—possess a compelling initiative that demands our contemplation. This effort of presenting images in a state of delay and stillness, rather than solely relying on the motion of video, reflects the artist's sustained exploration of painting. Just as

the icons condensed through direct painting reveal themselves to us, laden with countless foreshadowings, the images in *The Last Night* expand into autonomous narratives of an ending already underway.

The word crisis has long become a common term, encapsulating much of the way existence unfolds in this world. Despite being surrounded by countless crises—climate and environmental crises, economic crises, food crises, pandemic crises, and war crises—humanity remains strangely indifferent. Our chronic apathy toward everything beyond ourselves has led us into the desolate landscape of *The Last Night*, shaped by the cumulative weight of these crises born of our indifference. Ji Hye Yeom's work emerges as a manifestation of images that perceive the crises saturating both past and present, like a siren pressing urgently against the world of today. As Georges Didi-Huberman observed about Pasolini's films, this entails perceiving an era that appears to pass without any signs of crisis—a rediscovery of a state of emergency in the presence of history.¹ Swept along by the relentless acceleration of civilization, repeatedly failing to brake at critical junctures, will humanity only recognize its helplessness at the very end? Yeom's oeuvre, with its persistent engagement with innumerable dangers and their signals, stands as an apocalyptic reflection on our deeply rooted indifference and the impotent passage of time in the present. At the same time, it is an urgent metaphor for the catastrophic future, as glimpsed through the lens of today.

Ji Hye Yeom's *The Last Night* presents an image of a neither chaotic nor violent apocalypse, encountered at the edge of space-time where water and fire, air and earth intersect. The night when humanity, having relentlessly pursued its own destruction, finally fades away, bears the solitary melancholy of a dying Prometheus. In Yeom's work, fire emerges as a fundamental lexicon of nature, imbued with intrinsic ambivalence. Yet in *The Last Night*, fire is darker than ever. A notable reference in the work is *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* by Gaston Bachelard. In this context,

¹ Didi-Huberman, G. (2023). *Sentir Le Grisou* [가스 냄새를 감지하다/Smell the gas] (N. Lee, Trans.). (pp. 41–43). Moonji Publishing Company. (Original work published 2014)

fire, both subject and object, represents the end of the poetics of its imagery. Bachelard describes fire as intimate yet universal, the only phenomenon capable of accommodating two opposing values—good and evil. This duality resonates with the “lingering words” Yeom provided alongside the images of *The Last Night*, which explore fire’s poetic production of imagery. Fire becomes the most dialectical element in the creation of imagery.² For Ji Hye Yeom, fire embodies both humanity and nature, as well as destruction and creation. Its imagery encompasses the duality of civilization as intellect and destruction, the duality of life as existence and death, and the duality that traces back to the primordial plane or monad of matter. Like Pele, the goddess of Hawaiian mythology, the ambivalence of volcanic fire shapes the world’s terrain. However, the human intellect’s insatiable drive for renewal—what Bachelard termed the Prometheus Complex—distorts this ambivalence into a reductive state of binary opposition. This transformation transcends human intellect, igniting flames of mutual destruction, generating uncontrollable mechanical life, and exacerbating disasters driven by unending carbon emissions. Ultimately, it propels humanity down a path of self-destruction—toward its last night.

Ji Hye Yeom’s work deciphers the signs of a foreseen future, offering chilling insights that transcend temporal boundaries. This is not because she possesses an extraordinary ability to predict the future but because she perceives the future embedded in the present when she confronts and interprets its signs. If we were to describe this quality in her work as “foresight,” it would be the power of images that emerges from an acute sensitivity to the signs of the present—a deeply logical deduction rooted in the premise of the now. For instance, her 2016 work *They come, Swiftly, Stealthily* delivers a starkly reflective message in the context of the pandemic era. Likewise, the paradox in *CyborgHandstanderus’ Nose* (2021)—where human-crafted technology sings of nature amid consuming flames—forces us to rethink the harsh realities we face today. Yet, *The Last Night* offers no such room for reconsideration. A world devoid of

² **Referenced:** Bachelard, G. (1987). *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (A.C.M. Ross, Tran.). Beacon Press. (Original work published 1964)

humanity after the last night may resemble the utopia humanity once dreamed of, but it is ultimately a hollow aftermath of extinction, witnessed by no one. As all human creations become material for AI's deep learning and the intelligence gap between humans and machines continues to widen, the celebratory toasts of capital mark the final chapter of a failed modernization cloaked in the rhetoric of development and progress. Thus, Ji Hye Yeom's *The Last Night* emerges as both an image of the future we are moving toward and an image of the end manifesting in the present, perceived through the reconfiguration of reality's montage, urging us toward an urgent and profound reflection.