

DREI

(The play of them, they divide
& spread their limbs
 under the blanketing earth
they learn their songs
 each from the stream
in which it hath its beginning

Mira Mann
Solo
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—from ARS METALLURGICA by Diane di Prima

In January 1938, Choi Seung-Hee arrived in San Francisco to begin a tour of performances across the US and Europe. The first woman dancer of colonial Korea to perform abroad, her performances attracted large audiences, including figures such as Pablo Picasso and Charlie Chaplin. Choi was trained in modern dance and ballet but later began incorporating elements from Korean folk dance and shamanistic rituals, creating a radical mix of hybrid dances that blended traditional Korean and Western dance. In 1946, Choi relocated to North Korea, where she started a dance school and engaged in international socialist networks.

In May 1958, French writer, photographer, and film director Chris Marker traveled to North Korea with a delegation of French journalists, artist, and intellectuals following an invitation from the communist government. His trip resulted in the photobook *Coréennes* (feminine form of the noun for ‘Koreans’, pub. 1959), a travelogue-photo essay, which includes texts by Marker and over 120 black and white photographs of Korean workers, children, women, and dancers, among others. Punctuated by the images, the essay mixes documentary vignettes, fragments of Korean folk tales and theater plays, and accounts of the Korean War; *The dragon had iron teeth: one finds them here and there, alongside the roads, in the rice fields, refused by the earth ... Ahn Seung-hi dances the sword dance (Kal tchun), the fan dance, the butterfly dance, the gypsy dance ... In Korean tales you glimpse more than you see. Lots of apparitions, dreams, cracks into another world of which only memory remains ... Sunday in Sonsan: on a platform planted with trees, the changgo and the accordion play by turns. Under the pale yellow sun of late afternoon, the dancers—couples of men, couples of women, even a Pierrot Lunaire dancing only for himself—appear and disappear in my viewfinder like visitors to an aquarium ...*

Marker’s estate is housed at Cinémathèque Française, where the entirety of the photographs from his journey to North Korea can be found, many more than the selection that made it into the book. Among them is a series from a performance at the Moranbong Theatre, where Ahn Seung-hee, Choi’s daughter, can be seen performing a sword dance. Marker’s still photographs form a stuttering documentation, where dynamism and continuity are only latent. In an attempt to recreate the flow of the dance, Mira Mann photographed the snapshots through a magnifying glass and created the slide show *Cinematheque Moranbong*, which consists of two Kodak Carousel slide projectors projecting two images on top of each other at the time. The missing information between each frame is filled by collapsing the temporal gaps between the single photographs, resulting in a slow stop motion that animates the stills. The photographic artifacts are recycled, not as an act of reconstruction but as an act of choreographic interpretation.

The fragmented dance moves are also animated by a clunky Wartburg manual transmission that slowly spins two spirit knives that jangle as they brush against each other. A set of windshield wipers wave two brightly colored fans, used in the neo- traditional buchaechum dance that draws on Korean folk and shamanic traditions but is known for the neon-colored fans that give away that the dance is a post-industrial invention. Buchaechum was developed in 1954 by dancer Kim Baek-bong, a student of Choi Seung-Hee. The mechanical ensemble all consists of parts from the Trabant, a small car produced in the GDR from 1957 until 1991. They were built in collaboration with the Oldtimer-Service Döllnitz, a workshop run by enthusiasts dedicated to the collection and repair of vintage GDR cars.

Solo brings together a cluster of mediations and translations of international socialist memorabilia that orient themselves in past aesthetics and practices, driven part by nostalgia and part by the desire to reanimate, rework, and recycle. Marker ‘translated’ the culture of communist North Korea to a Western audience, and Choi Seung-hee also worked to transfer and translate elements of both Western and traditional Korean dance in her effort to establish a pan-Asian counter ballet. Choi first adapted pieces for multiple dancers into the Western format of the solo that she performed herself but later turned to creating dances for groups and choreographies for large film scenes. She focused on teaching, on building an archive of dances, and less on her personal stardom of the 30s. Whether performed solo or in a group, her strategies of performing and reimagining dances from various cultural contexts, of sampling and recycling, question the idea that there can ever be such a thing as a solo.

— Anna R. Winder

Mira Mann (b. 1993, Frankfurt, Germany) lives and works in Dusseldorf. Their work has been exhibited and staged at spaces such as K20, Dusseldorf; The 15th Gwangju Biennial, Gwangju; Drei, Cologne; Shmoréevaz, Paris; Klosterruine, Berlin; IMAI Foundation, Dusseldorf; KIT, Dusseldorf; Gallery of the Bauhaus University, Weimar; FriArt, Fribourg (2024); N/A, Seoul; Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Dusseldorf; Frac Ile de France, Paris; Heit, Berlin (2024); Brücke Museum, Berlin; de Appel, Amsterdam; Kunstverein Bielefeld; Galerie Max Mayer, Dusseldorf (2022); Lantz’scher Skulpturenpark, Dusseldorf; PiK Deutz, Cologne; Dortmunder Kunstverein, Dortmund (2021); Simultanhalle, Cologne (2020); and Kunsthalle Osnabrück (2019), among others.

Mira Mann is recipient of the Peter Mertes Stipend 2025 with an upcoming solo exhibition at the Bonner Kunstverein. The March issue of Mousse Magazine will include an extensive feature written by Nicholas Tammens.