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### Interface: Fringe Landscapes and Identity

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Interface: Fringe Landscapes and Identity

by

Elizabeth Tannie Lewin

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2016

Thesis Sponsor:

12/11/2016

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Constance DeJong

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

12/11/2016

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Thomas Weaver

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Second Reader

Dedicated to my family: distant and near  
biological and paternal. In every sense of the term.

## Acknowledgements

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University of Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

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Dual Channel video, multimedia

00:11:20

2. *Simulation: Haenyeo* (2016) video still (audio captioned for image)

The story of Dangun is an ancient myth about the origin of the Korean people. The story begins with Hwanin the ruler of heaven, sending his son Hwangun down to earth to rule. Hwangun travels from heaven with an entourage of three thousand heavenly subjects and the ministers of the Rain, Wind, and Clouds. The group arrives beneath a sandalwood tree at the top of Mount Taebaeksan, on which they establish the Prince's royal court.

Elsewhere on earth, are a tiger and a bear who both desire to become human; upon hearing of the prince's arrival both pray fervently, asking him to change them into human beings. Hwangun, hearing their pleas, bestows upon each beast twenty cloves of garlic and a bundle of mugwort. He instructs them to avoid sunlight and eat only these sacred foods for one hundred days. The tiger and the bear thank the Prince and retreat into a dark cave to begin their transformation. After several days the tiger gives up and leaves the cave. The bear, however, continues its vigil and after twenty-one days Hwangun returns and transforms the bear into a beautiful woman. The story ends with Hwangun marrying the bear and their son, Dangun, becoming the King of Korea.<sup>1</sup>

I recognize myself in the tiger. Hwangun's commandments are arbitrary. The garlic, mugwort, and darkness do not hold any transformative properties. We know this because Hwangun returns to the bear after only twenty-one days and by his own will transforms the bear into a woman. While many may interpret the tiger's decision to leave the cave as an indication that it was unworthy of Hwangun's blessing, I see the tiger's choice to

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<sup>1</sup> David Mason. "Myth Of Founding-King Dan-Gun", *San-Shin.Org*. Accessed Nov. 9. 2016 [http://www.san-shin.org/Dan-gun\\_Myth.html](http://www.san-shin.org/Dan-gun_Myth.html).

abandon Hwangun's test as analogous of a person's decision to define themselves under their own terms and no one else's.

Philosopher Ernst Bloch argues that there are two types of utopias: the abstract and the concrete. Bloch defines an abstract utopia as fantastic and compensatory where ideals are unable to be translated into a realized space; whereas, a concrete utopia is one that factors in extant and anticipated variables while pushing towards a utopic reality.<sup>2</sup> Today, the marketability of utopia is without limit; it can conform to an endless range of commodities and images. As utopia is mined it is cheapened, becoming clichéd and ironic; its original Greek translation of “no place” seems fitting. ‘Utopia’ is no longer a viable space to escape to; therefore, the escapee must reclaim the term by re-evaluating the importance of the concrete, and the legitimacy of the abstract, and the need for the temporary.

Born in South Korea. My twin sister, Nora, and I were adopted together in 1986 when we were five months old.

I had always envisioned my return to South Korea as being a national event. We (my mom, dad, and twin sister) would all visit the country for the first time together. Every experience would be our collective first—each a demonstration of our strength as a family. I imaged a cinematic arrival: we'd exit an airplane holding hands and waving to an audience who automatically understood the symbolic weight of our trip. In the end,

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Levitas, “Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia,” *Utopian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 13–26. [www.jstor.org/stable/20718998](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718998).



this trip never occurred. I feared a homecoming that would not be celebrated —or even recognized; a homecoming where we would be treated like any other tourist family.

I used to fantasize about our birth mother. My day dreams were not aggrandizing or damning; instead, they were vignettes of a faceless woman moving through life completely independent of us, engaged in pedestrian activities: eating dinner in front of the TV, walking down the street on her way to work wearing a business suit skirt and jacket, picking produce at the grocery. These glimpses satisfied me.

In 2010 my sister, Nora, was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to teach conversational English in South Korea. While living there she decided to search for our birth mother. This was not something I wanted. Communicating or meeting our biological mother would make real a woman whose history, physical features, and future were no longer subject to my imagination, my whimsy.

During Nora's search we learned that the information we were given, the story we had grown up believing, was not true. Our official adoption papers list us as illegitimate. In reality our birth parents were married, having two girls who were already four and two years old, and the real reason we were given up for adoption was because they had wanted a son.

Theorist Paul Virilio believes that our relationship to space flattened the moment our gaze turned away from the horizon and towards the screen, enabling us to see and hear at

a distance.<sup>3</sup> This dramatically changed the terms of our engagement and experience with space and time.<sup>4</sup> There is no longer a need to be physically present to witness an event when it can all be seen live through a screen. Additionally, even a person who is physically present might film an event yet watch the entire scene unfold through the screen of their recording device. The screen has transformed how we consume and commune with the world.

While the screen, as object, has become ubiquitous, its utilization has undergone a dramatic transformation altering our perception of time. Virilio attributes this shift to the advent of the Internet, which has endowed us with the ability to communicate bodily experience and sensory presence from a distance.<sup>5</sup> Virilio believes that we are entering an era in which “history will develop within a one-time system... [and that this condensation of time is] superseding real space. A phenomenon that is making both distances and surfaces irrelevant in favor of the time-span.”<sup>6</sup> As our lives become increasingly mediated through technology, it is altering our perception of reality; and as space and time tear away from our constructed reality, we begin to pivot away from the physical world and towards a space where time and space take on new meaning.<sup>7</sup>

My work for thesis, *RE: Search Request...* (2015), is a two channel video installation that, through my removed perspective, documents my sister’s search for our biological mother.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Virilio. “The Third Interval,” *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Verso, 1997), 9-21.

<sup>4</sup> I remind the reader of the famous anecdote of the Lumiere Brothers, “Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat” where the audience was said to have reacted in terror at the train, believing it would come into the theater.

<sup>5</sup> Virilio. “The Third Interval,” *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose. 9-21.

<sup>6</sup> Virilio, Paul, “Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!,” Trans. Patrice Riemens. Ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. *CTheory*. August 27, 1995. [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

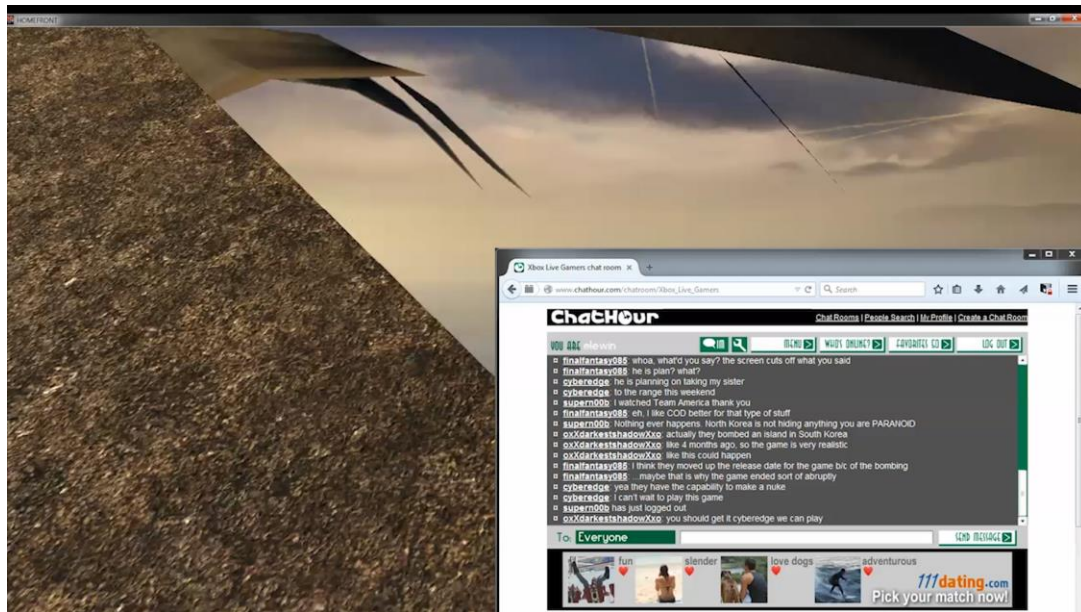
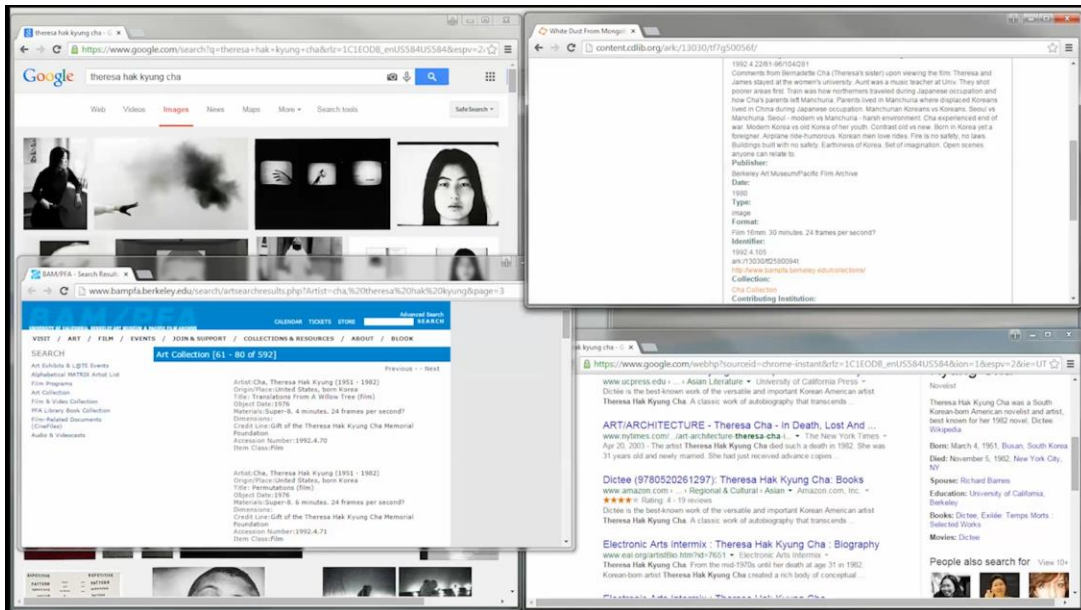
*RE: Search Request...* (2015) records a series of exchanges between my sister, Nora and Eastern Child Welfare, the adoption agency where we were adopted, mediated entirely through screens. Two videos play adjacent to each other: one on a TV, the other, as a large projection. The videos are synchronized, alternating to play one at time. Emails are read aloud providing audible context to interactions devoid of the physical nuances that occur when communication is unimpeded by technology, also, through its own virtue, the audio retains some aspects of presence, such as vocal intonation. The audio simulates my own experience, the video inhabits the space of my absence or the video occupies the space of my absence.

*RE: Search Request...* aims to locate the humanizing moments within the post-modern experience of simulacra. The project begins with an online search, where a trail of links and clicks directs the viewer to the notes for Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's incomplete film, *White Dust From Mongolia*.<sup>8</sup> The 1980 unfinished film was supposed to be about a woman with amnesia who must be retaught all aspects of her identity. Cha's notes for *White Dust From Mongolia* are fragmentary, providing glimpses at a character whose experiences mirrored my own. While my sister was searching for our birth mother I struggled to locate my agency within the process. A paradigm shift occurred when I found Cha's notes. Agency took form in the creation of *Re: Search Request...* that recasts the

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<sup>8</sup> Cha traveled to South Korea in 1980 with her brother, James a cinematographer, to film *White Dust From Mongolia*. However, their filming was interrupted due to civil unrest and the declaration of martial law following the assassination of President Park Chung Hee. Cha did have plans to turn *White Dust From Mongolia* into a book but she was murdered in 1982 before this project could be realized. Constance Lewallen, Lawrence Rinder and T. Minh-Ha Trinh, *The Dream Of The Audience* (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley Art Museum, 2001), 1-14.

experience in a series of increasingly oblique references to moments in time where my experience and interests seem to intersect with other moments in history.



1. RE: Search Request... (2015) video stills

Robert Heilman explores the etymology of the term ‘escape’ from initially describing the act of, or the ability to, physically remove oneself from a space of distress or danger to the inclusion of escape as metaphor. Heilman theorizes that the constant use of the term

‘escape,’ be it literal or figurative, eroded the initial urgency and permanent nature that was first tied to the term; in recognizing the need to differentiate these two meanings, society began using ‘escapism’ to denote removal to a less permanent state via entertainment or fantasy.<sup>9</sup> Utopia will never recover the ideals with which it was originally associated. However, escapism aids in legitimizing the abstract. The escapee can once again see utopia as not just a commodity but as a tangible and attainable space.

The second channel video in *RE: Search Request Case...* records the *out of map*<sup>10</sup> roaming of the avatar within the video game *Homefront*. *Homefront* was released the same year as my sister’s Fellowship. *Homefront* is a first person shooter game set in a dystopic America. In this game, North and South Korea have reunified under Kim Jong-un, forming the Greater Korean Republic (GKR), and have invaded all states west of the Mississippi. The objective is to aid the resistance efforts of other Americans and retake San Francisco.

Escaping the confines of the game oftentimes leads the player into beautiful fragmented spaces; a desolate landscape where the *end game*<sup>11</sup> becomes arbitrary and the player gains a freedom over a space not intended for them. Getting *out of map* destroys the virtual *reality* of the virtual *world*. My use of getting *out of map* in this game is analogous to my imaginary move to connect to my birth family and nation of origin. Technological

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<sup>9</sup> Robert B. Heilman, "Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience." *The Sewanee Review* 83, no. 3 (1975): 439-58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27542986>.

<sup>10</sup> *Out of map* is a general term used to describe glitches within any game that allow the player to escape the bounds of the virtual playable landscape.

<sup>11</sup> *End Game* in video games is used to describe the final stages within a game. However, as video games become more expansive and intricate *end game* is now used to describe a point within such a game that the players themselves define.

virtualities and imaginary bonding work in tandem in my work, creating mutual, oblique parallels.

Jean Baudrillard in his essay “Consumer Society” argues that we are living in a world in which communication between people has become obsolete.<sup>12</sup> People no longer need to seek out interpersonal experiences since such experiences can be simulated by machines.<sup>13</sup> *RE: Search Request...* attempts to claim and circumvent alienation from my own identity.

Growing up I had always known that males were valued over females in Korea, however I did not realize that gender played a role in my sister’s and my adoption until 2010.

While Nora was living in Korea, she told me about the Haenyeo.<sup>14</sup> The Haenyeo represent the only semi-matriarchal society in the heavily patriarchal country.<sup>15</sup> They live on Jeju Island, located approximately sixty miles south of the Korean mainland, and until recently, served as the main source of Jeju’s economic wealth.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard. “Consumer Society.” *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Trans. Mark Postner. (California: Stanford University Press, 1988). 29-56.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Haenyeo, literally translating to ‘sea women’ are female free divers living on the island of Jeju. The Haenyeo wear only neoprene wetsuits, round scuba masks, cotton gloves, and weighted belts. They use no breathing equipment and can hold their breath for up to 2 minutes and dive to depth as far down as ten meters. The Haenyeo harvest for sale: seaweed, abalone, octopus, and other edible marine life. Andrea DenHoed and Hyung S. Kim, “The Sea Women Of South Korea,” *New Yorker*. Mar. 29, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/sea-women-of-south-korea>.

<sup>15</sup> “...the case of the *haenyo* does not support the arguments of the development theory that the economic contributions of women enhance equality between men and women or the social standing of women.” Gwi-Sook Gwon. “Changing Labor Processes of Women's Work: The Haenyo of Jeju Island.” *Korean Studies*, vol. 29 no. 1, 2005, pp. 114-136. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/ks.2006.0006.

<sup>16</sup> Sang-Hun Choe, “Hardy Divers In Korea Strait, ‘Sea Women’ Are Dwindling.” *New York Times*. Mar. 29, 2014 <http://nyti.ms/1gbsonk>.

Baudrillard argues that we are not actually living in reality;<sup>17</sup> instead, we all live in a simulation of what we believe and accept as reality. To clarify his argument Baudrillard offers Disneyland and its threshold, the parking lot, as a clear model of his theory.

Disneyland is a space where from the moment you enter the park your movements and feelings are choreographed. You are seduced by a fictitious and momentary experience within a reality. This lies in stark contrast to the parking lot where the feelings of kinship and nostalgia expire as you are abandoned in the parking lot. For Baudrillard, Disneyland is the red herring within this reality; it exists only to reinforce our belief in what we accept *as reality is reality*.<sup>18</sup>

Whenever I see a Korean woman in her mid to late fifties I speculate whether this woman could be what my birth mother looks and acts like. I am not trying to find a mother to replace the one I have; rather I am trying to find a surrogate for a woman I will never know.

In 2015 Nora and I went on a vacation to South Korea with our mother. The Haenyeo represent, to me, the only community in Korea where the birth of my sister and I might have been accepted. My motivations for going to Korea in 2015 were and continue to be conflicted and multilayered, but a part of myself had gone to Korea to search for acceptance from the Haenyeo. However, when I saw the Haenyeo I realized that the experience I was searching for was one that could not be filled through visiting them and that to these women I was just another spectator, an outsider voyeuristically looking in. I

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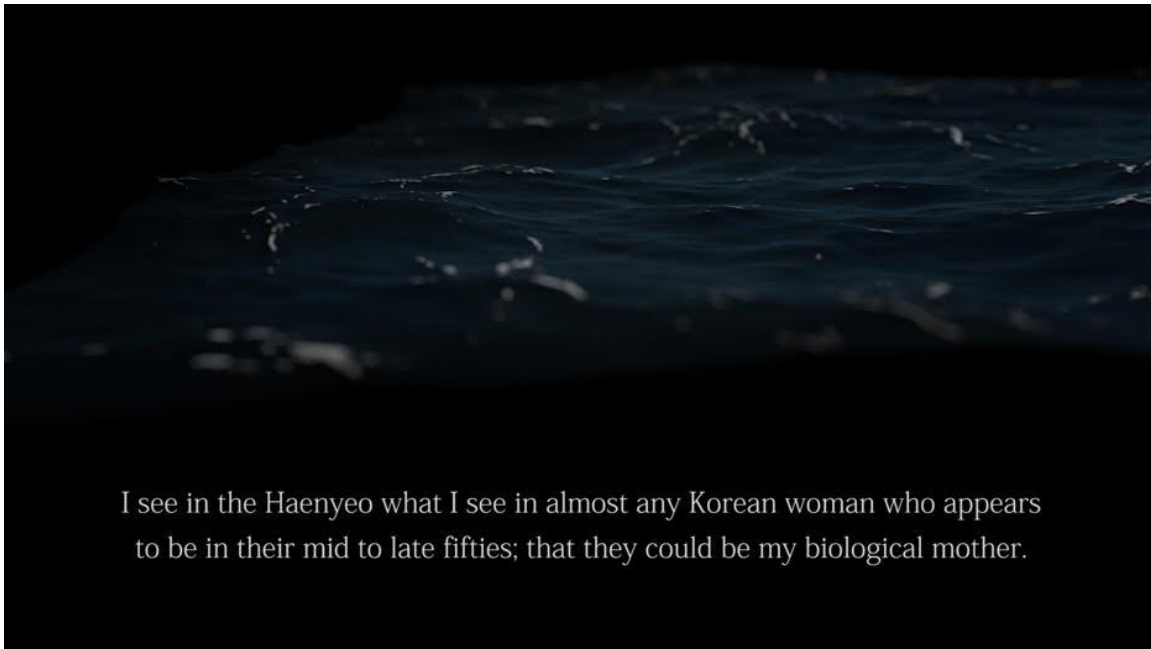
<sup>17</sup> Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations." *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Trans. Postner. 166-184.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

had gone to videotape the Haenyeo, but in that moment I realized these actions were exploitive. I, a tourist, was standing among a throng of other tourists watching women in their seventies performing their labor. There was no reverence for these women; tourists threw trash into the water, motorboats passed in and out of the cove, their waves disrupting the divers' focus. Simply being there made me an accomplice to this sort of spectatorship. I needed to redefine the reality I was presented with and use it to simulate the experience I had envisioned.

*Simulation: Haenyeo* (2016) is a three channel interactive video installation. Three videos of computer-generated waves are projected onto three clear acrylic sheets each with a webcam attached at the top. These videos only play if the webcam recognizes a face and, if the viewer turns their head or leaves, the video will pause. The viewer emulates the sort of exchange I sought when I went to see the Haenyeo; this simple turn of the head, the acknowledgement of one's gaze echoes for the viewer the recognition I was seeking as I stood along the shore watching the Haenyeo.





I see in the Haenyeo what I see in almost any Korean woman who appears to be in their mid to late fifties; that they could be my biological mother.

2. *Simulation: Haenyeo* (2016) video still (audio captioned for image)

Baudrillard explains in “Fatal Strategies” that we live in a “universe [that] is not dialectical... it is devoted to radical antagonism, and not to reconciliation or to synthesis.”<sup>19</sup> We, as a society, are confronted with extremes: utopia and dystopia, reality and hyperreality,<sup>20</sup> the compression of time and space — the moments when one is met head on with a pyrotechnic manipulation of the senses. I am not this sort of artist. I am interested in the turn of the head, the pivot, the peripheral — an experience that is caught in the action of looking backwards and forwards.

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<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard. “Fatal Strategies.” *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Trans. Postner. 185-206.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

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[www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72)

List of Works Exhibited

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1. *Simulation Haenyeo*, video installation, projection on plexi, 2016

Platform installation for *Simulation: Haenyeo* (2016)

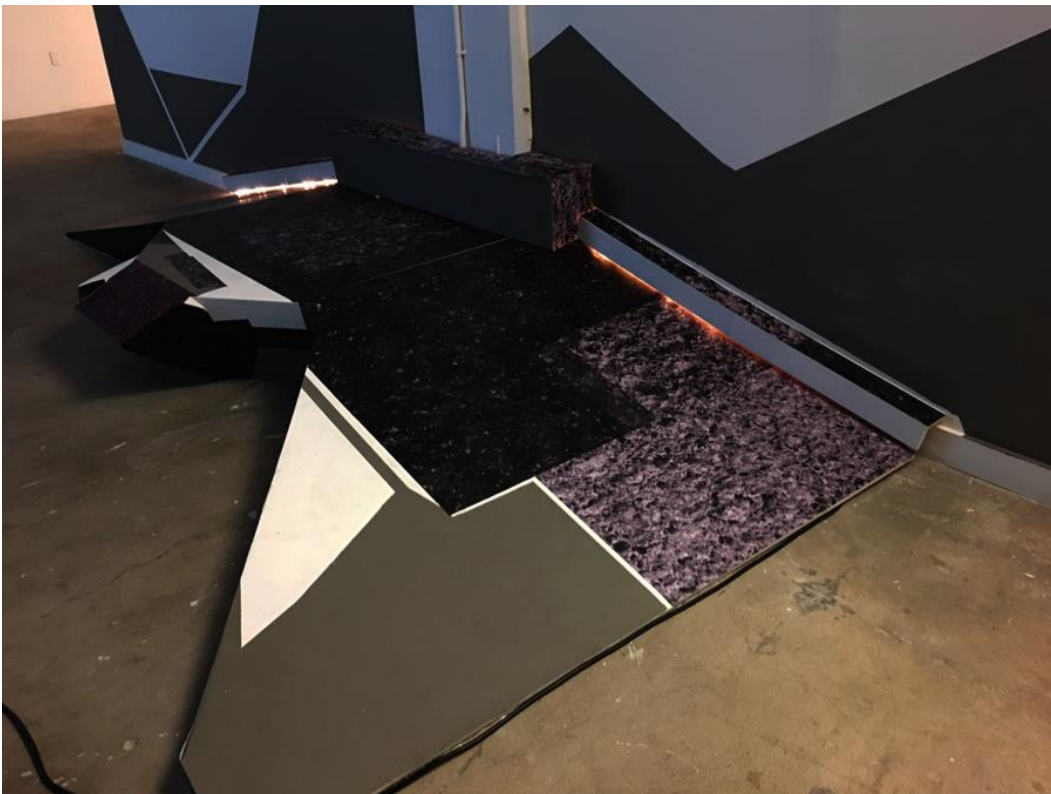
RE:Search Request... (2015) two channel video installation

## Installation Images

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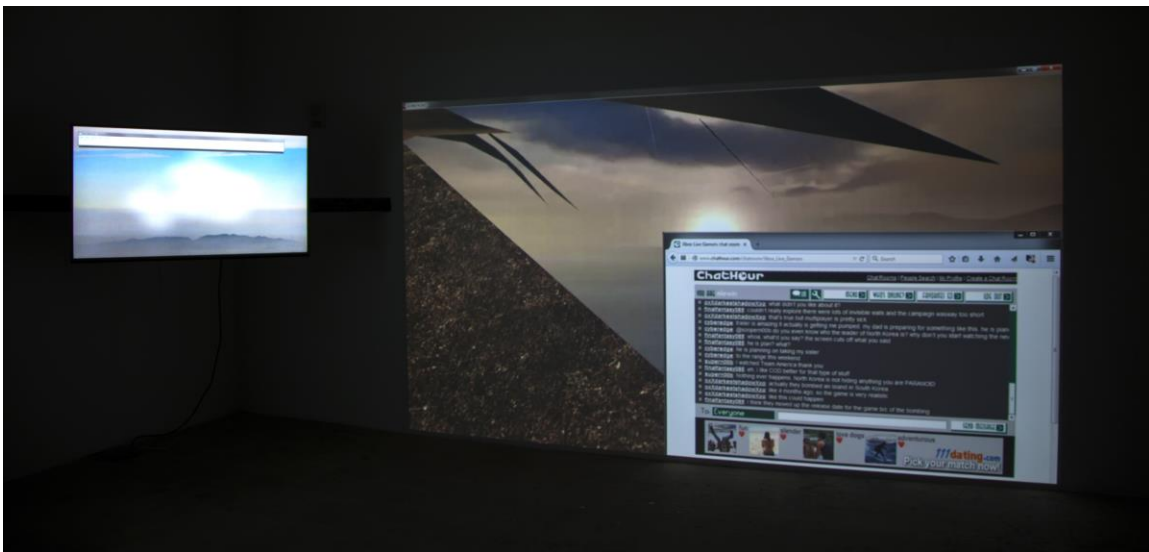


1. *Simulation Haenyeo*, video installation, projection on plexi, 2016





2. Platform installation for *Simulation: Haenyeo* (2016)



3. RE:Search Request... (2015) two channel video installation