

## Let the Breath Sing

If whistling is likened to an elaborate articulation of wind, humming is more akin to spontaneous murmuring.

Whistling often has an object. It is also used with a clear objective in mind, such as calling a dog or a person from a distance. Manipulating the wind to hit an accurate note, like most instrumental performances, is meant, in many cases, for others to listen to rather than to play for oneself. It also requires a certain degree of technique. In this world, there are people who can whistle beautifully and those who cannot whistle at all. Someone who has failed to acquire the skill, however hard they may have tried, will turn their head in appreciation even at a few bars of a tune whistled on the street.

Humming is different. First, you have to close your mouth. Humming can be defined as “singing out of joy behind closed lips,” but can also mean “murmuring in one’s mouth something indiscernible to others.” Songs produced through closed lips usually indicate the absence of a clear intent to reach someone else. They are not songs with words. It is alright if someone else does not understand. Whether an original song exists or it is improvised on the spot, the level of perfection attained matters little to none. It can easily shift to something else over the course of humming as it progresses toward an unknown ending. Melodies conveyed through your nose cannot, from the onset, be as loud as calling out to someone, nor can they be technically perfected through practice. A virtuoso or expert in whistling can exist, but no such thing is possible in the realm of humming. Humming emerges carelessly from behind closed lips through the nose and towards oneself.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Kim Ji-yeong (a.k.a. 109) has collected the sounds of other people’s humming. She has compiled the humming of about forty people through barter or by paying them in proportion to the length of their contribution. In last winter’s performance *A Humming Walk*, that humming was transformed into small flags. She created embroidered flags that visualized humming into images, attached to which were sound devices that played the humming sound. Participants walked the snow-covered trails of Bukhansan Mountain, holding the flags. As they walked, they variously listened to the humming emitted by the flags, hummed along with it, or just hummed something completely unrelated to the sound. Unlike *A Humming Walk*, in which the experience of moving while carrying the sound of others’ humming was paramount, the exhibition *Singing Nose* concentrates on the individual humming of more people and on the diverse sensations felt by the visitors within a fixed space.

Kim Ji-yeong (109) discusses the process of rendering sound visible or tangible: “It occurred to me that sound was something tactile, like touching the air. I also had fun visually imagining the form of humming, or the moments that one strand of humming met another.” She interweaves the act of making sound with that of listening to sound; that of creating vibrations with feeling vibrations (in a tactile manner); and that of drawing images with viewing images. It would appear that she has a solid understanding of the particularity of humming—a song that emerges from oneself even as it is directed towards oneself. However, sound produced within a closed mouth is not necessarily directed toward the ears. It is a song but is not limited only to the auditory senses. A sound produced inside one’s mouth that is simultaneously a vibration of oneself possesses a sort of tickling sensation felt not by way of the ears, but through skin and muscle. It feels as though the sound that I have made is soothing myself from within. When the distance between the transmission and reception of some senses is minimized to the point that those senses become part of “my body” or “an organ of my body,” those senses blur the boundaries of other senses. For instance, the nose thus creates sensations of sound that can not only be heard but also felt through the skin. The artist posits this as humming possessing the sense of “consoling oneself as if someone was patting me on the shoulder.”

The indescribable sense of humming that comes forth heedlessly, the sense of a song that chafes awkwardly at the bounds of that designation, or a vibration generated for oneself only

momentarily—all of these bring to mind the individual person humming for no particular reason and the daily landscape surrounding that person. Someone somewhere is humming in an easygoing manner—for no one really hums when they are busy or sad. And that humming is patting the person consolingly from the inside. What the visitors at the exhibition sense, surrounded as they are by the humming that flows diagonally as it draws wavy patterns downward, sideways, and upward, is the intimate moment of a stranger, the moment that the person created a song for themselves with their own breath. Breath that is transformed into song can be heard by ears, smelled by noses, seen by eyes, and touched by lips. And those sensations of that breath will draw visitors to sing with their own breath.

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