

Laser Emission, Krabstadt and Geography—Krabstadt as “Gray Humor”

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Seewon Hyun

Abstract

The text is a multilayered reading of the feminist transmedia project Krabstadt. Starting as a review of Krabstadt’s (counter) computer game, “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise,” the text unfolds through cross-cultural references weaving through game spaces, the question of horizontality, practices of confronting institutions, encounters with game characters and thresholds, and the ashes of gray humor that pervade the Krabstadt atmosphere. You enter Krabstadt as a player, an art viewer, a reader, and become lost in its never-ending corridors and jumpy floorplans that are blueprints to the making of the Krabstadt Education Center.

Editors note

[Click here to read the Korean version of the text.](#)

Ewa Einhorn and Jeuno JE Kim’s Krabstadt “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!” (2020) is a computer game but it is not just a game. Krabstadt is a fictional country within a transmedia project and as such works produced from *this world* exist in another dimension as a reality in and of itself. By gathering external voices and sharing them, the project is at once a curriculum, a proposal, a social report, a manifesto, and a playful tactic in the process of breaking through the realities of this world. Einhorn and Kim’s collaborative process is like “playing chopsticks” on a piano, where the composition in its variation and humor is best completed by two pianists. Through these collaborations, viewers, players, and colleagues share their time in Krabstadt. Spending time together with others in “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!” is to be within an art project as well as a game, and a reality in itself. Therefore, I can also say I am in Krabstadt while I am writing this.^[1]

The Krabstadt series is a solution and a manual, which shows the “how tos” in confronting a hopeless system. At times, it takes the form of a complete game and a film project. It is a peculiar cooperative that creates a clear sense of direction in a declarative and amusing manner. I see “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!” part of Krabstadt as an exhibition, a film theater, and an extension of multidimensional “manipulation.” In it, there is a narrative, a mountain, and interior design. There is movement as well as a “passage” system between domestic indoors and the outdoors. You are done as soon as you turn your head the other way. But what are you done with? The ends are also a possible entry, in which one feels like one may squeeze oneself into a system of accessibility and

coalescence, development opportunities and membership registration. Here, when you turn your head left and right and go through a door, the possibility of an “alternative narrative” instead of an upgraded system is an option. Powerful systems such as that of nationhood, wages, policy, gender, etc. are embedded in this game/exhibition like a backdrop. Just like it is difficult to feel the biological change when water turns into ice and ice melts into water again, a large part of Krabstadt is permeated with black humor and its sublimated ashes, or what I would call “gray humor.”

The “gray humor” in Krabstadt disturbs or resists existing definitions of humor either blank humor that is funny for its own sake (100% empty humor), or critical humor (black humor) which has an acerbic core and stings in its criticality. Krabstadt’s humor is neither blank nor black but exists on a gray scale. I wonder if it’s somewhat like the weather in northern Europe, where I’ve never lived, with Krabstadt’s humor being subdued and sensible, going back and forth between being playful and bureaucratic. In other words, the phrase “gray humor,” which I coined while thinking of Krabstadt, raises questions about the intensity and subject matter of humor. Is there another message intended behind humor’s façade? Or is it a gag that ends when it’s funny? Who is making who laugh? Do you laugh together? Or do you laugh separately?

It is not angry. It also does not crack someone up per se. But it is not somewhere in the middle either. Due to the distance taken for a critical view, it is your story and also mine. The space becomes a strange one with both personal and public intentions. I reckon that this is the privilege given by the exhibition as well as a kind of a safety net that can be felt inside the space-time created by the game.

Let’s again look at the game I am seeing right now. The space constructed in “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!” is horizontal. It is important that the characters in the game move horizontally, which leads me to think that I, a player, am above all the characters moving within the screen. The lateral movement is far from the temperament of the “problematic individual,” who charges forward in defiance. Let us look at the game characters’ gestures. They remind me of medieval Europe, in which gender, status, and personality, etc., were recognized according to the way people walked in the city.^[2] The bodies and thoughts of these (characters) were developed by Krabstadt’s time and space. Somewhat passive and somewhat transitional, the characters in the game are profoundly speculative. All together we move forward as we speculate no, we actually proceed and examine only as much as the doorways allow, becoming each others’ subjects of examination. It is unusual to see a character thrown onto the screen without a weapon or a desire to win in a computer game. Inside “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!,” the actor is an individual who confronts multiple institutions in a small town somewhere in Norden.

Confronting Large Institutions Via the Act of Doubt

Instead of formulating questions, one must respond to a set of options. This is an act of choice permitted for an individual dealing with large institutions and powerful nation-states. Advancing toward two given conclusions, the characters are the agents in Krabstadt’s space and time and in the Krabstadt Education Center. I, who control the computer mouse, become both a witness and an agent steering this game/world. Sociologist Erving Goffman wrote that “regardless of how many steps have occurred in the information game, the witness is likely to have the advantage over the actor, and the initial asymmetry of the communication process is likely to be retained.”^[3] Let’s mull over this assertion, which we may apply in various ways. The witness treats people’s experiences as if they’re stored in a kind of a database, constantly observing different behaviors. This allows for multiple answers that can be posted mechanically. However, the very first one to act walks alone and therefore to some extent makes decisions inefficiently. For the actor, the database is like the cigarette that is quickly dissipating, or a palm-

sized snowman that is melting. For an individual, making a decision is the key methodology in confronting a large institution. The “indeterminacy” claimed by many artists in the 1960 70s was also a specific decision, asserting meaning in their act of not making any decisions.

We, the players of “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!,” are simultaneously actors and witnesses. Learning one thing at a time as we go, we gaze at the lateral movement in space. Without knowing the final ending (of the game), we watch a character “gaining” the ability to speak English after procuring a dictionary from the library. The consistent principle to these game characters, who speak Volcanish and poor English, is that they “move.” As I have mentioned earlier, the characters sluggishly linger in a slightly whimsical and hazy state, with their heads tilted at 45 degrees, as if they are dragged by someone else. They walk like the crabs at the ocean, or a person with their arms wide open to measure the size of an exhibition space. These sideways-moving people advance to a different dimension inside the horizontal partitions of space and time. The “sideway-view” is a game in which one can only move along the x-axis.



Ewa Einhorn & Jeuno JE Kim, Krabstadt – Arrabbiata Wants A Raise, the library, 2020 (still), <https://itch.io/search?q=krabstadt> © Monkey Machine Film



Ewa Einhorn & Jeuno JE Kim, Krabstadt – Arrabbiata Wants A Raise, the library, 2020 (still), <https://itch.io/search?q=krabstadt> © Monkey Machine Film

The people living in “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!” walk from side to side. While they do, their faces look toward the front, similar to the frontality of the hunters’ faces in Egyptian murals. With bleary eyes and wobbly heads, wearing thick winter sweaters, these people who take on the volcano with fire alternate between the artificial (a coffee cup on the bar, a table, a bookcase in the library, etc.) and the natural reality (mountain, land, smoke) designed by Einhorn and Kim. The horizontal movement happening here is not an inverse of a vertical, it is not a conquest of subjects in a hierarchy, but rather a “visit” to heterogeneous systems. Unlike the hierarchy of heaven and hell demonstrated in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the horizontal motion does not advance toward somewhere higher, but simply passes through transparent doors. Making their way through the systems of search, integration, loan, and certification, they momentarily drop by heterogeneous contexts whether it be a space or a mood.



Ewa Einhorn & Jeuno JE Kim, Krabstadt – Arrabbiata Wants A Raise, the street, 2020 (still), <https://itch.io/search?q=krabstadt> © Monkey Machine Film



Volcanoes Cannot Be Strolled on (Volcano ≠ stroll)

On the other hand, numerous essays outline the necessity for a kind of teacher, guiding voice, and previous traveler in navigating a foreign environment. Let us look at Nam June Paik's 1968 paper *Expanded Education for the Paperless Society*. He asserted that in the future, rather than a teacher behind the classroom desk, a new education center would be realizable with the advancement of audio and video tapes and slides. Written during the height of the Cold War, his text undeniably demonstrates its influences, such as when he writes about a wish to "make a CIA-like archive." The reason I am bringing up Paik's text in my observation of Einhorn and Kim's work, is his idea of the "stroll." As the result of a three-month research funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in the United States, Paik envisioned a novel type of archival center. Arguing that librarians would be obsolete, he elaborated on a number of spatial images,

Some literary works which are concretely related to certain places or scenery can be recorded on video tape. In that way students can experience a literary stroll with the guide of genial description, learning a foreign language, e.g. Goethe's *Italienische Reise*, Gide's *Congo*, Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, Sartre's Bourge as a model city of *nausée*, and Proust's French scenes, Basho's *Okuno Hosomichi*, etc.^[4]

For instance, in the case of, say, Chartres, or the Stony Garden of Kyoto, the gradually but constantly changing hues of colored windows or stone according to the time of day and the weather might give more information about the artistic content than a hasty trip with a noisy guide...^[5]

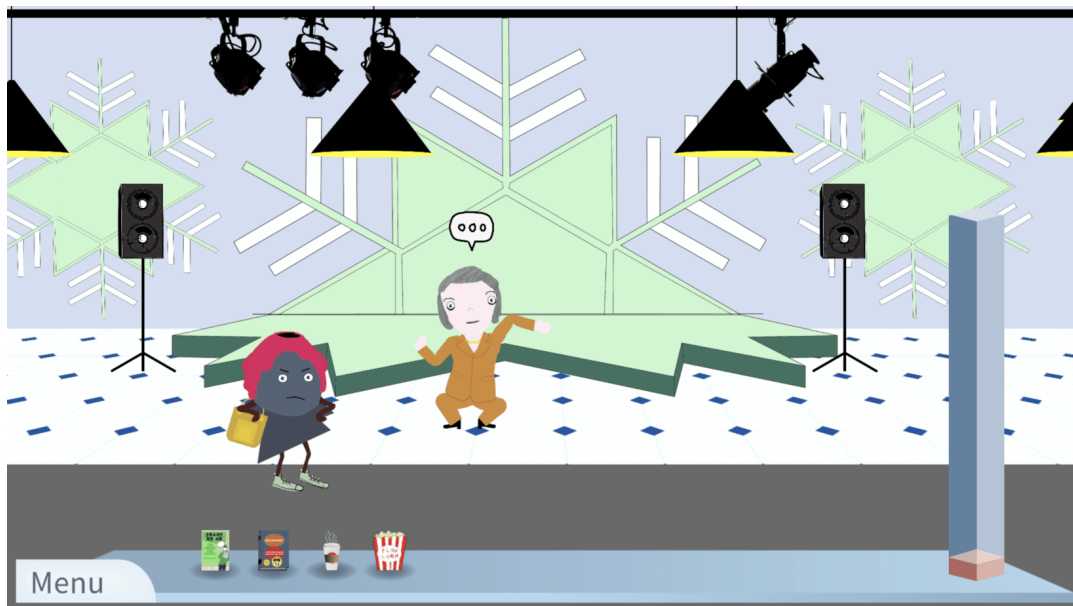
How do you travel? The "guide of genial description" linked with videos suggests a visit to a foreign city as a generalized experience. It is a way of traveling (strolls, tours) along a specific route. While we (the actor/witness) are immobile, we are able to "experience by proxy" via the genial guide's description along with a sequence of images. Capturing the images of Kyoto's Stony Garden, mountains that remain in one place, and dynamic cityscapes, a voice delivers what has been seen before. However, what enters into the picture of "Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!" is a completely incomprehensible language Volcanish. The Arctic volcano, institutional buildings, and interiors in the background this space is sustained by choices, not a guide. Volcanish does not integrate Krabstadt's images and worldview into a guide, but rather "dispersed" it. The experience is not a proxy tour, but one carried out by the user in person. As if things here were directly transplanted right there, the original of the space is in the monitor, not in northern Europe. Instead of the horizontal screen moving on the monitor in front of the player, and the text scrolling from top to bottom, one continues to select the spoken lines of the game characters. In consequence, the player situates the positions of this town, nature's level of anger, and ending. It is a way of understanding a world, with a "protocol" as basic framework. The language of this process is delegatory rather than explanatory, guiding an individual's decision.

As the name of the language indicates, Volcanish, invented in Krabstadt, strikes one as if the byproducts of the volcanic eruption are acoustically transposed. Activating and participating in "Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!" generates a unique audiovisual experience in the digital environment. The mechanical rendering of the simmering sound of fire and the characters' spirits "synchronized" to the music from a typical bar in Norden hover around this town. The sizzling sound coming from the volcano determines whether a hotel can be built on the volcano, or the town is to be burnt down by it. The barometer in control of the anger level suggests the temperature by

way of a simple pictogram, which cannot be felt on the online screen.



Ewa Einhorn & Jeuno JE Kim, Krabstadt – Arrabbiata Wants A Raise, Inside Gerda's Bar, 2020 (still), <https://itch.io/search?q=krabstadt> © Monkey Machine Film



Ewa Einhorn & Jeuno JE Kim, Krabstadt – Arrabbiata Wants A Raise, Inside Gerda's Bar, 2020 (still), <https://itch.io/search?q=krabstadt> © Monkey Machine Film

Doors and Movement

Similar to Jeuno JE Kim's description of spaces in series of her previous works, there is a bar past the door in the game space.^[6] This bar's interiors are distinct from the exterior. The distinguishing mood is set by the bar's background music. As you walk through the door, the music dominating the space is on a loop. The owner, manager, and servers drink tea facing ahead. Another door serves as the entrance to the library. Both an archive and a loan-circulation system, the library is similar to society's governance structure: it assigns numbers and categorizes into classes. Depending on whether you can understand the words spoken by the librarian or not, the book as a public property can be a private one for a brief moment, and then it must be returned.



Ewa Einhorn & Jeuno JE Kim, *Krabstadt – Arrabbiata Wants A Raise*, Outside Gerda's Bar, 2020 (still), <https://itch.io/search?q=krabstadt>
© Monkey Machine Film

Another door in “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!” is that of an igloo. In order to move to another plane/space, Krabstadt uses languages as a tool, including the language of matter such as liquid, solid, and gas. The basic state of these three substances is specifically used to open the doors of Gerda's bar in Krabstadt. It might be useful to understand Krabstadt through the prism of Korean fortune telling, which relies of Feng Shui geomancy, the theory of divination based on topography to understand ways of moving through elements that aren't defined primarily by architecture. In Korea, and in East Asia in general, in the “geography of feng shui” “feng shui” connotes physical elements such as wind and water, which affect the formation of the outside world with their unique properties. Atmosphere and climate that underpin feng shui of the land is not visibly manifested externally, but instead asserts itself through “invisible and magical energy.” The understanding is that there are energy points and lines in the ground that traverse through the soil following specific routes, similar to acupuncture points and meridian routes of energy used in acupuncture on human bodies.

Movement is the basic condition for growth. In Korea and China, the concepts of the Four Pillars of Destiny [*sajupalja*], and the sexagenary cycle [*yuksipgapja*], in which sixty years is one cycle of its calendar, are applied. Based on these concepts, the future can be predicted; for example, the east brings luck and the south brings terrible fortune for three years, which is also known as the Three Disasters (—) [*samjae*]. The Chinese letter — [*jae*] contains the character for fire (—) twice. Three Disasters does not mean the misfortune will come three times here Three (—) [*sam*] in Korean means the number three, hence the misunderstanding. Instead, it denotes that the misfortune originates in the world's three fundamental elements: water, fire, and wind.^[7] Not every Korean living in 2022 knows the exact etymology of this term, but just as one craves a tangerine in winter, and not a watermelon or an apple, we can intuit or know of the Three Disasters as a type of mood or common sense. If a calendar year happen to coincide with the Three Disasters, it will be a bleak year. This could mean a year filled with minor accidents or global catastrophes; and no matter what you do, you cannot overcome or avoid them. Although there are different philosophical interpretation of this term, the repeated colloquial use of the concept affixes a specific connotation in the languages in which the term is in use (Chinese, Korean). Evidently, in its colloquial usage the idea of the Three Disasters is simplified to mainly express disaster because the character that signifies fire — [*jae*] is repeated twice. Each culture has its own seasons, land, and language, but once something is repeated twice, we all know that it's a suspicious move; be suspicious when someone says the

same thing twice.

Krabstadt Education Center (KEC) as a Geography Class, Floor Plans

So far, I have been discussing the space, lateral movement, doors, and movement in “Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!,” a specific work chosen out of several that form Krabstadt. Now I want to ponder on what a geography class at the Krabstadt Education Center (KEC) might be like. Under the premise that the geographical considerations in Einhorn and Kim’s projects first and foremost extend beyond the Nordic, and second that they restructure traditions centered on male Western intellectuals with “gray humor,” I envision that this geography class is able to reassess and create other “lands.”

Introduction: Geography 101

Let’s start with Geography itself. Geography is not an encyclopedic inventory of ground surface phenomena. Geography means understanding the geographical and spatial properties of phenomena that develop at ground level, and through this examine the dissimilarities of different regions. In Naver (naver.com), one of the most often used search engine and online platforms in Korea, the objective of geography is defined with a quote from the Academy of Korean Studies’ encyclopedia, which states: “(A geographer) finds a pattern formed on a terrain and reveals the process by which the pattern is made.”^[8] KEC’s geography class explores the development of patterns via an endless variety of activities, much like the choreography of talking about one’s hometown, observing it as an insider, including arguing over names of countries, and showing an indifferent friend a neighborhood that is meaningful to the storyteller, and so on. One communicates with others who “live in the same land” as oneself, where the existence of that land goes beyond understanding it as a capitalist commodity, and that relates to power in such a way that those criteria are made irrelevant. Moreover, rather than implanting history, like engraving one’s name on a stone, it allows one to feel the real weather and the energies of the earth.

Land is also important in KEC. Perhaps, the invariable element in geography is the land itself. No one knows what nomination will be attached to a land and what it will be called. I distinctly remember the hand-drawn maps from the television programs I watched as a child in Korea. In *Finding Dispersed Families*, which was extensively shown on the Korean public broadcast channel in 1983, many who lost their families during the division of the North and South as an outcome of the Korean war came out with maps they had sketched. In their hands were maps drawn from recollection that served as material evidence. Their accounts often described a nearby stream and a mountain, the ducks that used to float in the stream, and the villages. They were recollections of impressions rather than concrete evidence. A place in the village called by its local nickname, and the house with a red roof where a friend lived of whom no one knows where they disappeared to they only remembered the personal contexts, not information about a specific name of a place in the past.

Writing, Walking, and Walking as You Observe

In writing, walking, and walking as you observe, there is one certainty: the fact that one moves their body, and that one’s vantage point shifts while engaged in the activity. When the stories of traveling, going on a tour, routes, and guided tours are conveyed from a different time zone, they become “revisions” (choreography/geography). The geography class at the Krabstadt Education Center is related to the writing class. It is also related to walking, walking while observing, and asking questions about another country.

Geography: Naming

The act of writing is associated with naming. Just like the Volcanish language makes it tricky to give a name to anything, at times we need to re-examine and discuss the act of naming and entitlement. As the names of star constellations demonstrate, names are necessary for humankind to communicate and grow, to avoid having different dreams about one and the same subject. Therefore, in the geography class at the Krabstadt Education Center, it is essential to visit astronomical observatories in various regions to discuss both the universality and differences of constellations. Let's provide plenty of examples with pictures to explore how the history of dinosaurs are taught to children in different countries, and why dinosaurs were named after the places they were discovered in. The reason I suggest an astronomical observatory as our classroom is that the scene in which a constellation guide points a laser to the sky would be fun and beautiful.

Geography: Making a Floor Plan

In KEC, we can contemplate floor plans to actively deconstruct and reconstruct physical structures such as playgrounds, exhibitions, libraries, and so on. First, I will share my thoughts on floor plans. The floor plans placed in exhibition venues are a medium through which new manifestations of exhibition formats can be observed. A floor plan has a double function: as a communicator of the exhibition's information and as a record (evidence) after the exhibition has ended. In this regard, the notion of the "museum without walls," which has been discussed by art historians, theorists, and artists, is useful as a means to reflect on the perception of art spaces and exhibition formats that floor plans imply. Through André Malraux's *musée imaginaire* and Rosalind Krauss's notion of "museum without walls," the latter is eventually interlocked with reproductions in another realm; existing online with unclear copyrights, these reproductions shake up the idea of duplication of the original. The floor plan inside an exhibition space is not only an instrument that indicates the location of exhibited artworks and their detailed captions. They are themselves a printed "museum without walls," and the technical support through which an alternative museum private or public and their methodologies are physically realized. On the other hand, a floor plan is not simply replicating the "museum without walls." Rather, it is a training device for visiting and pursuing interesting environments, even in dreams, allowing one to think innovatively about spaces, places, and geography.

The experience of the actor/witness that emerges from Krabstadt and "Arrabbiata Wants a Raise!" cannot be condensed into a single page of a map. Memory is comprehensive. Together with the images, the gestures of the game's characters and the sound of the background music persist. I recall the moments of clicking my mouse. Abruptly moving an inch from the still screen! I do not remember Krabstadt's geography as a static installation, but by way of the game characters' footsteps, which at times trot, stop, and then move again. These movements are fragmentary, like the crumbs sprinkled in *Hansel and Gretel*, and simultaneously a directional map, once all the dots are connected. Presenting Krabstadt as an educational program, Einhorn and Kim, together with Karolin Meunier, developed the project as a performative and continuous entity. And because the process is performative, the geography curriculum at KEC cannot be condensed into a single map. However, attempts to construct this unfamiliar terrain is a map itself, like a new language system that may emerge out of nowhere. A new term is needed to replace the word "map." To those who ask what and where Krabstadt is, I tell them to enter the atmosphere of it first. Now, what should our bell sound like, announcing the beginning and the end of our class?

Footnotes

1. The first text written about Jeuno JE Kim by the author of this text was a review of Kim's solo exhibition, which dealt with the subjects of traveling and itinerary, and a conversation and perspectives of more than two persons.
Hyun, Seewon. "Jeuno Kim—News From An Unknown Space." *Art monthly*. June 2010. pp.120–32 See https://monthlyart.com/page/80/?attachment_id=jozybvypipy (accessed 2022-04-19). Krabstadt by Einhorn and Kim, who have been collaborating since 2009, is an animation project and a series of shorts. It satirizes subjects such as immigration, unification, unemployment, and sex. In 2020, their computer game installation, *Krabstadt Buttons* (2020) was shown at the Busan Biennale, and in 2016 Kim gave a talk about the first Krabstadt film, *Whaled Women* (2013), at the Book Society in Tongui-dong, Seoul.
2. On the question of labyrinths, see Sennett, Richard. *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. Translated by Dongeun Lim. Seoul: Munhakdongne. 2021 [1994]. p. 215.
3. Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Hyeonamsa. 1959.
4. Paik, Nam June. "Expanded Education for the Paper-less Society" [1968]. In *We Are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2019. pp. 140–41.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
6. Have a look at Jeuno JE Kim's script. I recommend Kim's work inside "Abstract Cabinet," see <http://abstractcabinet.org/exhibition/goodday/> (accessed 2022-04-12). Click a few times on the white bar inside the screen. You can watch Kim's video created in December 2020, and the text describing and giving evidence of a space will appear in the video.
7. Some say the Three Disasters come in a cycle of twelve years and last for three years. See http://mytemple.co.kr/bbs/board.php?bo_table=disasters&sca=%EC%82%BC%EC%9E%AC%EB%9E%80+%EB%AC%B4%EC%97%87%EC%9D%B8%EA%B0%80%3F (accessed 2022-04-12).
8. See <https://terms.naver.com/entry.naver?docId=2686647&cid=46618&categoryId=46618> (accessed 2022-04-12).