Critical Writings on Korean Contemporary Art
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Contents

Introduction: Overlooking the Korean Art Criticism
Baek Jihong _ 006

A Critical Note on the Direction and Tendencies of Korean Art Criticism 2018–2019
Michael Lim _ 014

Artist Analysis

Listen to Citizens, Listen to Stories, Listen to the City
Park Juwon _ 030

Narrative and Image: The Living and the Dead
Lee Nara _ 046

Voice of the "MTV Generation": Early Video Work of Sejin Kim
Mun Hye Jin _ 060

Exploring the Emergence of Dansaekhwa: The Works of Park Seobo
Kim Han deul _ 074

Hwang Yong Yop and the Variations on Human Anguish
An Jaeyoung _ 088

Exhibition Reviews

What Does a Biennale Do? A Review of the 2019 Cheongju Craft Biennale
Seo Juno _ 100

The Opening Ceremony of the Seoul Olympics and Cosmopolitanism
Eom Jehyeon _ 112

Media Study

"New Painting": "Painting in Crisis" theory as a point of departure
Ban Ejung _ 136

A Landscape as a poison: Praxis of Landscape in Independent Documentaries
Lee Do Hoon _ 152

From Net Art to Post–Internet Art: Open Possibilities of Post–Internet Art
Nathalie Boseul Shin _ 168

Theory Study

I will not live the way you want: Thoughts on relation between Screen, Gender, and Visual Arts
Kim Shin Sik _ 182

Representations/Machines/Objects as the World: Recent movements in Korean Contemporary Art
Jeung Gangsan _ 198

Nonlinearity of Meaning and Structure outside Structure
Jung Hoon _ 218

Looking Back on the 21st Century from the 21st Century: Criticism as a Witness of the 21st Century
Mun Hye Jin _ 234
What is the position that art criticism occupies? In truth, there is no need for it to be restricted to art—in every field, the position of “criticism” is not fixed, but fluid and uncertain. The prerequisites of criticism, which depend on a critical subject, give rise sometimes to claims of criticism’s “pointlessness.” In cases such as films, popular music, or cartoons that have a large audience, this leads to attacks on the expertise of critics, as people ask the question, “Just what is the difference between me and a critic?” In areas where the art form itself has a smaller audience—such as fine arts, literature, or dance—the readership for criticism is so small as to veer toward pointlessness or survive solely as the “dialect” of an insular community. Art criticism likewise faces questions about its utility. Not only does criticism no longer possess the power it once held to select “good art,” but its readers are a very limited bunch. Yet criticism is still needed wherever creativity is practiced. Just as artistic creation and exhibition planning are influenced by criticism, so criticism functions as a part of a virtuous cycle that leads to the emergence of better exhibitions and artwork as it influences artistic creation. Moreover, artwork tends to be quickly forgotten when it does not survive in records, and criticism offers the most exemplary means of recording art. Good criticism is still necessary for good art.

The Art Critic Support Program launched by the Korea Arts Management Service (KAMS) since 2018 which aims to produce of good criticism. As the program title suggests, its distinguishing feature is making a pair of critics and an art magazine—an apt approach, in that criticism can only perform its role when media are promoted as channels for its circulation. When support is being provided to an art world that has lost its own momentum for perpetuating the cycle amid a collapse of the art market, some element of design is needed to keep the cycle going, however artificially.

A total of 76 manuscripts were written as a result, and KAMS has compiled the reports of its program into a book titled Critical Writings on Korean Contemporary Art: A report of the 2018–2019 Art Critic Support Program. 
which includes 14 of those texts along with one newly written one. The individual manuscripts differ in character, as no conditions were stipulated for participation in the matching project: indeed, it may be a bit of a stretch for them to be compiled into a single volume. The differences are not limited to diversity in topics or approaches. For instance, the critical texts that are recorded in the limited pages of print media opted for an approach of delving deeply into a single topic despite the larger-than-average space, whereas the online media, which are typically more or less untroubled by space issues, ambitiously attempted to tackle topics as vast as their footnotes are voluminous. This difference is but one small example of the sourcebook’s diversity. Each author anticipated a different level of readership, and the texts are not uniform in terms of difficulty. Texts that are easily readable by anyone with an interest in art are compiled alongside ones that require readers to dig in their heels and unpack each individual sentence. Reading this book in one sitting would be like traveling on a bumpy road—by no means a comfortable experience.

If anything, however, it is that very diversity that is responsible for this sourcebook’s unique significance—an illustration of the overall state of Korean art criticism circa 2018–2019 that no other critical collection can boast. Art criticism is not an especially large field, yet there are critics who never cross paths in their activities, whether it is because of the media through which their criticism circulates, the generations of the critics themselves and their subjects, or the artistic genres that the criticism focuses upon. This collection focuses on the full range of criticism fields present in Korean art today (although it may still be missing a few), and this is what enables it to provide vision of Korean art criticism.

The most difficult points in editing the book was tying together all of that diversity—however roughly—under a handful of topics. As mentioned before, it would have been a discourtesy to readers to simply lump together texts of such different character. So we took the risk of categorizing each of them under one of four major topics (“Artist Analysis,” “Exhibition Reviews,” “Media Study,” and “Theory Study”) to provide some minimal guide. Given that some of the manuscripts fall under more than one of those topics, we hope the reader will not dwell too much on arbitrary categories assigned after the fact. The moments spent reading should be all about the dialogue between reader and writer.

The first text that greets the reader is Michael Lim’s “A Critical Note on the Direction and Tendencies of Korean Art Criticism 2018–2019,” which is the only text that was newly written for this collection. Examining the state of Korean art criticism over the two years of the program in terms of the topics of “alternative channels and programs,” “exceptional critics,” and “areas for improvement in) academic society-centered research activities,” it is written in a quite accessible way despite its diversity of content and is well-suited as a “warm-up” for the next 13 texts with its examination of the current conditions and position of contemporary Korean art criticism.

The ensuing section on “Artist Analysis” accounts for the largest number of texts, five in total, and illustrates all the different aspects that the kind of criticism often referred to as “artist theory” can assume. Among the five artist theory works included here, Park Juwon’s “Listen to Citizens, Listen to Stories, Listen to the City” is the closest to the artists. It shares the work of the Listen to the City collective, whose members capture the voices of people victimized by state-led development projects such as the redevelopment of Seoul’s Cheonggyecheon Stream, the Four Major Rivers Restoration Project, Okbaraji Alley, and the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang: as a text, it expresses the writer’s passionate support for what the artists are attempting to achieve. In contrast, Lee Nara’s “Narrative and Image: The Living and the Dead” is a more subdued introduction to the artistic world of Song Sang-hee, basing its discussion on the ideas of Georges Didi–Huberman, one of the most noted thinkers in the Korean cultural world of the 2010s. In addition to aiding in an understanding of Song’s artistic vision, it is also meaningful as a record of the contemporary critical climate.

Mun Hye Jin’s “Voice of the “MTV Generation”: Early Video Work of Sejin Kim” convincingly charts the changes in Kim Sejin’s artistic body of work as
it explores how the Korean video art of the late 1990s to the early and mid-
2000s was influenced by the transformation in cultural history terms as the new
medium of cable TV was applied to the public. An art history-based approach
is more strongly emphasized in Kim Han Deul’s “Exploring the Emergence of
Dansaekhwa: The Works of Park Seobo,” which introduces the artistic oeuvre
of the preeminent artist Park Seobo based on research into dansaekhwa(Korean
monochrome), one of the most oft-studied genres in Korean art history during
the 2010s. It may not offer much that is new to those already acquainted with
the information, but as a critique it rests on a solid foundation. An Jaeyoung’s
“Hwang Yong Yop and the Variations on Human Anguish” could be seen as the
most “classical” example of the artist theory style in Korean art, as it aids an
understanding of the artist through a storytelling approach that centers of the
artist’s words and artistic body of work. This aspect of the text seems to be ac-
ccentuated all the more by the fact that the author was a prizewinner in the “art
criticism” category of the Chosun Ilbo spring literary contest, that most classic
of gateways for critics in Korea.

The two works of criticism that follow represent the character of the
“Exhibition Reviews” as we most often encounter it. Seo Juno’s “What Does a
Biennale Do?: A Review of the 2019 Cheongju Craft Biennale” uses the pro-
cess of the biennial format’s establishment in South Korea—which has become
known as the “kingdom of biennials”—and the writer’s own experience as an
artistic director for a special biennial exhibition as a basis for discussing both
his hopes for the Cheongju Craft Biennale and the areas he found lacking in
the 2019 event. It could also be said to offer an illustration of the state of art
criticism today and the blurring of boundaries between exhibition planners and
criticisms, as An Jaeyoung (the author of the immediately preceding piece) was
the exhibition director for the 2019 Cheongju Craft Biennale, while Seo himself
works as an exhibition planner. Eom Jehyeon’s “The Opening Ceremony of the
Seoul Olympics and Cosmopolitanism” broadens the scope of art criticism by
training its critical gaze on the Olympic opening ceremony as the largest work
of visual arts created in Korea in 1988. Summoning back the grandeur of a cer-
emony held over 30 years ago, the writer is scathing in his criticism of an event
orchestrated by the military administration to inspire patriotic sentiments and
usher Korea into the ranks of “advanced nations.”

The media and genre in which art is situated are also critical targets, for
they are not value-neutral presences, but ones whose meaning changes with the
times. A representative illustration of this is Ban Ejung’s “New Painting: ‘Painting
in Crisis’ theory as a point of departure which is based on the shift in the stat-
ure of certain genres/media that has become known as the “crisis of painting.”
Examining the phenomenon of new trends in painting drawing attention in the
2010s, the piece explores the characteristics of these new paintings, showing a
form of criticism that is based in the “field,” namely galleries and studios. Lee Do
Hoon’s “A Landscape as a poison: Praxis of Landscape in Independent Docu-
mentaries” focuses on the increased frequency of landscapes in contemporary
Korean independent documentaries, offering scenes from specific works as
concrete examples as it analyzes the meaning of landscapes within video work.
Nathalie Boseul Shin’s “From Net Art to Post-Internet Art: Open Possibilities of
Post-Internet Art” examines “post-internet art” as the best reflection of con-
temporary changes through which being online has become part of daily ex-
perience. Focusing her discussion on the history of “net art” as an early form of
internet art and the exhibition Art Post-Internet, which served to raise broader
awareness of the term “post-internet,” the piece shares the process behind the
changes in media and the emergence of a new artistic genre. Another possibility
is to focus on a narrower domain.

In addition to the concrete subjects to be found within visual arts gen-
res—artists, exhibitions, and media—there is one other thing that can be the
focus of criticism: specific ways or frames of thinking that become concretized
through artistic activities or that concretize the significance of artistic activ-
ties. Kim Shin Sik’s “I will not live the way you want: Thoughts on relation
Baek Jihong graduated in art from Hongik University and pursued graduate studies in fine arts at the same institution. He was a reporter for the art monthly MisuSegye from 2013 to 2016 and served as chief editor from March 2016 to November 2019. In 2019, he cooperated on the planning of Korea Research Fellow: 10 Global Curators X 10 Korean Curators at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea. He has also worked as a lecturer and a cultural writing staff member. In addition to his writing, he is involved in work related to cultural planning and criticism, including publication editing and cultural program planning.

between Screen, Gender, and Visual Arts” analyzes works of Song Min Jung, Heemin Chung, Kim Cho-yup, Yoon Hangro, Park Min-jung, Lee Eunsae, and Yun Yi-hyung: moving image, fiction, and painting. And it also examines how the screens closely related to contemporary civilization and the passage through which we encounter images today influence in the work of these female artists. Jeung Gangsan’s “Representations/Machines/Objects as the World: Recent movements in Korean Contemporary Art” traces the meaning of the “layers or flatness continuously invoked in the mid- to late 2010s,” referring to the work of artists from a particular generation as it shows commonalities among them that cannot be easily lumped together in terms of specific medium characteristics or social phenomena. Jung Hoon’s “Non-Linearity of Meaning and Structure Outside of Structure” centers on exhibitions as it explores the artistic oeuvres of Cha Jinhyun and Kim Jung-a, but it evokes a rather unfamiliar sense with its focus on a linguistic perspective rather than on artists, artworks, or exhibitions. Let us consider how works in the visual arts can help in understanding potentially difficult theory.

The final piece in the book is the most recent (published in January 2020): “Looking Back on the 21st Century from the 21st Century” by Mun Hye Jin, the only author to have two pieces published in the collection. Briefly covering the 30-year history of Korean art criticism between 1990 and 2019, it refers to critics and critical currents that are closely connected to the 14 texts presented in this book—helping to produce a clearer “bird’s-eye perspective” on the previously examined art criticism.

We have looked at all 14 of the texts. As mentioned before, each of them is the product of different planning: in some cases, an intermediate installment has been chosen rather than the first “episode,” which may come as a disappointment to readers encountering this sourcebook alone. Since each of the writers is prolifically active outside of the pages of Bird’s-Eye View, motivated readers will hopefully be able to allay any such disappointment with ease. I would also recommend seeking out the texts that were not included in this collection, as it would be a shame to miss them.

As I conclude, I would like to mention certain ambitions regarding the Art Critic Support Program that arose as I was editing this collection. What I would like to see is an approach that preserves autonomy in terms of theme and writing format, while imposing certain constraints that establish connections with the practical environment of contemporary Korean art. The beauty of art criticism as something distinct from art history or aesthetics lies in its relationship with the fields where art is practiced, and the ongoing production of high-quality texts related to currently active artists and recently organized exhibitions and programs helps to infuse vitality into the Korean art world. As this collection has shown, the Art Critic Support Program has yielded definite reports in its overview of the world of Korean art criticism. Even if the changes don’t necessarily proceed in the direction mentioned here, I look forward to this project being continuously bolstered and developing into a foundation for more robust art criticism in Korea.
If one is to apprehend and evaluate a series of critical practices from today’s contemporary art context, it would be crucial to ruminate in light of art historical research, critical/discursive practice encompassing both criticism and theories, and curating as an expanded mode of critical/discursive practice. Yet, there has not been an agreement on this issue, and neither has been a proposition of an efficient mode for a comprehensive evaluation of all three aspects.

Every now and then, there are those who lamentingly repeat the empty chant of “the crisis of criticism,” but in fact, a wide spectrum of practices of criticism has continued to unfold in the art scene. In particular, if the crisis debate refers specifically to the professional critics, that crisis already arrived in 1986 with the opening of MMCA Gwacheon, which marked the beginning of the ‘age of curator’ and reached a full-blown scale by 1993 when then-director of the MMCA Lim Youngbang abolished the annual Contemporary Art Festival for which critics had held the authority to select artists. Besides, making a living as a critic solely on manuscript fees has always—even during times of economic prosperity—been next to impossible.

Even so, the conditions for art critics in the Korean art world can be deemed better than that of the neighboring Japanese art world. In Korea, it is granted that numerous state-run art organizations and foundations intervene in the art scene, operating support programs for artists and critics to provide at least some monetary aid, whereas in Japan, the size of support directed toward the cultural arts industry is less than half of that of Korea and many gape when they learn about Korea’s unusual system. That is to say, the kind of protocol we imagine for an emerging artist—obtaining a grant to hold a solo show then obtaining another grant to commission critics or curators to write reviews—is in fact, utterly Korean.

There are different streams and branches to criticism as there are to art concerning each contemporary period and significant discrepancies in each critic’s method of research or choice of discourse. A Japanese scholar of aes-
thetics Takeuchi Toshio (1905–1982), classified artistic criticism into three categories in Bigaku jiten (Dictionary of Aesthetics): judicial criticism, impressionistic criticism, and scientific criticism. Long story short, judicial criticism—rooted in absolutism—and impressionistic criticism—rooted in subjectivism—were pegged as attitudes to be overcome in the early 20th century, and what came to fore as an alternative was scientific criticism. Scientific criticism also branched into three categories, founded on each sociology of art, historical psychology, and art history.

The only two that are still applied today are sociological criticism and historical criticism. Scientific criticism founded on historical psychology, which took the 20th century by storm, rapidly dwindled after the art historian E. H. Gombrich, whereas sociological criticism largely maintained its thread thanks to the sudden boom of cultural research. (Note: The scholastic branch of historical psychology—which sought to read into the psychological symptoms of the masses in connection to historical shifts—became obsolete. It’s hard to find anyone who reads or cites Zevedei Barbu nowadays.) The mainstream genre of criticism today would have to be historical criticism. Since the 1970s, the fate of contemporary art’s has been tied to the academia—such institutions as art history—and critical activities have gradually come to display academic tendencies. Moreover, as studies on Postcolonialism became incorporated into college curricula in the late 1980s, sociological criticism was partially consolidated with historical criticism.

Regardless, one does not have to pursue art history or theory in college and write a thesis to qualify as a critic. After all, Oh Kwangsu, the art critic synonymous to 20th-century Korean art, majored in painting at Hongik University then won the 1963 Annual Spring Literary Contest by the Dong-A Ilbo with this essay “The Attitude of Succeeding Tradition” before he gilded the scenes of the modern art movements. While the degree system of academia and the institutions of academic associations have repeated idle rotation over the two decades of the 21st century, site-centered criticism began reclaiming value. What’s regrettable, however, is that media circumstances or a solution to power that momentum hasn’t clearly presented itself.

With that said, let us abstract and evaluate noteworthy examples of critical practice carried out in 2018 and 2019.

The Search for Alternative Channels and Platforms

When discussing criticism of Korean contemporary art, one cannot avoid mentioning as one of the most prominent events the rush to find new, alternative, more vibrant channels for critical discourse. As the torch of the alternative space/young artist collective movement ignited in late November 2013 and various attempts and disputes followed, discursive practices—though it’s hard to say that they were in the center of it all—played an integral role in the process of what was a generational shift.


Audio Visual Pavilion (run by Ahn Inyong and Hyun Seewon) which prompted the start-up alternative space movement, closed on October 30, 2019 with their closing exhibition, SMSM10. But the third issue of the Audio Visual Pavilion’s journal AVP Quarterly published that summer still saw some results as a critical practice. The second issue published in the fall of 2018 featured contributions under the theme “Locating Korean Contemporary Art: Media of Today.” In this issue, the art historian and critic Choi Jong Chul proposed “Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb: Media Art after the Digital – A Kraussian View” and a Media studies scholar Kim Jihoon analyzed the characteristics of post-cinematic works by contemporary artists through “The Essayistic Convention that Mediates Units: A Tendency of Post-Internet Moving Image Arts in the Korean Contemporary Art Scene I.”

Tiger Sprung, advocating a translation platform for contemporary art discourses, introduces themselves as follows: “We are a platform that translates
contemporary art discourses derived from overseas in cooperation with artists
and theorists. We share translated text and circulate discourses in hopes that
they resonate at certain moments of the present time to attune the polyphonic
spacetime hic et nunc. Tiger Sprung is currently hiring translators. We pay
translation fees to various translative bodies and guarantee accreditation as we
provide opportunities for translation, and the translated text is openly shared
for free.”

According to their website, Tiger Sprung aims to establish a new platform
for translated discourses with the anthology 30 Selected Critiques on Con-
temporary Art (compiled by former Art Quarterly journalist Lee Youngchul and
published by Korea JoongAng Daily) and the Discourses in Art after Modernism
series (compiled by the art historian Yun Nanji and published by Noonbit Pub-
lishing Co.) as references. But seeing the works of Claire Bishop, Boris Groys,
Jean-Luc Nancy, Hito Steyerl, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist translated and blatantly
posted online with absolutely no entry barrier, the visible absence of editorship
is a little disappointing. The problem is, more specifically, that it is hard to detect
any will or intention to trace the topography of Western discourses and interpret
them from a Korean perspective.

Jipdanochan, which takes the form of a critics group, Critic-al, which
advocates a “culture-critical webzine,” and Wowsan Typing Club, which can
be defined as a sort of a “club for contemporary art criticism,” all display a lack
of editorship. Among them, Wowsan Typing Club, seeking active and mutual
feedback by posting serial pieces by participating writers and through year-end
retrospectives, may fall in the category of a substantial alternative.

A quirky attempt is Pia☆After; first activated around 2015 or 2016. Artist
Kang Jungsuck, who played a central role in the extensive alternative space/
young artists collective movement and the generational shift that proceeded
from 2013 to 2016, took up an ambiguous kind of practice called Pia☆After—
allegedly a “parasitic pop-up space”—with the 2015 exhibition Dungeon
co-curated with Lee Su-kyung as a turning point. This space has never claimed
itself a critical platform but has intermittently carried out interesting discursive
activities, hosting and publicizing the discussions GOODS: The 2nd Anniversary
held in January 2018 and “Contemporary Art Black Market” and “Goods” held
in December 2018. But the most intriguing critical practice was “People: Niche
Curator Konno Yuki” put out in March 2019, an interview of the niche-seeking
curator-critic Konno Yuki. Compared to that of Yoon Yuli and Don Sunpil who
fueled production of discourses during the generation shift from 2013 to 2016,
and later focused on their practices as a curator or artist, Kang Jungsuck’s tra-
jectory of action is quite off-the-wall.

To a degree, the struggles of these newborn platforms has to do with their
dissatisfaction with existing art journals. These discursive platforms are cur-
cently in a cooperative or complementary relationship with print media such as the
Monthly Art Magazine, Art In Culture, and Public Art, but the fact is, younger-generation readers and participators feel a sense of distrust and resistance
toward established media.

Established print media has reached a certain ceiling as a result of their
decision to adhere to the revenue model dependent on advertisement and sub-
scribers. Amidst the ebb tide of subscribers and print ads, some magazines have
even been bashed for pressuring subscription and purchase on featured artists.
Nevertheless, Monthly Art Magazine, Art In Culture, Public Art, and MisulSegye
have often managed to put out feature articles of qualities incomparable to
those produced by fledgling platforms, and they still serve as the backbone of
Korean contemporary art discourses. The problem is that people have stopped
reading discursive content in the printed format: more and more people are
opting to wait to read them online even if they’re sporadically uploaded by au-
thors themselves a month after their initial release.

In 2018 and 2019, reviews of art critics supported by the Korea Arts Man-
agement Service (KAMS) could be found in some of the mainstream art journals.
I wonder if it would have been better if they were posted online immediately
after publication or if support programs could be enhanced to organize collabor-
ative projects for new and established media. Many artists are also waiting for
organizations like KAMS to carry out projects that archive exhibition materials,
in which case a project dedicated to archiving key articles and critical text could also be considered. *Monthly Art Magazine, Art In Culture, and Public Art* have undergone great and small changes but have managed to maintain their original identities. *MisulSegye* begged to differ. Back Jihong, made editor-in-chief in 2016, monitored the alternative space/young artist collective movement while aggressively taking the lead in discourse production. The key staff and journalists were also mostly born around the 1980s—relatively younger than most other journals. *MisulSegye*’s exceptionally rapid stride, however, ended in October 2019 when every single one of the editorial staff including Back left the magazine in protest of the new owner.

**Exceptional Critics Making Progress**

There were those who proved themselves prominent while critics with degrees in art history and theory were in idle rotation. The most celebrated was Hwang Jeongsoo, a literature major and an art lover known for his incisive eye. Showing prolonged interest in Korean modern art and the artistic interaction between Korea and Japan during the Japanese occupation of Korea, Hwang received accolades for his book *Japanese Painters Drawing Joseon* published in November 2018. Hwang is reminiscent of the art world’s last known connoisseur Bernard Berenson (1865–1959) in some ways, but the Korean equivalent to Berenson—an art historian who had an acute view and won admiration for written works such as *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance with an Index to Their Works* (1894) that combined impressionistic criticism and systematic categorization—would have to be the early art critic and connoisseur, Oh Sechang. While most connoisseur-critics lost their place with the emergence of art historical methodologies, Oh managed to carry over old-school values and virtues through art collection and connoisseurship.

On the other hand, Kim Jihoon and Kwak Yungbin began as film critics and expanded their realms into the domain of contemporary art. The two are disparate in terms of the roles they play. At the symposium “Contemporary Art caught in a cobweb” held on March 31, 2019, in correlation to the exhibition *Web-Retro*, where the two took turns to speak, Kim’s topic of discussion was “Net Art/Post-Internet Art: Continuity and Discontinuity” while Kwak presented “The Present and the Future of the Net and Its Correlation to Art.”

Kim, who has worked to surmount the limits of existing filmology and cultural criticism by combining film studies, media studies, and contemporary art theories, aspires to embrace both film and the artistic genre of moving image under the premise of the post-cinematic era. For this reason, he insists on a style of writing that is conscious of the readers in the film industry even when reviewing contemporary art. Kim majored in communication studies as an undergraduate and obtained masters in film studies from Chung-Ang University, and a doctorate in cinema studies from New York University which is to say that he has gone through quite a journey to be able to practice criticism in the contemporary art scene and on the plane of post-internet art.

Kwak, whose critique unfolds in the manner of cross-composition of film history and theory, digital media aesthetics, and the contemporary art theory generated by the art journal *October*, stands on a plane that largely overlaps with that of Kim but seems to lack the ambition to cradle both film and moving image arts. Having graduated from Seoul National University’s Department of Education then earning a master’s degree in communication from Sogang University and a doctoral degree in cinema and comparative literature from the University of Iowa, Kwak’s style of writing invariably falls in the structural format of a comparative literature study regardless of the subject. After winning the first SeMA-HANA Criticism Award in 2015, which placed him on the map of the contemporary art scene, Kwak has shown a more unrestricted and broader range of criticism compared to Kim.

**Areas for Improvement**

I stated earlier that academic research has been running around in cir-
icles, but that doesn’t mean that there haven’t been any meaningful attempts or results. Let us recount some of the notable events:

The symposium “Features and Reevaluation of Kim Chong Yung’s Art” hosted by the Seoul Calligraphy Art Museum at the Seoul Arts Center in January 2018 in correlation to the exhibition Kim Chong Yung: Sculpture with a Brush rendered somewhat inadequate unlike the exhibition itself, which received favorable reviews.

In March 2018, “A Forum for Considering Strategies for the Development of Korean Art Scene” was hosted by the Soorim Cultural Foundation, the main topic of which was the issue of corporatization of the MMCA. Considering that corporatization of the MMCA was nullified later that June, this event could be seen as a sort of a groundwork. The MMCA celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2019 under director Youn Bummo as the art scene demanded that the government elevate the rank of the museum director to the level of a vice-minister. (In March 2020, the rank was moved up to first level from second.)

The theme of the 7th Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation Cultural Policy Forum held in July 2018 was “Succession and Reform: Culture & Art in New North Korea.” Though there have been several other attempts that explored the possibility of inter-Korean art exchanges from various angles, none were realized due to the failure of negotiations among South and North Koreas and the United States. There were also attempts to reexamine defector artists to North Korea, but responses were meager as opposed to the enthusiasm shown for similar attempts made during Roh Tae-woo’s administration. It may be time to come up with a new approach to studying North Korean art history.

There were a few events that rendered rather fruitful. The symposium “Reconsidering works of Jung Hyun-Woong and North Korean Art in the 1950s–1960s” organized by the Korean Society of Art History in October 2018 received positive reviews as Kim Seungik’s “North Korean Postwar Art’s European Foray and Jung Hyun-woong” and Kim Myunghun’s “Jung Hyun-woong’s Political Course after Defection to North Korea” proposed alternate directions for research.

In July 2018, KAMS briefed the outcomes of its Research Support Project for Publication of Electronic Catalogues of Deceased Artists. At this event organized to report the achievements of the two-year-eight-month research project, artist Park Soo Keun and Lee Jung-seob’s research teams presented both their achievements and existing limits. Amidst various conflicts in interests, the most popular opinion was that the research project was necessary although it is impossible to publish electronic catalogues due to practical issues concerning authentication. (KAMS held another conference, “KAMS International Conference about Authentication and Appraisal 2018,” in November to continue discussing the issue of authentication but because appraisal as a business falls in the private territory, it seems realistically difficult for an organization that executes subsidies on behalf of the government to be involved in it.)


Upon the “Seminar in Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of Lee Kyungsung’s Birth” held on March 2019, an art historian Hong Sunpyo presented “A Historical Study on Lee Kyungsung’s Art” and Kim Jeongeun presented “A critical review of the art criticism of Lee Kyung Sung: focusing on the issue of defining the concept of modern and contemporary eras.” Another art historian Lee Kyungsung’s historical perspective was faithfully succeeded by the MMCA, hence there remains the regret that a more proactive proposal of alternatives could have made in time for the museum’s 50th anniversary.

The symposium held in correlation with the exhibition Korean Modern Calligraphy and Painting in Transition by the Association of Korean Modern & Contemporary Art History in June 2019 integrated various studies centering

In June 2019, the Association of Biographical Art History in Korea, and Seosomun Shrine History Museum co-organized “An Aspect of Korean Contemporary Sculpture: Exhibition Symposium” under the theme “100 Years of Korean Modern and Contemporary Sculpture,” where an art critic Choi Youl, an art director Choi Tae-man, and a curator Kim Jonggil each presented “The Introduction of Modern Sculpture in Korea,” “The Formation and Development of Korean Abstract Sculpture,” and “A Study on the New Figurative Sculpture Theory: Persona, Existence, Tricksters, and Politics” respectively. It was a shame that this symposium neglected studies on sculptures as non-monumental objects and sculptures of the globalized era, not to mention that any sculptors from the current art scene were not invited as a panel at an event probing the ongoing history of modern and contemporary sculpture.

The annual fall symposium held by the Association of Korean Modern & Contemporary Art History in September 2019 dealt with a heated issue: “Women, Art, and Institution: Reframing Art History in the ‘Me Too’ Era.” The director of Jungnang art center Christine Park, researcher and art historian Kwon Haeng-ga and Kim Gyewon each presented “Again, Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” “Modern Art and Craft Industry and Women’s Art: Focusing on the Artistic Practices of Sun-hee Jang,” and “How to Shoot Women: The Social Image of Mid-20th-Century Japan Revealed through Visual Culture and Nude images” respectively. However, there was no discussion or proposal regarding the institutional issue: "What kinds of organizational reform must take place for museums to convey a more politically correct history of art?”

Gwangju Museum of Art’s December 2019 symposium “Reconsidering Korean Painting: Changes and Prospects” and KAMS’ special seminar “Seeking new ways of Korean Contemporary Painting” epitomized the recently vitalizing discourse on reevaluation of Korean painting. But as with many other similar attempts, these events missed the big picture. There was a void of committed research and debate on how modernism and contemporariness are manifested in Korean painting and why Korean painting was excluded from major national museum exhibitions, and from the contemporary art trends of the current globalized era.

(Note: The “Again, Right, Together, Korean Art” program organized by KAMS helped create a platform for reconsideration of the history of Korean contemporary art by putting together research teams in charge of three periods: postwar-1970s, 1980s, and 1990s-onward. It also served as a stepping-stone to follow-up research and activities.)

The year 2019 also marked the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus, and related research was proceeded in Korea as well. In April, the Korean Society of Design Studies published Bauhaus, a book commemorating the 100th anniversary of the German art school, assembling texts by Kim Jongkyun, Shin Heekyoung, and Kim Jooyun and other contributing editors. Among them, a number of pieces that reinterpreted the history of the Bauhaus from a Korean perspective stood out along with Kim Sangkyu’s “The Bauhaus as an Archive: How Has the Bauhaus Been Historicized?” and Kang Hyunjoo’s “The Adoption of the Bauhaus into Korean Colleges as Seen through Si-Wha Chung.”

Despite these efforts, the centennial anniversary of the Bauhaus passed by as an event irrelevant to the Korean art scene due to the lack of supportive collections, archives, and exhibitions rooted in long-term research. In particular, the problem with Korean national and public art museums is that the research of design history and the archives of design are detached the research of art history and the collection of art works. Understanding of the relationship between the two areas and long-term development plans have yet to be established, and the task remains an almost entirely blank slate.

Finally, I would like to point out the blind spots of artistic criticism and
research. There is plainly no support fund or organization currently dedicated to the study of deceased artists, which results in the inability to arrange exhibitions and projects founded on the studies of posthumous works. From masters that have reached centennial anniversaries to underrated artists from the postwar period, studies on deceased artists need to be allocated appropriate forms of support for vitalization of criticism and research, which will largely contribute to the normalization of the art market in return and in the long run.
Artist Analysis

Listen to Citizens, Listen to Stories, Listen to the City
Park Juwon  _  030

Narrative and Image: The Living and the Dead
Lee Nara  _  046

Voice of the “MTV Generation”: Early Video Work of Sejin Kim
Mun Hye Jin  _  060

Exploring the Emergence of Dansaekhwa: The Works of Park Seobo
Kim Han deul  _  074

Hwang Yong Yop and the Variations on Human Anguish
An Jeeyoung  _  088
Listen to Citizens, Listen to Stories, Listen to the City

Park Juwon

At sunset, the sky begins to reveal all that has been hidden by the blinding light of day: dust escaping from a forgotten crack, gaps in the wallpaper, the bleak corners and hidden colors of buildings. All these and more appear when the sun melts into the horizon. Like the setting sun, Listen to the City sees into the hidden spaces and hears the real stories of those who have been overlooked in the light of day. Although these stories are all around us, they have been rendered invisible by the glaring light. Listening to these stories, Listen to the City seeks ways to return "the public to the people." To do so, they must "produce a language" to represent this goal and create "the space of the issue."¹

The City That Lost Its Memory

Korea is known as the country of rapid change, and no part of the country changes more rapidly than Seoul. The city is changing every second, but one thing that never changes is the loss incurred by such change. According to the inviolable laws of change driven by capitalist desires, whatever had previously existed must disappear. As the cityscape is continuously torn down and replaced by increasingly sterilized versions of itself, we are urged to look only forward, never back. As such, there is no attempt to remember what once was, no narration to remind us of what once occupied the space. Who can turn back the flow of time that had accumulated in the space? As seen in the neighborhoods of Hongdae, Cheonggyecheon, and Dongdaemun, such changes are characteristic of urban space. But in Seoul, the changes have become so rampant that it is now difficult to define the essence of the city.

While the Seoul cityscape has always been subject to change, the topography of the city was particularly transformed over a ten-year period by the sweeping policies implemented by two former mayors, Lee Myung-bak (2002-2006) and Oh Se-hoon (2006-2011)². Two of the most significant projects overseen by these two mayors were the uncovering of Cheonggye-

¹ See the website of Listen to the City: http://www.listentothecity.org/About
cheon stream and the construction of Dongdaemun Design Plaza (DDP) under the “Design Seoul” campaign. Like a massive pair of scissors, these development projects chopped away the history and ambience from the heart of the city. While the projects have yielded some positive surface results, the deeper wounds suffered by the people who had been living and working in these areas have not yet been diagnosed, let alone healed.

Observing the sad results of this “progress,” Listen to the City responded with their book The Hidden History and Star Architect of Dongdaemun Design Park. They wrote, “At the time, Mayor Oh Se-hoon was the embodiment of power, so no one criticized the DDP project. In fact, our book was the only one that took a critical perspective. It felt like South Korea was living under a dictatorship. But we believed that the city is not composed solely of those with money, but also those who are not invited to participate in governance. That’s why we launched the anti-gentrification movement.”

In accordance with the group’s name, Listen to the City actively listens to the stories of the city by achieving solidarity and communicating with people who lack a social voice. For Cheonggyecheon, Dongdaemun Gentrification (2017), they interviewed many people who once owned shops and businesses around Cheonggyecheon and Dongdaemun Stadium, who describe how they were forcibly relocated from the area starting around 2007. In the interviews, the small business owners explain that, just as they were finally getting settled and starting to enjoy better business, they were forced to move from Cheonggyecheon to Seoul Folk Flea Market in Sungin-dong. Naturally, thanks to the aggressive campaign for urban design led by Mayor Oh Se-hoon, these stories were conveniently excised from the public narrative of the Dongdaemun Design Plaza. In order to recover and record these stories, Listen to the City carried out the Memory Map workshop.

Park Eunseon: At the time, I thought it was wrong to try to squeeze this huge project of Cheonggyecheon into such a short schedule of seven months. I also thought it was wrong that no consideration was given to the people who
worked in the area. And despite the scale, no one seemed to be taking any steps
to document this massive civil engineering project. So I took it upon myself to
start documenting it. Keeping in mind the issues of perspective when docu-
menting the history of a city, I focused on the street vendors, asking why they
came to Seoul, how they began their business, and what happened at the time.

Since their establishment in 2009, Listen to the City has shown persistent
interest in issues of gentrification and development, seeking especially to help
people who have been backed into a corner by the state and city. The group
believes that the city does not belong to any individual (or small group), but
rather that it is public property that must be publically managed. Park and her
colleagues have also stressed the need to stop thinking of land purely as real
estate, and to instead consider its non-monetary value.

From the outset, Listen to the City demonstrated their commitment to
helping society through action. When the popular restaurant Gungjung Jokbal,
an institution of the Seochon neighborhood, was threatened by gentrification,
the group did not merely voice their disapproval: they went to the restaurant to
prevent the demolition. They were also deeply involved with efforts to resist the
demolition of homes and other buildings in Okbarajī Alley near Seodaemun
Station, a low-income area with a significant political history. The neighbor-
hood originated from makeshift houses where the families of Korean independ-
ence activists once stayed while caring for their relatives, who were imprisoned
in Seodaemun Prison under Japanese colonial rule ("okbarajī" means "to take
care of a prisoner"). Since the early 2000s, major construction companies have
been vying to "redevelop" the area, and plans are now underway to build a huge
apartment complex there. In addition to leading conferences and organizing
tours of the area, Listen to the City meticulously archived the campaign to de-
molish Okbarajī Alley—including documenting the forced eviction of residents
on May, 17, 2016—through their video Okbarajī Alley (2016).

30 Do Hwaji, Fragments of Memory (Gongju: Keungeul Sarang, 2016, 228.)
Jang Hyeonuk: I was informed about Okbaraji Alley by one of my friends, who is an activist fighting to preserve the neighborhood. I was instantly drawn to the inherent charm of the area, and I felt that such a space should not be replaced by an apartment complex. So I also became active in the movement.

Park Eunseon: Starting in late 2015, the construction companies moved in quickly and began the redevelopment of Okbaraji Alley. By January 2016, a considerable part of the neighborhood had already been demolished. I proposed to the Seoul Metropolitan Government that Okbaraji Alley be nominated as a City Restoration Project, because of its rich history of stories. Although they seemed to support the proposal, the city demanded concrete evidence for preserving Okbaraji Alley. By going without sleep for a few days and nights, we were able to quickly collect and submit historical evidence about Okbaraji Alley, including newspapers from the 1920s through 1940s. But we were then told that it was too late. Even though city development is a public project, the city did not take social responsibility. Through this process, I came to realize how male-centric history has been, and how important it is to record the history of ordinary citizens, not just famous people.

Instead of simply delivering their messages on a canvas, Listen to the City expresses them through workshops, archives, videos, and other time-consuming formats. Working closely with residents to create archives, improve communication, and organize seminars, they directly confront social problems at sites that many people have become “desensitized to because they do not go there.”

Rejecting superficial and deceptive art, Listen to the City stimulates discourse by meeting people and having conversations in workshops and seminars. Reiterating this approach, Jang Hyeonuk claimed that the group’s work consists primarily of striking up a conversation. By leading tours, Listen to the City bring
us into the actual space. By organizing workshops, they help us meet people and discuss problems that we were not yet aware of. By joining resistance movements, they form genuine solidarity with those affected by urban development. In these and many other ways, Listen to the City records the stories that people cannot quite put into words.

What Is Happening in Korea

Listen to the City also ventures beyond the boundaries of Seoul to investigate issues in other parts of Korea. It has been said that Koreans today have no values, aside from real estate. Failing to grasp the meaning of happiness, many Koreans chase a comfortable life by spending money and wasting resources. In the name of development, the state sprints towards its short-sighted goals, letting the siren song of big capital drown out the cries of the people. Korean society has been so devastated by the blind greed of money-grabbing corporations and politicians that our entire national identity is now at risk. As we all know, many things can be lost in an instant, but it takes much longer to recover them. Those who have lost their jobs, their homes, and their agency are forced to shout louder, fight harder, and persist time and time again, in order to get through to those who refuse to listen.

In their work *High Altitude Sit-in Demonstration in South Korea* (2015), Listen to the City documented demonstrations that were held at high-altitude sites throughout the country, from 1990 to 2015. As explained on the group’s website, the people who were forced to hold these demonstrations had been directly affected by various forms of corporate oppression and abusive labor practices, such as temporary contracts, indirect employment, illegal layoffs, and even false closures. The work resonates with the stories of those who climbed to the highest points in the country to shout at a society that refused to hear them.

Park Eunseon: Everyone feels life is difficult in Korea, so most people aren’t interested in labor issues, and have little sympathy for protesters. As an
I’ve come to realize that Koreans prefer to keep art separate from life. But I also understand that nothing will change without people who fight and resist. This is not only true of neighborhood demolitions or labor issues. But Korean people have never been trained to listen to the voices of the powerless. They’ve never done it before, because they couldn’t afford to. I felt like, if someone speaks out of desperation, then I should listen. Then I thought that a whole group was needed to listen.

The work includes a schematic map of Korea that is densely filled with various high-altitude demonstrations of the past. But only some of the recorded demonstrations are indicated on the map, reminding us that Korea is a place that often ignores the stories of the Other. By refusing to listen to counter opinions and excluding the voices of others, a handful of people have transformed the country of Korea to suit their own selfish desires. *High Altitude Sit-in Demonstration in South Korea* visualizes the voices of ordinary citizens—their "shouts in the silence"—which have been muted in the name of the nation-state.

Another work by Listen to the City that fills a similar role is *Illustrated Guide to the Ecology of Naeseong River*, which confronts the Four Major Rivers Project, a massive undertaking to restore several large rivers, which caused significant damage to the landscape of many affected areas. Carried out from 2009 to 2012, the Four Major Rivers Project was the primary engineering project of the administration of Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), who became president after his term as the mayor of Seoul.

Park Eunseon: In 2009, while I was conducting a field survey, I met Monk Jiyul, who was very familiar with the Naeseong River before the Four Major Rivers Project took place. By that time, the river had already been completely devastated, and they had started working on the riverbed. The government repeatedly said that the project was 90% complete, so any attempt to stop it would just incur more losses for the country. But the Four Major Rivers Project was such a huge project that no one, including those in the government, could possibly understand its effects. Witnessing this situation, I kept researching what was wrong with the Four Major Rivers Project.

To create their book *Illustrated Guide to the Ecology of Naeseong River* (2014), members of Listen to the City regularly went to monitor the conditions of the Naeseong River, documenting the destruction of local ecosystems. In addition to recording the changes to the river, the book was also intended to give the group enough standing to file an environmental lawsuit, a right that ordinary Korean citizens do not have. In the preface, the group wrote, "Until the river was completely ruined, our society did not pay much attention: the essence of the problem is the death of our society, if we fail to respond to the death of our environment." This preface is an indictment of everyone who glimpsed news reports about the Four Major Rivers Project, but then never gave it a second thought. Along with their book, Listen to the City also led workshops about the project and produced the videos *Naeseong River* (2012) and *Sand Water Filter at Naeseong River* (2015). Then for the exhibition *Objectology II: City of Makers* (2015, MMCA), they exhibited miniature paintings of species that were in danger of extinction, along with water filters made with sand from the Naeseong River.

Listen to the City also joined in the movement to support the people of Gangjeong, Jeju Island, whose lives have been turned upside down by the local construction of a U.S. naval base. Despite massive protests, the construction of the naval base was recently completed, but the people of Gangjeong remain determined not to allow their home be defined as a military site. Refusing to submit to the government’s demands, they have declared Gangjeong to be a town of life, peace, and culture.9 Joining the fight, Listen to the City published *Hello, Gangjeong*, which documents the history and current status of the town and its citizens. Despite their surface differences, all of the sites that Listen to the City has supported (i.e., Okbaraji Alley, Naeseong River, and Gangjeong) have at least

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9 *Gangjeong Peace Trip, Hello, Gangjeong* (Seoul: Listen to the City, 2017), 8.
one thing in common: people forced by the government to relocate. Hence, the
group recently produced its video *Placelessness*, which documents stories from
all three sites. Jang Hyeonuk said that he wanted to talk about people who had
been displaced by the state—especially those who refused to leave—and the
places that they lost.

More recently, Listen to the City rallied against the 2018 Winter Olympics
through its “Anti-PyeongChang Olympics Alliance.” Although most Koreans
consider the PyeongChang Olympics to have been a success, the short-term
achievements are already giving way to long-term problems. First and foremost,
the environment of Mt. Gariwang, home to many unique animals and plants,
suffered irreparable damage due to the construction of facilities and the use of
artificial snow. Moreover, most of the profits from the games went not to local
citizens, but to wealthy financiers who had snatched up real estate in the area
when prices began to increase before the games. As Jang Hyeonuk explained,
"The activists...and I shared a critical opinion of the Olympics, in terms of both
the beginning of the event and the aftermath. We examined many issues related
to the selection of the host city, constructing stadiums, and deciding who will
oversee maintenance after the event." While conceding the need for "healthy
patriotism," Park Eunseon argued "The Olympics are just an event organized by
the state to stir up feelings of nationalism." The group’s words and works force
us to ponder the real meaning of the Olympics.

Listen to the City does not try to resolve problems by removing or destroy-
ing the institutions in power. Instead, they adhere to flexible ways of helping
people understand and contemplate the true nature of social problems. Rather
than quietly accepting the unsustainable and indiscriminate development of the
state or city, Listen to the City seeks sustainable resolutions for problems that
have already happened, with an eye towards preventing problems of the future.

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6) Anti-PyeongChang Olympics Alliance, "We Don’t Need Olympics Calamity," (Seoul: Listen to the City, 2017).

Language for the Margins of Society

In *No One Left Behind* (2018), Listen to the City detailed the plight of
disabled residents in Pohang after an earthquake hit their city in 2017. Since
earthquakes are so rare in Korea, the country was not adequately prepared to
deal with such a disaster. In particular, the city of Pohang failed to provide
competent assistance to its 26,000 disabled residents, who represent about 5%
of the city’s population. In the video, various disabled residents share their
testimonials of problems that occurred in the aftermath of the earthquake. For
example, Heunghae Stadium, the designated shelter for residents, did not have
any facilities or equipment for the disabled, and the television channel DBN
(Deaf Broadcasting Network) was slow to inform viewers about the situation
because of its limited budget.

If the city of Pohang has a disaster manual, who is it written for? In the
wake of a national disaster, the speed of life-saving information should not
be dependent upon a budget, or even worse, the conditions of the receivers.
Observing these circumstances, Listen to the City interviewed many disabled
people to learn about their problems and emotions related to the earthquake,
and also organized workshops for disaster preparedness.

Park Eunseon: The effects of a disaster are not equal. Older people and
those with less mobility are more prone to danger. Social minorities are espe-
cially vulnerable to disaster. We must think seriously about how to be better
prepared for this. Some people have said, "If we can’t even effectively evacuate
fully abled people, how can we possibly assist the disabled?" They’re basically
saying that the disabled are destined to die in a disaster. Is it really okay to say
that? This is a simple, but very important issue.

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A woman in the video says, "We are just the same as everybody else. We might be a little slower to move or think, or we might not be as good at making quick judgments. But should that be a reason to discriminate against us?" The interviewees also emphasize the importance of being with other people in the aftermath of a disaster, to avoid feeling alone. Of course, this is true not only after a natural catastrophe, but also in everyday life, as we all try to navigate our own psychological issues. In the video, Park Eunseon says, "Just as feminism took a long time to establish its own language, we need to build the language of minorities at the periphery of society." Through works such as *No One Left Behind*, Listen to the City is working to create and visualize such language.

In her book *Time of Failed Country*, the cultural anthropologist Jo Han Hyejeong wrote, "New possibilities emerge not from the center, but from the edges of society... Those who recognize extreme situations causing disagreement initiate a revitalization movement in order to save themselves, which then triggers a massive transition." Exemplifying this process, Listen to the City confronts problems that are taking place at the periphery of society by speaking out in diverse ways to change our ways of thinking and improve the overall status of our city and nation. Listen to the City believes that we must change our attitude and awareness in order to ensure that those with disadvantages receive every advantage. Like a hammer, the works and voices of Listen to the City constantly pound against the rigid walls of our society, forming cracks and opening possibilities for a new way of life.

Listen to the City has been able to achieve this by living up to their name: they perpetually listen to the city and the people who live there. Like the sunset, they reveal the sights, sounds, and voices that have been hidden within the blinding light of day.

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Those leading communal lives constantly try to establish a relationship with the dead. For the living, the dead are either subjects for exclusion or summon. The living attempt to imagine the course of death—the journey through which the once living depart and reach the land of the dead—adopting fictional instruments to configure a relationship with the dead hence disrelated. Ancient Greek epic poems are one form of those fictional devices deployed by the living. In countless stories delineating their battles and glories, heroes appear as those who have surpassed life: they’re painted, not as superhuman beings originally excused of birth or death, but as mortals who go on to transcend life. In this narrative lies the irony that, for these mortals to become life-transcending heroes, they must befriend death, wrestling beasts and fighting battles on earth. Roland Schaer points out that in *The Iliad*, the death of the heroes, namely Sarpedon, Patroclus, and Hector, and the disposal issues of their corpses serve a particularly important role in establishing the idea of “immortality.” Leaving their families, land, and livestock behind, the heroes of *The Iliad* arrive at the battlefield—the walls of Troy—where they must fight like wild beasts. Wars birth heroes, and heroes seek revenge. Revenge, of course, procreates more revenge, among ways of which violation of the corpse is key in these epic poems. Only after the families have retrieved the heroes’ corpses, held a funeral, and burned them down to a handful of ashes could the bodies escape the laws of nature—flesh of the dead recycled by the living—and acquire the right to be remembered. The valiant Hector is slain by Achilles, and his corpse is tied to a chariot to be dragged around. Despite his wife’s dissuasion, Hector’s father runs to Achilles, kisses the hand of the man who killed his son, and begs for the body. Achilles accepts the aged father’s entreaty and spares his son’s body from the humiliation, becoming the first epic hero to deviate from the vicious circle of war, revenge, and disgrace.

In a similar way, images also create a pedigree of the living and the dead. Georges Didi-Huberman discusses the meaning of “imago,” the origin of the word “image,” found in the literary work by Roman naturalist Gaius Plinius Secundus. An imago is a funeral mask modeled after the face of the deceased, and
therefore, the “resemblance” found in an imago is a resemblance to someone who is both related and lost, a resemblance achieved via direct contact with the deceased body. The Romans were known to be obsessed with genealogy, hence obtaining the imago of the dead as a funeral ritual and keeping it in their homes afterwards was a way of securing the family’s heirloom status. Reflecting on the imago, one of the first uses of image, Didi-Huberman leads our eyes to a history beyond the history of image as an artistic category of visual reenactment as has been perceived by art historians. Instead of determining success or failure of an image and its purpose in the context of visual similarity or dissimilarity, Didi-Huberman proposes that images should be understood as measures of private ritual bridging the living, the dead, and the dying, and in the context of their anthropological resemblance. (Georges Didi-Huberman, Devant le Temps)

**Song Sanghee: The body and skin of history**

Two of Song Sanghee’s works were exhibited face-to-face inside a large gallery space at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea. *This is the Way the World Ends Not with a Bang but a Whimper* (2017), installed across from *Come Back Alive Baby* (2017), was a work of Delft-blue tiles paired with recorded sound playing from speakers. Song explains that she drew out images of mushroom clouds—explosions that had destroyed cities and left countless casualties—and turned them into Delft tiles. Seeing as that her tiles look like computer graphic pixels, Song decided to arrange the tiles in random order, allowing for an illusion of blue monochrome as an effect, which hinders immediate recognition of the reproduced subject. For the audience to piece together the image, they must step up, listen, and examine. Looking at the blue tiles, I recalled, oddly enough, the ballpoint pen series by Jan Fabre. Surely, it was just a spontaneous association triggered by the blue color, nevertheless, I decided to take some time to think about the two artists in one context. The blue was specifically the hue and shade of Dutch Delft tiles, but it was also the color of Virgin Mary’s cloak, often painted in particularly exquisite detail in Flemish Renais-


2. Installed view of This is the Way the World Ends Not with a Bang but a Whimper by Song Sanghee, Image courtesy of Kim Heunggyu, 2017, 8 channel audio installation, textile, variable dimension, Image courtesy of Kim Heunggyu
sance paintings. Fabre, who had produced sleek yet obscene works using bodily fluids at a time when the horror of AIDS epidemic had consumed the planet, employed monotonous strokes and the specific blue in his ballpoint pen series, tactfully referencing and ridiculing the Flemish art tradition—this explains why terms like "bodiless," "atypical," "lower materialism" coined by Julia Kristeva and Georges Bataille have been used in commentaries on his works. By introducing bodily fluids none other than semen and blood, Fabre made a garish carnival out of death—death, if one had to choose between life and death, that is. The art world had already defined Song's works as "the return of the bodiless" earlier on, but the "body" in her works, or the lack thereof, manifests itself in a different way. The body, in this case, is a mark of sort: the body only begins to exist when the dust on the floor starts to adhere to the industrial tape tightly wrapped around it (Song Sanghee, Cleaning, 2002). While Fabre mocks the history of traditional art sacralizing death, Song mourns the death of the "bodiless" who have failed to become a part of that history.

Song Sanghee's three-channel video Come Back Alive Baby begins with a story of someone dead, or rather, murdered, though it could just as well be a story of someone who's survived, or rather, been resurged. Song weaves in the "Agijangsu" fable—about a baby who's murdered by his own parents immediately after birth then brought back to life, only to be murdered again by the government troops—in between the history of war, state violence, and catastrophes. She creates variations in time and space, entwining an archetypical story with a true story of a certain time and place (history-story), and intermixing self-produced visuals (drawings and videos) with found visual sources that testify to events such as the Mincheonghangnyeon,1 the Inhyeokdang,2 and the Dongbaengnim3 incidents, and the fascist eugenics experiment. The parents kill their child and claim that the child didn't resemble them: the state kills its people and claims that the people didn't resemble the state.

Song, who had initially planned a science fiction type of work on disasters, discarded the idea upon her first visit to a massacre site. Instead, she traveled to photograph the current sites of the Nazi concentration camps, the Lebensborn human experiment lab, the Ukrainian famine-genocide Holodomor, the bankrupt city of Yubari, and Chernobyl, often finding herself staring into the remaining ruins and particularly, walls. Come Back Alive Baby begins with an image of a tiled wall covered with myriad unmistakable thin lines almost like knife marks. With scenes from the "baby farm" and the old bed remaining in the deserted space as hints, the viewers begin to deduce the meaning of the tiled wall shown in the opening and closing scenes: they must have been the tiles inside the Lebensborn project lab: the marks must have been left by the victims of the Nazi brutality. The evidence of confinement and desperate writhing testify to the violence forced upon the victims’ bodies. And in this respect, the "victims of history" are remembered in the opposite way of how the heroes in epic poems are remembered. If the heroes in epic poems are celebrated and immortalized only after their bodies have been honored by physical battles and cremation, it is only when the physical body or the marks left thereby prove their past existence that these victims of history cease to be objectified. It is only due to the lingering materiality of the evidence that the victims are warranted, by the living, historical and existential dignity. And I must repeat: what we need to recognize from works like Cleaning, Blue Hope (2004), and The Story of Byeonggangsoe(2015–2016) is how Song seeks to re-experience and reinterpret history through bodily evidences and paradox.

In a written piece about Come Back Alive Baby, Song states that, to her, the wall against which the concentration camp victims were executed, the tiles in the human experiment lab, and the burial site of the victims of the Bodo League

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1) Mincheonghangnyeon Incident: In April 1974, more than 180 students and social figures related to the Mincheonghangnyeon (National League of Democratic Youths and Students) were wrongfully arrested and prosecuted for attempting to overthrow the nation under Communist control.
2) Inhyeokdang/People’s Revolutionary Party Incident: In 1964 and 1974, innocent individuals were wrongfully accused of socialist inclinations according to the Anti-Communism Law and National Security Law, respectively, and prosecuted for what turned out to be government-fabricated incidents.
3) Dongbaengnim/East Berlin Spy Incident: In 1967, the Korean government forcefully abducted and repatriated more than 194 artists, intellectuals and students residing in Europe, wrongfully accusing them of spying for North Korea.
massacre felt, in a way, like "the skin of history." And seeing the scratched-up tiles inside the screen conjures up memories of a wall tagged with a faint doodle left by an anonymous someone. Out of the whole body, Song chooses to work with the image of "skin," a disputable organ. In her work, anonymous skin, covered with severe burn marks, overlays tightly onto the image of the tiles, onto the image of the beach dotted with artificial eggs, then to the camera, the screen, and finally, the beholder’s eyes, closing in with fervent intent. After the fable is told and another disaster scene is summoned, the heavily burnt skin reappears along with the images of the tiles and wall, only this time, a hand enters the screen to gently pat the tiles and brush the skin. Maybe it’s the textual context lining out the baby’s cry and the intimidating woman’s plea of her case: maybe it’s the image of the woman with burn marks from hydrochloric acid sprayed by a man: or maybe it’s the skin from the opening scenes of Hiroshima Mon Amour (Alain Resnais, 1959), an image now emblematic of post-World War II trauma: but I can’t help but imagine the burnt skin in Come Back Alive Baby as that of a woman. Female skin has historically been a subject of regulation and restriction. While skinless men have been portrayed as heroes who have overcome limitations, skinless women have been labeled as damaged or contaminated. Instead of overturning the predominant representations of victims and women, Song overturns the overriding twentieth century representation of skin as a separating barrier. In Come Back Alive Baby, skin is a symbol of contact and infiltration, not separation, and thus the skin is prepositional to the wall. The wall serves as the body, and the skin serves as both history and image. The tiles and skin are surfaces, scarred and marred. But owing to the wounds, the surface becomes a stratum, layered with deposits of time—the surface and stratum become indistinguishable by the countless gestures the body poses as it loses its physicality, or by the marks left by the struggle. This is why images of death are often surfaces with depth.

Georges Didi-Huberman once used the bark of a tree as a metaphor for historical image. Because a tree expresses and presents itself to us through its

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4) The Bodo League massacre: In 1950, during the Korean War, an estimated 110,000 civilians suspected to be Communists were mass-murdered by South Korean soldiers, and the massacre was concealed by the government until the late 1990s.
The bark, the bark is less an external layer of the tree but more of something the tree manifests itself through. Didi-Huberman asserts that the irregular, discontinuous, uneven bark "is no less true than the trunk," that "it lies somewhere in the interface between a transient appearance and a lasting inscription. Or else it designates precisely the inscribed appearance, the lasting transience of our own life decisions, of our experience undergone or undertaken." The trunk of the tree is upheld by the bark, which is not to say that the bark is always absolute and intact. The bark may be clinging to the tree at one point, but it may also unravel and fall into our hands at another. In other words, the bark is something that undergoes constant death yet still remains. The bark is inherently an object, therefore could never be pure. Through this metaphor, Didi-Huberman addresses the impurity, contingency, truthfulness, affluence, and relativity indwelling images of history. In this sense, it would be safe to imagine what Song described as "the skin of history" as the bark.

Film Clips and Found Footage

We remember the early-twentieth-century outpour of war documentaries and news footage that ensued the world wars. As strategic propaganda became essential, one by one, national military forces began to establish new units dedicated to video documentation. Lighter-weight video cameras began turning up. Day after day, the public stared blankly into the images on the news. A full-scale war and the post-war paradigm encouraged the desire to video-tape and archive every minute event. Video, or "film," was considered as the solution to total and complete documentation of history. Film critic André Bazin praised the truthfulness of the all-recording camera but also feared "total war," that is, imaginations of "total history" that seemed to be emerging with the film era. In "On Why We Fight: History, Documentation, and the Newsreel," an essay about Why We Fight(1946), a found-footage documentary film produced by writer and filmmaker Frank Capra, Bazin expresses foremost his bafflement towards the conspiracy between the war and film. Bear in mind that this was 1946, a time when everyone was haplessly exposed to shocking, graphic images they had never before seen or imagined—mounds of cadavers pouring out from the concentration camps, for example—in respect to which some have written that "perspective" in this particular period had to be "pure," inevitably due to its lack of distance from the atrocious images of history. At such a time when people were collectively traumatized by the horrific images of the war and redefining the idea of human malice and justice, Bazin sought to address the indecency and violence of film, notwithstanding its audacious exposure of injustice. Looking at the flood of video recordings, documentary films, and live broadcasts post-World War II, standing before the piercing eye of the omnipresent camera, Bazin feels the kind of exhilaration a Roman emperor would have felt looking down at the burning city of Rome. From Bazin's perspective, a world sieged by cameras continuously sheds image, its outermost skin, hence calls into question the contingency and truthfulness of "the bark" (image) upholding the trunk (world), as discussed earlier.

The English and French words "film" and "pellicule" originate from the Latin word "pellis," meaning "a thin piece of skin," and the Late Latin word "pellicula," which means "removed skin, peel, or foreskin." Today, the French word "pellicule" is used to signify both skin and film, and the English word "film" also refers to the thin tape used in motion pictures as well as other thin-layered objects. In 1946, Bazin was already aware of the linguistic proximity between skin and film, writing, "As soon as it forms, History's skin (la peau de l'Histoire) peels off again (pellicule)." Bazin perhaps envisioned something like the slough of an insect, skin removed from the body. He would have wanted to see historical events, fast-engraved onto film even before they're endowed with meaning (depth), as "the skin" of history. Though rather pessimistic, Bazin sensed early on, the ambivalence of the external surface: how it's simultaneously superficial and revelational, visual and sensual like the skin or the bark. After watching Nicole Bedress' found-footage documentary Paris 1900(1947), Bazin wrote in a critique titled after Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time that documentaries incorporating found footage can be remarkable tools for portraying death.
therefore life, loss, and contingency, as he foresaw the advent of an era in which worldly meaning can only be found within the superficiality of the film.

In 2017, individuals with smartphones and camera drones at their disposal upload realtime reports more prompt and provocative than films or TV broadcasts. In 2017, the physical world is instantly processed into data to become information, and events are documented and saved in an external repository, without having to be processed by the confined human memory. In 2017, Song Sanghee writes: “I see these days, in the papers and online, reports of attacks and bombings, photographs of missile drops from all around the globe. War has now become an everyday image. The catastrophic realities exist as images surrounding us, and we live surrounded, emotionless and hollow.” Song continues to collect the pieces, the skin of history, but also feels exhausted by the removed peels that have failed to gain meaning. And as viewers, we need to pay closer attention to this aspect of dilemma in her works.

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**Removed pieces, placed pieces**

If the ’50s gave rise to dramatic, documentary, and experimental films with recycled footage of educational videos or news broadcasts, the ’80s introduced VHS, thanks to which found footage was widely used in films. Today’s digital archive era provides extended access to and manipulation of recorded content. As much as archiving is a remembering and preserving process, it is also a process of subsumption and exclusion. Archiving is a means of domination, but can also be an act of resistance towards the mainstream archive. Archiving is also a desire for placement as much as it is an attempt for displacement. By rearranging archived images, Song tries to resist the carpet-bomb of images that disable us. She almost seems to believe that we can overcome the inability only when the “sentiments” of history infiltrate into our senses and minds. *Come Back Alive Baby* is an effort to rearrange the skin, the film, the archive of history, in order to give life to the sentiments.

Regardless of nitrocellulose or cellulose acetate, film, being a delicate and sensitive imaging, recording, and projection medium, has become almost obsolete in filming environments of the digital age. But found footage—a section extracted from reports, personal videos, documentary videos, or even dramatic films used in its original or modified form—particularly calls to mind the etymology of the word “film” and its context as “a piece of removed skin.” Film as a fragment of skin instead of a whole—as Jean-Luc Nancy had appropriately pointed out, the “removed” skin no longer holds value as a “cover.” The removed pieces of film do not, or at least not immediately, constitute “total history.” Consumed with the idea of “history’s skin,” Song “removes” the photographs and video clips archiving the history of violence and “places” them next to the images of lands and walls tainted by history. This found footage is pieces of evidence that point to the people excluded or erased from “total history,” people raped of their human existence and dignity. The first part of *Come Back Alive Baby* shows photos of victims’ trial records, drowned in what looks like a developing solution. As the light refracts and the liquid moves, the photos begin to resemble scarred or wrinkled skin. If not, it almost feels like the timid movements around the photos are gently shaking the benumbed scars of the past awake. The requiem of the candlelight flickering over the picture of the Holodomor has the same effect. For Song, a requiem is, most importantly, an act of breathing life into the defeated, the immobile, the frozen moment in time, allowing them the energy to squirm again. In other words, “the skin of history” is like a scarred surface that has long lost its grain (context). A scar is a mark left by loss, but more importantly, a mark left on the still-living. Thus the scar imbues the skin with historicity. Song discovers and extracts marks remaining from incidents, and leaves her own mark on the photographs. Then through the powers vested in media such as water, fire, and moving camera, she agitates the marks as if to stir up forgotten sorrows.

But then again, when these images—residences remaining in a disaster-stricken city, Holodomor victims on the ground, drawings of two insects facing one another—are placed in a line next to one another, I can’t help but wonder: is *Come Back Alive Baby* an endless act of reverting individual events
and subjects back to one particular “form”? The piece stumbles noticeably when Song, who has, up until then, picked up the fallen pieces and faced the loss, attempts to revive the souls. Images, sound, and words compete with one another just to become another ornament. The captions that read “Baby, I can’t speak” or “I no longer have a tongue” over the muted scenes of the “baby farm” cry out too loud. The clips and voice of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, falls right within the time frame of the “Agijangsu” fable, within the narrative: “We must kill this baby in order to realize our ideals.” Moreover, the camera reposes the wrongful deaths and moves onto the grave of Yun Isang, the venerated composer (his music is used in the opening scene of the piece), as if to come to a conclusion that the spirits of the dead were guided off into the arms of a “good father.” The caption, “The revived baby flew up into the air like a white hawk,” appears last before we’re faced with a hand appeasing the tiles, the wall, and the burnt skin. Does this signify reconciliation of the gap between the seen and the unseen, between the tale and the evidence? Without this gap, how can we protest to history?

I wrote above that Song Sanghee seeks to access the sentiments of history. The history Song is concerned with is that of the lost. She makes us look around for such fragments of skin—scarred with a history of loss—the surface, the fragment, the depth. In discussing the sentiments conjured by historic images, Georges Didi Huberman once noted that we can never “entirely possess an image” but can only “follow its movement as far as possible.” Videos documenting Chernobyl are results of the calamity itself in historical context: we must never forget this. But fragmented records create breaches in between recorded history to write it anew: we must never stop this. This is how we follow the movements of “the surviving images.” Song cordially identifies fragmented images both created as a result of and neglected by history, yet her requiescent archiving process proceeds dubiously back and forth mending the gaps between the fragments and placing a cover over all.

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Around the turn of the twenty-first century (give or take five years), virtually every Korean art journal released its own “special edition” focusing on multimedia and video art. *Monthly Art Magazine* was no exception; in its July 1998 issue, three major experts penned articles on “Reading Images in the Video Era,” while the October and November 1998 issues provided “Focus on Exhibitions,” including in-depth reviews of *Seoul in Media—Food, Clothing, Shelter* (1998) and other major video experiments of the time. The spotlight on video art became even brighter in 2000, as *Monthly Art Magazine* published two scholarly essays on single-channel video (March), a set of reviews of major exhibitions of media art (June), and a special issue examining the sensibilities of the “MTV era” (September). Art scene was no exception to this inclination. For example, in the September 2000 issue in *Monthly Art Magazine*, Shim Sang-yong noted that five of the seven exhibitions being reviewed in the July 2000 issue in another art magazine, consisted of video projections, video images, and video installations.

Any investigation into the origins of this phenomenon should probably begin with the overall florescence of video culture in the 1990s, culminating with the advent of cable broadcasting in 1995. February of that year saw the arrival of M.net, Korea’s first television channel specializing in music, followed in quick succession by Dong-A TV, KMTV, Tooniverse, and YTN. By 1996, with the launch of 24-hour channels from M.net, DCN, Catch-One, Maeil Business TV, and others, the cable era was in full swing. Among the new channels, Mnet had a particularly profound effect on the image sensibilities of Korea’s youth. Offering programs from MTV from its first day on the air, M.net went on to form a strategic partnership with MTV Asia in 1998, before launching Korea’s first

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2. Shim Sang-yong, p. 70.
24-hour internet broadcasting service in 1999. In the art world, the emerging video culture was represented by a new generation of video artists, led by Sejin Kim, who began producing image-centric works infused with the spirit of pop culture. Invoking terms such as “sensual,” “playful,” “superficial,” and “spontaneous,” the resulting works varied considerably from the existing video art of Korea.

The new video culture quickly gained prominence within the art world through several major video exhibitions in prominent locations, such as International Video Art: Beyond the Smiles of 1,000 Years, held in 1998 at the Gyeongju World Culture Expo; Seoul in Media: Food, Clothing, Shelter, held in 1998 at the Seoul 600th Year Memorial Hall (curated by Young Chul Lee); and Media City Seoul 2000, held in 2000 at various sites around the city, including Gyeongghuigung Park, thirteen subway stations, and forty-two electronic displays (general director Song Mi-sook). Specifically, in Seoul in Media, art director Young Chul Lee invited graphic designers, architects, filmmakers, and photographers besides artists and produced bold spatial presentations in an unconventional exhibition setting, ultimately seeking to enact “non-linear visual communication” between work and work, work and space, art and non-art. Capturing the spirit of a metropolis on the eve of a new millennium, this event had both a direct and indirect impact on future video artists, activities, and exhibitions. The new ubiquity of images and media in everyday life was also visualized by Media City Seoul 2000, which escaped the confines of art museums to take over subway stations and electronic displays in downtown Seoul.

Contributing significantly to the video and media art boom, two institutions specializing in video and new media opened their doors in 2000: first, Ilju Art House announced itself as Korea’s first exhibition space dedicated exclusively to media art, followed by the reopening of Art Center Nabi inside the corporate headquarters of SK. Equipped with a gallery, media archive, digital editing room, and conference spaces, Ilju Art House played a leading role in the discovery and promotion of video artists, documentarians, and experimental filmmakers before shutting down in 2005.

As opposed to the early Korean video artists, who were primarily interested in video sculpture or exploration of device itself, the new generation pursued image-centric aesthetics that were unique to video art. The resulting works introduced many of the tropes, themes, and techniques that are now familiar aspects of video art (e.g., non-linear narratives, fragmentary editing, temporal shifts, discordance between sound/image and image/text). Such distinctive approaches proved ideal for creating multi-layered narratives that tapped into concepts such as the hybridity of bodies, the intersection of time and space, and the splitting of the subject and the gaze. Representative artists from this period include Taeueun Kim, Park Hyesung, Sejin Kim, Hwa Young Park, Ryu Biho, Rho Jaeoon, Hong Sungmin, Kim Du-jin, Jum, Han Keryoon, Seo Hyunsuk, Chang Jia, Yang Ah Ham, and Ham Kyung-Ah. Either through immersion in Korea’s new video culture or their overseas studies of video art, these artists were the first generation who could draw upon an internalized sense of media images in creating their works and theories. In addition to their own artistic activities, many of them also taught or trained the next generation of video artists, thus laying the foundation for the contemporary video art scene.

1. Within the context of Korean video art history, the most significance development of the late 1990s to mid-2000s was the emergence of single-channel video. For many art historians, the trajectory of Korean video art begins with the work of Kim Ku-lim and Park Hyunki in the 1970s, rises steadily through the works of Lee Won-gon, Oh Gyeong-hwa, Kim Jae-kwon, Cho Tai-byung, and Yook Keunbyung in the late 1980s, and gets into its stride in the early to mid-1990s, with the works of Youngjin Kim, Kim Chang-kyun, Kim

4 Established by the city of Seoul in 1996, the Seoul in Media event was held three times through 1999 before being renamed Media City Seoul an event that continues to this day.
5 Seo Hyun-suk and Hong Sung-min taught at Yonsei University and Kaywon University of Art and Design respectively, while various other artists trained apprentices in other ways. For example, promising young contemporary video artists Jung-soo An, Ji Hye Yoon, and Ham Hye Kyung studied under Yang Ah Ham at Seoul National University and Kaywon University of Art and Design.
But even as recently as the late 1990s, single-channel videos had not yet taken hold as a medium, a relative anachronism that can be explained by various idiosyncrasies of the Korean environment. Up until the mid-90s, Korean video art was dominated by video sculpture and video installations, focusing primarily on metaphysical and existential themes. For example, KIM Youngjin rose to prominence with installations such as Dangerous Experiment (1991), in which self-portraits of the artist were projected onto items such as an ancient Roman helmet, a Buddha statue from India, and a clay head from the mausoleum of Emperor Qin Shi Huang. In Age of Reason (1992), Kim used images of Mao Zedong, Vladimir Lenin, and a monkey (associated with Charles Darwin) as historical evidence. Such works functioned by producing temporal and spatial intersections through encounters between video images and historical relics.

In these works, video acts as still image than moving image. While Kim occasionally produced movement through the devices, he rarely used editing to generate movement within the images themselves. In Beautiful Incident (1991), for example, Kim manipulated the focus on a slide projector to repeatedly blur and sharpen a self-portrait projected onto a skull, yielding a respiratory effect. Later, in Liquid (2002), Kim presented a real-time projection of droplets from a pump device falling onto an acrylic sheet.

Similarly, the multimedia video installations of YOOK Tae-jin give equal weight to the “video” and “installation” components by prominently featuring antique furniture and objects. In Dancing Chair (1994), for instance, images of a man walking up stairs are shown on a motor-driven model of stairs, such that the actions of the image and the object coincide. Also, in Yook’s Tunnel (1998), the projected image of a person inside a large tunnel repeatedly grows and vanishes in conjunction with the sounds of a train.

While this emphasis on objects can be partially attributed to the difficulties of editing long videos before the advent of digital technology, it also

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reflects the Korean art world in the late 1980s in conceptual and formative aspects, when object and installation art began coming into its own. In defiance of “Dansaekhwa” (Korean monochrome), small groups such as TARA, Nanjido, Meta-vox, and Logos and Pathos led the push away from two-dimensional art with their calls for “after modernism.” While most of the aforementioned media artists of the mid-’90s were not yet established in the late 80s, they were certainly influenced by the contemporaneous visual language of the time, which was characterized by the predominance of installations. Indeed, many of the prevalent themes of 1990s video art—history and the individual, genesis and extinction, self and other, cycles and regeneration—echo the emotional landscape of installation works of the 1980s, the titles of which frequently included words such as “mythology,” “absence,” “transcendence,” and “void.”

Unlike in the West, where artists had been producing single-channel videos since the 1970s, Koreans did not fully embrace the medium of single-channel video until the late 1990s. While the shift to single-channel videos—as opposed to “video sculptures” or “video installations”—was partially stimulated by outside sources, it was more the result of the increasing acceptance of video culture within the overall community of Korea. As Cho Seon-ryeong has noted, single-channel videos were not truly accepted in Korea until the late 90s, by which time popular video culture (especially television) had become inscribed within the society. Thus, in contrast to Western video art, which surfaces largely in resistance to the perceived inundation of commercial television, Korean single-channel videos were cultivated within the context of commercial advertising and pop culture. As such, the single-channel video works that originated independently within Korea (i.e., not including those produced by artists educated in the West) were directly influenced by advertising and cinema. Reflecting this situation, a June 1997 *Monthly Art Magazine* article about the “Emerging Artists of the 1990s” featured cartoonists (Mo Hae-gyu and Shin Il-seop), animation directors (Lee Seong-gang and Jeon Seung-il), and a direc—

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8 For the latter, see Min, p. 64.
9 Cho Seon-ryeong, p. 130.
tor of television commercials (Park Myeong-cheon), along with the requisite painters and other practitioners of the fine arts. In September 2000, *Monthly Art Magazine* invited critics from various fields—including photography (Lee Sang-hak), fashion (Kim Seong-bok), cartoons (Lee Myeong-seok), film (Kim Bong-seok), and popular music (Kang Heon)—to analyze the current trends and tastes in visual culture.

2. One of the foremost representatives of the new video scene was Sejin Kim, who rose to prominence with videos showcasing a commercial and popular—rather than an artistic—sensibility. Eschewing the conventional path of a formal education, Kim was largely self-taught as a video artist. Although she attended Hongik University, she majored in Oriental painting, which failed to satisfy her creative impulses. Bored with her studies, Kim began searching for a form of visual expression that could keep pace with her rapidly changing society. After dabbling in architecture, photography, and computer generated graphics, she happened across a friend’s 8mm video camcorder. Immediately intrigued by the new media technology, Kim submitted a video work with no relation to oriental painting as her graduation project.

Kim’s first video work is *The Girl* (1994), which uses fragmentary, unconnected black-and-white images to produce a variety of visual effects. Incorporating almost every conceivable digital video effect, including morphing, zooms, fades, dissolves, screen inversion, and composite images, *The Girl* eventually stands out because of Kim’s meticulous use of Photoshop program to generate each individual frame. Clearly, she was not interested in narrative or concepts, but rather in the power of the visual image. As the artist herself has acknowledged, the uncanny aura and strong contrast of the black-and-white images show the influence of Maya Deren’s *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). But whereas Deren conjured a spiraling psychological structure by repeating the opening sequence, *The Girl* highlighted the texture and surface of the individual images, rather than the overall structure.

Recognizing Kim’s outstanding eye for images, 3D graphic designer Park Young-min hired her to work at Bisontek, one of the leading commercial post-production companies of the time. Driven by the explosive boom of special effect in commercial advertising and films, Korean computer graphic industries had grown dramatically in the 1990s. Despite its relatively brief existence (1990-1997), Bisontek has attained legendary status as an innovator in the early days of Korean computer graphics industry. In two of their most iconic commercials, Bisontek used advanced morphing effects to transform an old car into a brand-new Hyundai Sonata and gold lettering into a washing machine. In her new working atmosphere, Kim had access not only to the highly technologic computer and most cutting-edge video equipment, but also film magazines and VHS copies of award-winning films from around the world. In other words, she was the proverbial kid in a candy store. From 1994 to the early 2000s, Kim worked as a visual effects designer and freelancer for Bisontek and other post-productions, such as V-post and Image House. Through her various assignments, she directly experienced the thrill of digital image processing while learning the subtle variations between different types of digital media equipment.

As presaged by *The Girl*, Kim’s earliest video works are replete with image effects and quick cuts, giving them a rough, jaunty quality. At her first solo exhibition, she presented *Too Close* (1997) and *Too Far* (1997), a linked pair of works that generate audiovisual rhythms through multiple channels. For instance, an image of an arm reaching to grasp a feather shakes with an intermittent rhythm, as if the figure is reaching either “too close” or “too far.” Further visualizing the


12 http://www.thestream.kr/?p=3284

13 Interview with Sejin Kim, Aug. 16, 2018.

14 http://blog.naver.com/qkreotj00/120156100549

15 Interview with Sejin Kim, Ibid.
titles, computer generated graphic images are used to either segment or extend the images. Completing a pleasant unity of sound, image, and device, *Too Close* is a two-channel video, while *Too Far* has four channels, indicating correspondence between content and form. Taking full advantage of the advanced digital image-processing equipment at her disposal, Kim used a Betacam (which can record in either forward or rewind) to produce *reverse* (1998) for her second exhibition. Seen and heard in reverse, ordinary activities—such as eating, speaking, tearing, drying hair, lighting a match, and drawing—become incredibly alien. Also in the video, Kim made mirror images borrowing from cartoons, edited out a child’s flowered shoes, removed colors, and accentuated a character’s outline to produce an animation-style effect. In these early works, rather than using images to convey some concept or story, Kim indulged her interest in the raw images themselves. The resulting works were saturated with sensual images that are typically seen only in advertising or animation: physical, non-narrative, and intuitive. Within the Korean art world, these images were thought to embody the new sensibility of the contemporary era, thus laying the groundwork for Sejin Kim to create her own synesthetic narratives from image and sound, rather than plot and drama.

3. Writing about new trends among young artists in the late 1990s, Baek Ji-sook noted the importance of versatile cultural venues that were post-genre, post-system, and post-art. Clubs in the Seoul neighborhoods of Hongdae and Dongsung-dong (e.g., Sal, Domabaem, Hwanggeum Tugu, Underground, and Sangsudo) served as interdisciplinary cultural spaces, offering performances, exhibitions, poetry recitals, and concerts, along with food, drinks, and dancing. These clubs were the heart of a distinct avant-garde atmosphere, where one could hear music from the Uhuhboo Project Band, watch a poetic (and pornographic) performance by cartoonist Shin Il-seop and the Heobeokji Band, and receive a free CD-rom catalogue from artist Park Hwal-min. Led by initiative cultural figures called new generation young artist such as CHOI Jung-hwa, Kim Hyung-tae, and Nak Beom Kho in early 1990s, this scene lasted through the 1990s, encouraging artist collaborations that transcended genre.

In Korea, the 1990s were a time of creation and expansion, as artists and other professionals began migrating among genres and producing new conventions through collaborative collisions. This liberated environment was certainly conducive to the development of a multimedia sensibility, as demonstrated by Sejin Kim. In her own fields of TV commercials and computer graphics, projects were carried out jointly by teams of experts in 3D image graphics, video editing, visual special effects, and sound, who once would have been limited to their own specific task. As a graduate of Hongik University (at the heart of Seoul’s art and indie music scene), Kim was also well acquainted with the contemporary music scene, such that the merger of music and film came naturally to her. In 1999, she collaborated with musician Sung Ki-wan on *In Dreams* (1999), a huge project led by artist Ium, wherein seventy participants from different cultural fields worked together (in thirteen teams) to bring art closer to the public. Representing the paranoid dreams of a man who has fallen asleep on a bus, *In Dreams* retains many of the characteristics of Kim’s early work, focusing on images rather than narrative. Rapid intercutting, augmented with the back-and-forth sound of a ping-pong ball, evinces a hybrid state, blurring the line between the real and the imaginary. Moreover, Kim liberally deployed her arsenal of dazzling visual effects—blurring, morphing, pinhole camera, quick pans, and flashy camerawork—to give the work the feel of a music video.

Thriving within this interdisciplinary atmosphere, Kim enrolled in a film studies of master program at a university in 2001. In the early 2000s, she produced two short films in collaboration with the musician Jang Young-gyu: *10 to 10* (2001) and *Kid* (2003–2005). With these early films, in addition to basic techniques of cinema production, Kim was learning new ways to transform text into images and to sustain longer rhythms with images. However, she also soon realized that the film world, with its significance reliance on funding, would not

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18 Interview with Sejin Kim, *Ibid*.
allow for the creative or collaborative freedom that she had become accustomed to. After *About YS*, Chae (2005–2006), which consisted of different remembrances of a figure who had been edited out of the film, Kim returned to the art world, but her film experience left an indelible mark on her works from the early 2000s.

For example, in *Take A Picture* (2002), which gained wide attention after winning the UNESCO Prize for the Promotion of the Arts at the 2002 Gwangju Biennale, Kim showed the endless repetition that is involved with filming and capturing images. While we typically remember history as a series of discrete events, like still photographs, reality is actually a dynamic continuum composed of countless forgotten moments. While based on actual methods of film production, the repeated sequence also represents the artist’s personal take on history.

Subsequent works such as *Night Watch* (2006), *Trans-Luminescence* (2011), *Sleeping Sun* (2012), and *Day for Night* (2014) also feature filming and storytelling techniques derived from cinema, thus manifesting the image sensibility that Kim developed while working in advertising and film in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While such elements are now viewed as distinctive characteristics of Sejin Kim’s own artistic world, they are also the echo of an era and the reflection of its visual culture.

Exploring the Emergence of Dansaekhwa: The Works of Park Seobo

Kim Han deul

Introduction

In brief, Dansaekhwa is a genre in Korean abstract art. Previously it had been given various names, such as Korean monochrome painting and monochrome painting to name a few. Dansaekhwa as the official name came to fore when the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA) adopted it in the exhibit “Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting” in 2012. As mentioned here, it is worth pointing out that the English title contextualized the Dansaekhwa as the “Korean Monochrome Painting”.

Dansaekhwa gained wider usage on the following year, ushered in by the publication of “Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method” by the art historian Joan Kee. While this publication explored the Korean contemporary art overall, a large portion was dedicated to Dansaekhwa and by far drew more attention. A few acclaimed international galleries began to hold Dansaekhwa exhibitions, raising Dansaekhwa into various spotlights. Further, it was followed by the acquisition of works by museums’ collection, which I won’t go into details.

Such developments brought a new vigor into the domestic art world as well. Korean galleries retrieved hitherto forgotten Dansaekhwa works from their storages for new exhibitions. The general conviction that resilient art movements need theoretical frameworks was followed and shared, which prompted series of public conferences on Dansaekhwa as well as new publications. Yet, even before these underpinnings could be situated, new developments around Dansaekhwa began to forge, including the formation of so called, ‘a second-generation Dansaekhwa’. Perhaps owing to these developments, the criticisms and evaluating of Dansaekhwa vary to this day.

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1) One must exercise caution not to equate a survey of Korean contemporary abstract art to that of dansaekhwa. A number of foreign articles develop arguments based on such erroneous surveys. The dansaekhwa movement took place alongside the work of other abstract artists who did not participate in this movement.

2) The art critic Yoon Jinsup participated in the exhibition as a visiting curator. Yoon coined the term dansaekhwa in the exhibition catalog for The Facet of Korean and Japanese Contemporary Art, held at the 3rd Gwangju Biennale in 2000. He played a seminal role in establishing the term and concept of dansaekhwa.
From early on, the art critic Lee Yil and Oh Kwangsu viewed Dansaekhwa as an art movement that acquired the inherent characters of Korean culture. Other art critics such as Seo Seongrok and Kim Bokyoung further considered the "revealing potential" of the movement in merging Western culture with the Korean tradition. On the other hand, Art critic Sung Wankyung renounced the significance of Dansaekhwa, claiming as a movement which overly relies on methodology and formalism. Another art critic Kim Yunsoo also criticized its limitations on the neglect of reality of the everyday, and for its lack of historical consciousness. While the debates have continued since, it seems yet to have overcome such binary arguments.

This essay moves away from these binary criticisms, it rather reflects on the standpoint essential in understanding the Dansaekhwa as a whole movement. In another words, by retracing the point of departure of Dansaekhwa and its contribution as an artistic movement of the time, the essay aims to provide a fundamental ground for formulating such a standpoint. And in doing so, I aim to move away from the focus of the Dansaekhwa movement, which is currently fixated on the "rise of a White monochrome group", and shift towards considering it as the abstract art movement which bears tradition and spirituality of the Korean culture. Finally, to contextualize I will closely follow the artistic developments of Park Seobo’s work, whose works are considered to be foregrounding the current Dansaekhwa movement.

Exploring the Emergence of Dansaekhwa

During the 1950s, the art world around East Asia adopted abstract art vis-à-vis international art movement of the West. Hence, abstract expressionism in New York and European informal movements found its way into East Asia, more specifically to China, Japan, and Korea. In the case of the People’s Republic of China, strong censorship in the arts began taking hold in 1949. Abstract art was condoned only when invested with propagandistic ideals. Under the ruling régime of Mao Zedong, abstract art was stigmatized as “degenerate art,” hence all production was banned.

On the other hand, in the case of Japan, this was a period not a long after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima had taken place. In the earlier period of Imperial Japan, artists would travel to Paris to study art. However, in this period of post-war Japan, a strong resistance towards Western culture pervaded society as a whole, resulting in a nostalgic movement that favored returning to the past monarchist regime of the emperor, and induced renewed interest for Japanese traditional art. Accordingly, the abstract art movement in Japan took place after a considerable amount of time passed.

On the contrary, South Korea had more accepting ground towards abstract art than others. Entering in the post war– heavy reconstruction period on a national scale, South Korea allowed increased accessibility of Western culture. Oh Kwangsu writes, “numerous exhibitions were held to mark artist’s departure to France or their homecoming, revealing frequent overseas activities of the artist of the time.”

Exhibitions such as “the Dobul journey to France of Park Youngseok(1955), “the Dobul of Kim Jongha(1956), "the Guinea Homecoming of Kim Whanki(1959)”, and the Domi journey to the US Exhibition of Kim Foon(1959) all gained a wide public audience. The year 1957 was a notable year, for in a single year the formation of the “Creative Art Association”, the “Modern Art Society”, the “Neo-Plasticism Group”, and the “Contemporary Artists Association” took place. The Contemporary Artists Association, held significant activities that included artists Park Seobo, Chung Sanghwa, Kim Tschangyeul, and Ha Indoo. These artists have since reflected on this movement as the “collectivization of Informel aesthetic.” Against this backdrop, Dansaekhwa begun to form amid its progress and lapse that ensued nearly a decade.

It is fair to say that the full scope of influx of Dansaekhwa has yet to be defined. Its first appearance was attributed to the solo exhibitions of Park Seobo and Chung Changsup, which were held in the early 1970s. Further it was

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widely viewed that Dansaekhwa gained momentum when the painters of “white monochrome” emerged as a group.\(^4\) This was when Suh Seung won’s Contemporary (1969) became the cover of A.G. in 1969, which also serve as the first image archived for the official Dansaekhwa timeline.\(^5\) Contemporary shows prominently drawn black geometric shapes on a white background.

In the same year, white monochrome works began appearing at the National Art Exhibition (Gukjeon). Several artworks included the “white” (baek, 白) in their titles. The 18th National Art Exhibition exhibited Kim Hyungdae’s People of White Clothes (1969) and Park Kiloung’s Traces, White F-76 (1969). The work by Park Kiloung gained the presidential award. The following year an exhibition of Kwon Youngwoo’s 70-2 (1970), Chung Changsup’s Round against Circle (1970), and Lee Bann’s Instant Closed Door, White. Lee Bann’s work was selected for a special mention.

In 1972, the Myeongdong Gallery exhibited the works of five artists in the “White Monochrome (Baeksaek)”. This was the inaugural exhibition of the White Monochrome Association (Baeksaek donginhoe) formed within the graduate study of Hongik Department of Painting Department. The association held yearly exhibitions until 1977 and, in some years, held biannual exhibitions. The members included Kim Jooyoung, Lee Wonhwa, Lee Jongnam, Eom Huiok, and Yeo Myeonggu. Aside from Kim Jooyoung, the artists continued to create white monochrome works. Kim was once excluded for having produced artwork in black.

These aspects of the movement raise doubts in current context; prompting a concern whether the focus on externalities of artwork is out of balance. Perhaps this explains the lingering criticism of the movement as a poor imitation of Western art. Yet, Dansaekhwa is a genre that imbues spirituality of Korea contained in the monochromatic art. In reading this description, one would weigh a heavier meaning towards “Korean spirituality” than “monochrome ab-

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This focus on externalities comes at the expense of substance in certain instances. The exhibit “Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting” held at the MMCA in 2012 marked as a historic event for dansaekhwa. As mentioned previously, the exhibit initiated in defining the term Dansaekhwa with prominent artists of the movement. Moon Beom, one of the artist in this exhibition, distanced himself from Dansaekhwa at the recent public seminar held in Seoul, Daehakro; he contextualized his work with diverse abstract art movement of Korea.6

Meanwhile, “white” as a color remains a subject of debate. The color holds a special substance in Korean tradition, as “white signifies more to Koreans than a mere ‘hue.’”7 Yet, many critics view this as a result of Japanese art critic Yanagi Muneyoshi’s theory of Joseon art, in which he interpreted white as the aesthetic of Joseon’s history of grief. Objections were raised in Rereading Korean Modern Art(2002), decrying such a view as distorted notions rising from flawed colonial historiography carried out under Japanese occupation.

Kwon Youngjin and Koo Jinkyung have each raised such objections in their PhD dissertations.

In describing monochrome painting, Kwon wrote, “...it responded keenly to geopolitical dynamics of the times, reviving Yanagi’s style of colonial aesthetics catering to Japanese tastes.”8 Koo Jinkyung refuted former claims that the exhibition Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White held at the Tokyo Gallery in 1975 was what prompted the rise of dansaekhwa.9

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If we are to consider the emergence of Dansaekhwa based on its substantive aspect of Korean spirituality, how are we to revise the genre’s historical point of departure? If seen as an attempt to find what is distinctively “Korean”, it must be traced back to the late 1920s when the Nokhywaghoe (Green Country Association) and Dongmihoe gave rise to theories of local art. The local motifs found in works by Lee Jungsup and Park Sookeun share this context.

The post-WWII era brought major changes to art worldwide. As Dansaekhwa was influenced by the Western art of this period in its formation, thus it should be traced back to the ensuing era; at the same time, Dansaekhwa should be seen as an endeavor that attempted to differentiate itself from the influences of Western art by embodying Korean spirituality therein. While this does not require major changes in terms of specific dates and years, it entails a shift in directionality.

As a case in point, one can turn to Park Kiloung’s Traces, White F-76(1969) mentioned above. The work notably features folk objects rather than geometrically abstract forms. In his commentary as a judge, Nam Kwan commended Traces as “a groundbreaking work that challenged the boundary which limits non-figurative art as foreign.” The use of Korean motifs won high praise, rather than the white foreground itself.

The Trajectory of Park Seobo’s Artmaking

Park Seobo is considered to be a representative artist of Dansaekhwa. Since Park presented the Ecriture in 1973, discussions around spiritual aspects of Dansaekhwa began taking place. This warrants the examination of prior works leading up to the emergence of Ecriture, Park’s representative work of Dansaekhwa. The earlier stage of his work Primordialis No. 1-62(1962), for which he retrieved wasted fragments of machine parts and garments, attaching them onto the canvas. Oil paints were painted over then scorched with fire, resulting in what seem like fatal burn wounds. The work was a gesture to portray the sanctity of humanity placed in a nexus of life and death. The foreground is mostly dark with symmetrical forms.

Indeed, Park has never mentioned Korean tradition or spirituality in relation to this work. However, when exhibited at the third Biennale de Paris, the critic Lee Yil wrote an introduction as cited below. Moreover, the work met with favorable reviews in Paris, gracing the cover of the French daily Les arts. The painting happened to be upside down on the cover, but the incident served to reveal a perspective of plasticism that differed from Western perspectives.

“Park Seobo’s preference for producing the ambiance of life in his work which implies spiritual intensity and dimly emerging sense of hope, along with the performer Youn Myeongro’s naturally elegant, undulating lines that resembles the movements found in the Korean traditional dance—are surely uniquely Korean characteristics . . . here Korean artists display a keenly developed sense of plasticism that likely owes to their discipline in the traditions of calligraphy; further the distinctive sense of space found in their work, can be said to have emerged out of their untainted affection and reverence towards nature. Herein lies the inherent characteristics of Korean art differs from that of the West, even as it assimilates Western contemporaneity and its artistic formation.10

Park began to depict Korean motifs with Hereditarius No. 2-68(1968). The work featured Korea’s traditional color spectrum obangsaek as a way of giving modern expression to traditional beauty. The primary colors stand out when compared to the hues of Primordialis, and the color contrast is heightened by the use of patterns. Korea’s traditional color scheme is realized upon a surface simplified by geometrically abstract shapes.

Some critics argue that this artistic tendency rose from the sociopolitical climate of the time, given that Park Chung-hee’s regime stressed the awakening of spiritual culture and tradition.11 The president frequently mentioned such words as “tradition,” “spiritual culture,” and “learning from the past” in his speeches. This was then reflected in the cultural sphere at large, which responded with movements to discover and develop traditional spiritual heritage.

Here, one can refer back to what Lee Yil discerned as "uniquely Korean characteristics" in Primordialis No. 1-62 (1962). An undercurrent of Korean spirit was already found within Park’s artwork or perhaps within Park himself. It can be said this is what flows latently in the subconscious of all Koreans. The only difference lies in the choice to reveal it to the world as opposed to keeping it buried within. In this light, one must reconsider the declarative statement that attributes Park’s work to sociopolitical causes alone.

During the 1970s, Park Seobo began to internalize this Korean spirit rather than expressing it externally. This is when he created Ecriture (1973), considered a key work of dansaekhwa. Park stressed non-action while defining Korean aesthetics as an aesthetic of emptying. No longer striving to paint new works such as the series Primordialis and Hereditarius, he created paintings that started from a place of resignation and renunciation. For Ecriture, a still-wet canvas covered in a base coat of white paint was marked with repeated pencil strokes. Shortly after presenting the work, Park gave a press interview as follows.

“The traditional Korean stance toward nature is neither to surpass it nor lower oneself to it, but rather to meet with nature on an equal footing, finding a point of convergence on a horizontal plane. In other words, one does not exert oneself excessively upon nature. Herein lies ‘the basis of Korean modes of thought’ and the worldview I have reached. . . . Since I do not depict an image, I treat the canvas as a form of nature. . . . Subject-object relations are rendered invalid before the canvas. . . . There is only a state of selflessness and non-action. . . . A realm of Buddhist incantation. . . . I was seeking art that, though international, could only be painted by a Korean artist.”

The Ecriture series is still ongoing; it also underwent several significant changes in the interim. The introduction of Korean mulberry paper (hanji) prompted a change in the 1980s. Pasting hanji on the canvas, Park marked the still-wet paper by rubbing or scratching the surface with various hand movements. Since the 1990s, he has removed such traces of the hand, pressing the paper with a pencil at regular intervals to create furrows instead. These furrows reveal colors while also hinting at their subtle depth.

The Seobo Art Foundation has explained the process as follows. "The work entails a repeatedly sated action—akin to plowing a rice paddy or making furrows in a field—as the artist applies self-mixed, aesthetic paints onto imbricated layers of multi-grained hanji. This is analogous to a farmer’s process of cultivating land. . . . This 'verbalization of the body' serves as a beautiful action resembling meditative motions in their repetitive nature.”

### Conclusion

In May of 2019, the MMCA held an international conference in correlation with the exhibition Park Seo Bo: The Untiring Endeavorer. Presenters who traveled from abroad for the conference included John Clark, professor emeritus at the University of Sydney, and Alexandra Munroe, Samsung senior curator at the Guggenheim Museum. At the event, Munroe spoke of Park Seobo in relation to Cy Twombly.

Munroe stated, "Like Park Seobo’s Ecriture series inspired by his son’s handwriting notebook, Cy Twombly’s blackboard series evoking a schoolroom’s chalk writings also bears characteristics of Dansaekhwa.” She added, "Given that these artists are contemporaries who shared several inward similarities, including their post-war pursuit of permanence, one must contextualize Park Seobo internationally instead of confining him to Korean art."

Having grown up in Asia, Munroe drew on her background to curate Asia-related exhibitions. Her statement does not seem to reflect a merely superficial interpretation. In actual fact, several studies have pointed out common

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changes seen in post-war artists. The disparate opinions regarding these similarities makes us review our stance toward Dansaehwa.

Dansaehwa emerged as an endeavor to modernize traditions. It is an art that liberated traditions trapped in the past. "Traditions are transformed by the light of each era, always revived anew." One must adhere to this context in approaching Dansaehwa. The view of Dansaehwa focused on the past must be brought forward to the present.

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16 Lee Yil, "Introduction to Works Presented at the Fourth Biennale de Paris," in Lee Yil Anthology, 207.
Hwang Yong Yop and the Variations on Human Anguish

An Jaeyoung

In the contemporary age, art is no longer a battleground for idealistic absolutism versus sentimental relativism—it is rather a sphere of skepticism, deconstructing what is old and experimenting with what is new. Nevertheless, painter Hwang Yong Yop stubbornly embodies a typical artist dedicated to creative endeavors, painting humans whose frail lives and characters belie their perseverance in striving to fulfill their human destinies.

Emerging from Hwang Yongyop’s own life and experience, these paintings seeking out human nature seem to give the artist’s life a unified direction while also providing the unwitting artist with an inner peace and stability. The human images and forms depicted by Hwang, approach inner feelings and lived realities by drawing on contemporary art media enabling free investigation and communicative functions that go beyond traditional two-dimensional frameworks, thus verging on an attempt to widen his creative methodology. In this way, the artist stays true to his convictions, using the human motif to stay aflutter, prompt change within his idiosyncratic art world, and trigger chain reactions—like a butterfly effect—of a different note.

Who is the artist Hwang Yong Yop? In 1986, thirty years after Lee Jungsup died a solitary death in 1956, fellow artists Kim Gwanggyun, Park Kosuk, Gussang, and others agreed to create an art award in honor of Lee, gathering twenty-four like-minded fellow and junior artists who each submitted an artwork: Hwang Yongyop received the Lee Jungsup Award in its inaugural year. Hwang’s personal experience of despair and crises as a war-time refugee gave his paintings an undertone of pain. In the past, he used dark, ochre hues, triangular figures, and rough lines to depict visual metaphors of a sorrowful, lonely era with the sole aim of expressing his interest in human beings through human images. In 1989, Hwang won belated acclaim as the winner of the first Lee Jungsup Award by the unanimous vote of judges.

Amid the late 1960s Korean art scene that saw abstract art rise as a domi-
nant trend, Hwang's artwork held a unique place by presenting figurative paint-
ings infused with the tragic experiences of contemporary history; his human
images spoke for his life as well as Korean history. Hwang's artwork transcended
the limited sphere of contemporary art, embodying a living truth of history.
Etched into the artwork are vivid traces of the fateful life lived by a man who
endured painful historical vicissitudes. As if scaling a mountain only to find an-
other ahead, Hwang sounded the depths of his humanity time and time again;
he now stands at age eighty-eight, still investigating humanity while engaging
in new artistic attempts. The paintings he created throughout those years of
tenacious yearning offer a record of his life.

Born in 1931 in Pyongyang, Hwang Yongyop began studying at the
Pyongyang Art College until interrupted by the Korean War; he later studied
Western painting at Hongik University. Distancing himself from the trends and
politics of the Korean art scene, he focused solely on human beings as his motif,
sounding the abyssal depths of humanity while developing his own unique style
of painting, resulting in a lengthy career testifying to his consistency and skill as
an artist.

In light of Hwang's unique path in the human experience as one of the
few surviving artists who studied art in both South and North Korea, gathering
handfuls of his life experiences to create artworks embodying what is human.
Robbed of his human dignity and freedom while swept up in historic tragedies
against his will or choice, deeply scarred in both mind and body, he depicted
memories of human beings that comes across like an urgent inner voice rising
after all passion is spent. Having lived through a war and utmost hardships,
Hwang was unable to create exquisitely elegant paintings. In a way, by depicting
humans in a lifelong struggle in despair and crises, he produced a serial work
on the theme of human beings.

Hwang's recent works speak to viewers with fiery passion as well as the
pure lyricism of human beings rising from the ashes. The artist shakes off his
dark memories, slowly recovering a new sense of affection for human beings.
Viewing his progression of works depicting human beings, one sees that Hwang
no longer lingers on visual representations drawing on experience. The artist
shyly reveals what was burning forth from within: a sense of folly found in the
far reaches of human nature. His recent series *My Story* offers a unique, una-
dorned lyricism combined with the freely relaxed comfort of blue tones. Forsak-
ing the art market and its trends with somewhat flawed human expressiveness
that is nonetheless refreshing, Hwang fills the background of his paintings with
densely painted afterimages of human beings while converting this sense insuf-
ficiency—seeming absence belying presence—into a sense of ease.

Hwang has now converted his pure, human passion into painterly auton-
omy. Turning to lyrical sentiment as a release valve for his existential agony, he
surrenders himself to the changes in universal consciousness flowing out from
within. His human-themed works seemingly address our questions, "What is
the true source of human happiness? How must we live?" The paintings seem
to respond with clues hinting at the distant path he has discovered, a path he
will take in the future. His past artwork had featured human beings as motifs,
evoking tragically dark aspects alongside freedom, filling the canvas with un-
complicated lines, fresh colors, and simple forms, which desperately suppressed
human figures. The artist's human motif can be traced back to his painting *Girl
and Boy*(1960). Whereas in the 1960s, darkened hues conveyed experiences of
pain, Hwang's human-motif paintings shifted toward the use of geometric lines
against gray, brown, and achromatic colors as demonstrated in *Human*(1975), a
work adorned with traditional decorative patterns.

Hwang's paintings from the early 1970s featured blackish blue and red
hues; in the mid-1970s, his color palette shifted to gray and brown tones. His
work *Human*(1982) depicting the Gwangju Uprising(1980)drew on traditional
patterns, folk elements, brighter colors, and an understanding of shamanism,
all of which characterized Hwang’s art in the 1980s. Following the 1980s, he used various color finishes to create traditional, folk images. The artist explored Korean folktales, folk paintings, cave paintings, shamanism, and other Korean traditions to present new forms of his “human story.”

In Hwang’s artwork from 1995, images of human beings featured Korea’s traditional color spectrum obangsaek along with a wider range of patterns. Shamanistic elements reappeared in the 2000s with cave-painting patterns he had seen as a child, leading to the series Story of Life (2016) that reinterpreted the 1970s series Human. The artist persevered in his commitment to human beings as a theme in order to give painterly expression to human beings driven to critical circumstances; since the 1960s onward, human beings appeared in his paintings in distorted, increasingly schematized forms, expressed simply yet differently in each era.

Looking back on Hwang’s journey as an artist, one realizes that the motif of human beings that constantly figured in his work did not necessarily carry grand implications. It started with modest intentions to reflect on authentic scenes of humans courageously carrying on with their lives. Nevertheless, those humans took on existence and meaning extending beyond Hwang’s personal experiences, appearing in variations of human form that gradually became the subject of his art.

In the 1960s, the series titled Woman used red, ochre, and brown hues to depict barely discernible figures and human forms consisting of silhouettes and shrunken heads. In the 1970s, Hwang’s paintings underwent a fundamental, structural change while drawing on lighter shades of blue and green as well. Human figures painted in the mid-1970s were hardly visible amid the lined, grayish hues that filled increasingly abstract planes. Subsequent works grew brighter in tone, and the influence of Korean shamanistic cave paintings became evident in figures that were more defined and separated from the
background. These paintings evoked a sense of liveliness and melodic rhythm. The late 1980s saw more densely arranged compositions. Human faces looked brighter, silhouettes became more detailed, and spatial compositions gathered complexity, movement, and rhythm. Whereas artwork from previous decades often fixated on titles including the word “human,” new works such as *Family, One Day Lovers,* and *Old Story* grew warmer as human affection suffused even their titles. Human figures appeared to meet and interact amid landscapes, nature, trees, mountains, and cityscapes, resulting in brighter, variegated scenes. Designs evoking prehistoric cave paintings also figured in these works.

In recent years, Hwang has eliminated unnecessary and, complex elements, referring to the grayish, geometric forms he painted in the 1970s with a lingering wish to return to this former place. Overall structures, forms, and human figures remain, but all non-essential, ancillary elements have vanished from the surface. Gray and blue colors are also structuralized with white lines. The darkly agitated, emotional upheavals seem to have subsided, as the artist now displays a state of peaceful ease along with leisurely variations in painting.

The latest works by Hwang are filled with gray and blue monotones that resemble his earlier color scheme from the 1970s. However, Korean folk patterns add a lively touch to the human figures. The works exude simple yet strong energy. New variations of humans expressed in lines appear in separate painterly screens, as various compositions and partitioned spaces convey different stories. Artistic expressions of this human motif serve as the underlying psyche and spiritual foundation of Hwang’s work. His human figures and painterly lines are characterized by simplicity rather than sophisticated appeal. Hidden in his paintings, one finds the ease, honesty, calm, and purity associated with classical scholars of yore, traits that suffuse Hwang’s work with happiness and ease, allowing them to become joyful records. Once shrouded and generated in pain, his thoughts and feelings now find expression in humans at peaceful ease on his painterly screen, which is to say, his human figures appear refreshingly unencumbered. The paintings evoke a sense of ease, depicting humans in free celebration of life. Humans are a part of nature, but their essence consists of spirit. Hence, they hold inherent value and meaning. Even without applying new perspectives to refashion inherent human value, one finds many more possibilities in human essence. Human study involves not only the visible human being but also the distinct, internal ego and the pursuit of the ego’s inherent essence. Through the spiritual world of his artistic philosophy, Hwang sought out a new mode of expression for depicting human beings. His human figures reveal inner thoughts somewhat somberly in the manner of German expressionism, but this owes to the two aims underlying Hwang’s work—namely, expressing emotion inspired in real life and elevating ego feelings—which result in unique traits of artistic variation driven by human novelty and audacity.

Hwang’s present encompasses both the past and the future. His present works hint at the former path along with the road he will tread hereafter. The artist continues to draw on new perspectives and sensations to reinterpret the various forms of human images he had created throughout the tumultuous past years. In retrospect, the artist pursued this human motif as a means of journeying down a long, winding path in search of his own self.

In order to understand the painterly formativeness Hwang achieved through a lifetime of work, one must join him on his lengthy journey. The recent work *One Day* allows us to reflect on the artist’s human images as the most active form of self-abandonment he can achieve after overcoming adverse realities. The human figures that once held center stage are now absorbed into paintings as Hwang expresses the esthetic quality of art through colors producing a decorative effect. The human beings once presented plainly and guilelessly now contain elements of record-keeping and scholarly convergence that seem to foreshadow things to come. As the saying goes, the present holds both the past and the future. Hwang’s current works present the human image as an emblem of his past life along with the yet unlived life of his future.
There are certain feelings we share in common upon viewing art. Scholars use humanistic speculation to describe and interpret this phenomenon of shared feelings evoked by art. East Asian literati have long since relied on the brush to think, write, and paint; objects before their eyes and images in their minds comprised dots and lines, expressed with the aid of respiration, accent, breath, and the mind. Hence, apart from overt content or meaning, viewers discern and glean other sights. Hwang’s method of using surfaces, signs, and materials bear certain resemblances to the abstract art of North American, European, and other Korean artists. Yet, in terms of his expression of human form, he achieves a record of compressed human emotion that also constitutes breath.

Finally, the most notable aspect of Hwang’s work lies in his rejection of realism and abstractionism, along with his uniqueness as an artist depicting human beings in the raw, in all their trials and glory. Hence, his paintings take on greater meaning and value. The human pictoriality evinces human technique and quintessential life force. The honest acts of human expression, the delicately sensitive rhythm and flow, the free yet understated human figures hold an invisible, hidden freshness attempting to convey certain messages to the viewer. The unique lines that only Hwang can capture in painting convey human dignity and nobility. Depicted with ferocious spirit radiating forth, the human figures are Hwang’s pride and joy.

I hope to see Hwang carry on his pursuit of humanity through varied methodologies that reveal the value and conflict structures inherent to humans, using his unique style of esthetics to modernize humans while proving to others that the road less traveled offers an answer.

Exhibition Reviews

What Does a Biennale Do?
A Review of the 2019 Cheongju Craft Biennale
Seo Juno _ 100

The Opening Ceremony of the Seoul Olympics and Cosmopolitanism
Eom Jehyeon _ 112
What Does a Biennale Do?  
A Review of the 2019 Cheongju Craft Biennale

Seo Juno

1. Introduction: A Short History of Biennales in Korea

"Biennale" has become a familiar word among Koreans. Today most people know that it refers to an art event held every other year and have some ideas as to what an event bearing this name is like. Much has indeed changed over the past 25 years. Few knew what a biennale was back when Nam June Paik won the Golden Lion Award at the 1992 Venice Biennale. He then brought the 1993 Whitney Biennial, in its entire exhibition, to the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) Gwacheon. This project was made possible by a grant from the Korean government and with Paik footing the rest of the bill from his personal funding, which amounted to US$250,000. Postmodernism was all the rage at that time in South Korea and by exhibiting the cream of the crop of the movement, the exhibit was credited with having elevated Korean art to a global scale. Some 150,000 people saw this exhibition which featured some of the most up-to-date installations including, performances, videos, photos and sound works. The event was an earth-shattering experience and delivered a positive uproar from the Korean art scene. In 1995, a Korean pavilion was set up at the Venice Biennale, which was an unprecedented incident since there had not been a Korean pavilion for several decades. It was also a testament to just how influential Nam June Paik was in these times.

It was also during the same year that the Gwangju Biennale, a mega exhibition of 10 billion won, was held for the first time. Meanwhile, the installation artist Jheon Soocheon won the Special Award at the 1995 Venice Biennale marking another highlight in the golden era of biennales. In 2000, the Pusan International Contemporary Art Festival (PICAF) was renamed the "Busan Biennale," while in Cheongju a year earlier, in 1999, a new biennale, called "Cheongju Craft Biennale," was launched.

When discussing the history of biennales in Korea, it is crucial to consider the sociopolitical context of each period. In 1993, Korea’s first civilian administration led by President Kim Young-sam took office and is widely believed that President Kim’s globalization policy had a profound impact on Korean soci-
Further, this era saw many other pivotal and critical events. Seo Taiji and Boys, the first South Korea’s hip hop group, stormed into the Korean pop music scene, and from 1994 to 1995 was a devastating period with the collapsing of Seongu Bridge and Sampoong Department Store. It was a period where Korea was transitioning into a late industrial society. The Kim Young-sam administration was eager to show the accomplishments of the promotion of cultural development and the globalization of Korean art. There was also a consensus in Korea, fresh on the heels of the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, that the next steps as a country was to enhance its position in the world in order to culturally match the advanced countries. In 1989, artist Yook Keunbyung and Suh Doho participated in the Sao Paulo Art Biennial, which along with the Venice and Whitney biennales, they were considered as one of the three most important biennales in the world, from which Yook was awarded the top prize. Interestingly, the fact that an Asian artist won the top prize at the Sao Paulo Biennial created a greater buzz in Japan, where people were more attuned to contemporary art trends than people in Korea. These milestones, together with economic growth, helped to set the Korean culture on a path of globalization. People returning from their studies abroad in the United States and Europe brought back with them aspects of the host countries’ culture as well. Seoul’s Apgujeong-dong district was invaded by the so-called the ‘Orange Tribe’ who enjoyed hip hop culture and American-style parties.

Also noteworthy is the government’s support for international art events, which began in the mid-1990’s. It was perhaps the best way to insure of the benefits of cultural events with a large impact as they were able to produce a maximum effect while keeping within a moderate budget. Such a cultural policy was a game changer in a country where economic development had been the be-all-and-end-all ever since the end of the Korean War. Together with the policy to support design, start-ups and content industries by the Kim Daejung administration(1998-2003), the Kim Young-sam administration’s cultural policy helped lay the fertile foundation for the development of what is known as K-culture.
This was a period when the birth of Korea’s first biennales was taking place and globalization was a nationally shared societal goal, the legitimacy of which was apparent to many. It was a dynamic period for Korea as a nation for regaining its self-esteem as its standing in the international community was promptly enhanced through art and culture. Nam June Paik’s rise to global recognition also inspired others. His lead was followed by artists like Suh Doho and Lee Bul whose works reached international prominence.

2. What Should a Biennale Do?

A biennale is a large scale art platform which usually takes two years of research and preparation with a primary purpose in displaying the latest issues and discourses in contemporary art through organizations of curators in a unifying context. As it was the case with the birth of Gwangju Biennale, few things must come together, including the historical background of a place and the consensus of its civil society. Oftentimes, hurdles posed by clashing interests need to be overcome as well. From my own point of view as a curator, a biennale is a complex sociocultural event of multilayered significance. Based on this premise, I propose to examine the role and purpose of a biennale by looking at a number of case stories derived from my personal experience.

The 2016 Gwangju Biennale held under the title, “The Eighth Climate (What Does Art Do?)” directed by Maria Lind, was for me both shocking and perplexing. Except for a handful of works by Korean contemporary artists, with the event’s estimated budget at 11 billion won, it featured mostly works by those artists who seemed to be using this platform to increase their international presence before being featured in galleries of major North American and European capitals such as New York City and Paris. In other words, the event seemed less concerned with the contemporary issues and was entirely focused on Western European and North American art trends, rather than being a balanced reflection of the latest global trends. In this sense the exhibition failed to question the hegemony of capitalism over the art world. Worse yet, it showed complacency with such a state of affairs. The media and installations works and sculptures, displayed using the latest equipment which looked glamorous, but was entirely devoid of core messages. It was hard to recognize any connection between the displayed works and the people of Korea let alone Gwangju locals. In comparison, the 8th Gwangju biennale in 2010 directed by Massimiliano Gioni under the title “10,000 Lives” was a notable example of clarity of concept and message, as well as a sufficient curation of artworks and images to communicate with the viewers. Even if the concept of the exhibition was not specifically relevant to the people of Gwangju, it had a distinctive narrative subtext. It was besides praised by some as an inspiring model of a large-scale exhibition which could be modified to suit different regions, while keeping the central narrative unchanged. It was an exhibition that showed the historical dimension of images and how we use them to influence one another, provoking thoughts and questions in the minds of viewers.

The special exhibition I curated for the 2014 Busan Biennale is perhaps also worth a mention. This being a mega exhibition with a budget of hundreds of billions of won, there was a discord and controversy surrounding the selection of the artistic director. Oh Kwang-su, then the chair of the Busan Biennale Organizing Committee, refused to appoint the highest-scoring candidate, Kim Seongyoun, the current Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, when she rejected his proposal to co-direct the event with him. Outraged Busan artists and likeminded artists around the country decided to boycott the biennale. I participated in the open call for curators for the special exhibition for the 2014 biennale, just as I did for the 2012 biennale, and felt it was a suitable project. On the day of my interview, Busan artists held a press conference about their decision to boycott the biennale. After my interview, I spoke with a several of the artists to understand their views on the matter. In the end, it was decided that Olivier Kaeppelin (Director of Fondation Maeght) would serve as the artistic director for the main exhibition, and for the special exhibition, I proposed to finalize the curatorial direction through internal discussions. The concept I chose was ‘A Drifting Life’ driven by the shock I experienced from the Sewol
Ferry disaster on April 16 of the same year. I wanted to reveal our illusory vision of having a free will and how we are drifting beings, pushed around by the invisible force of gravity or buoyancy. The exhibition consisted of four parts organized by curators from Japan, Singapore, China, and Korea. We agreed that we would create a theme chosen by each of us to converge into the larger theme of the ‘Sea.’ Meanwhile, I was expected to compose the exhibition with the works of artists from different countries, a task made difficult because of the boycott movement. I eventually ended up inviting two ethnic Korean artists from China, two Japanese artists of Korean descent and three ethnic Korean artists from the former Soviet Union (Koryo-suram) region. The Korean descendants were forcibly deported in 1937 to Central Asia by Stalin, rice farmers that left colonized Korea for Manchuria and Zainichi Koreans who settled in the Osaka area following the Jeju Uprising in 1948 were all castaways, drifting on the waves of history and stranded in distant places.

Another message I wanted to convey through this exhibition was how the role of artists today is more important than ever, as ones who visualize the material conditions of life and experiences as Koreans. In fact, biennale as a platform requires the ability of artists to concretely materialize the specificities of a local and historical conditions under the encompassing curatorial theme. Throughout history, artists have spoken with prophetic voices and shared visions through their works not yet to be heard nor seen. They didn’t stop at representing the world and the reality, but they went further to breach walls against currents of change and progress. Biennales are indeed events with a potential to conduct such role in a large scale. But the question here is whether biennales are able to define their directions in a way that can meet these requests from the current age, the public society, as well as from the artists communities themselves. This is no simple challenge to say the least and we return to our initial question: what should biennales do to be able to meet such a challenge?
3. Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land

I have been to the Cheongju Craft Biennale several times over the years. I attended the first biennale held at a former cigarette factory, as well as the 2017 and 2019 biennales. This ancient cigarette factory is a historical industrial site where I could still palpably feel the traces of those who worked there long hours in bygone days. BTS, the Korean boy band whose worldwide popularity has earned them comparison to the Beatles, had recently released a music video shot in this factory, at the ground-floor parking lot and on the rooftop. Having been used to store tobacco, the building has a high ceiling and a vast open floor plan, which makes it ideal for remodeling as a cultural space. It reminded me of Dia Beacon, the museum of the Dia Art Foundation located in Beacon, New York, on the banks of the Hudson River.

However, at the 2019 Cheongju Craft Biennale I was disappointed to see how the cigarette factory was remodeled. Its stately atmosphere was gone, so were the traces of hard labor carried out at this site in days gone by. The site where BTS once sang and danced was no more. With the soaring ceiling now lowered to cover the HVAC installations, it was no longer the grand space it used to be. Some of the changes made, perhaps for convenience’ sake, were far from well thought out, such as the traffic line to and from the elevators, which was too narrow to accommodate large crowds.

On the third floor, special exhibitions were held by the national pavilions: the Chinese, Danish, Hungarian Pavilions and etc. I was curious how it had been decided that these national pavilions would be set up there and why only these countries had pavilions. The works of Yue Minjun and other celebrated Chinese artists were on display. They were expensive artworks that mirrored post-Tiananmen China and its artists and intellectuals. Rising above the distinction between art and craft is an attempt I personally approve of, if it was the year’s curatorial concept. Unfortunately, it was difficult to see a unifying concept of curatorial direction. At the Danish Pavilion, for example, I saw exhibits that showcased Danish trends, and in the Asian pavilions, I saw traditional lacquer-ware, wooden crafts and clothes of different Asian countries.

Another regrettable aspect was that apart from a few notable names of Korean artists, any artists capable of offering critical reflection and discussions were hard to find. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, I felt that this could be one of the most outstanding exhibition I had seen: as I wandered through its euphoric web of multiple walking tracks of the exhibits, the experience I felt was almost hallucinatory. The displayed ceramics and oil landscapes paintings, side-by-side, gave an effect of dépaysement, which made me wonder whether this impact was the original intention. The surrealists, for instance, juxtaposed two unrelated objects to denounce the illusoriness of the world. Even if one concedes that this style of exhibition, one that forces the viewer to speculate on the curatorial intent is an acceptable method, such a ‘department store-style display’ only made the exhibits and the exhibition less compelling, as pointed out by many critics. As for two-dimensional and three dimensional works, and craft works and artworks were mixed pell-mell: they seemed to be competing to stand out and clamoring for attention. Although there were descriptions for each section, it was hard to see the point when the works were not classified according to theme or style.

In a large-size biennale such as this one, viewing works without a stylistic or thematic context can be an exercise in frustration. Only a well-designed display gives people the urge to shop. A display that is an indiscriminate hodge-podge of things exhaust the viewers. This takes us to our next question. What should the Cheongju Craft Biennale do?

4. Beyond Alternatives toward Innovation

To begin with the positives, the 2019 Cheongju Craft Biennale offered plenty feast to the eyes on bringing together works from various regions of the world. Then again, one must remember that at MMCA Cheongju, which next door, people can view some of the greatest masterpieces of Korean modern and contemporary art for free. Now how about the Cheongju Museum of Art where
all manners of experimentally-curated exhibitions take place routinely? When there is a growing demand for art and the standard expected by the public is ever higher. Is the Cheongju Craft Biennale, a project costing nearly 6 billion won, successfully meeting this demand and standard? I am certain that this has been the question in many people’s minds. Some like to point out how a large-scale cultural event like this creates jobs and contributes to the local economy. But when the organization and management of the event is outsourced to a handful of contractor firms who take turns to host it, can these indirect benefits be even expected? Over the several decades of the history of biennales, as discussed earlier, Korea’s cultural standing in the world has been elevated to a par with its economic standing. The Gwangju Biennale today counts among the world’s top five acknowledged events, or according to some, among the world’s three most recognized art events. Other biennials such as the Busan Biennale and Seoul Mediacity Biennale have also gained worldwide acknowledgement. As these three events take place around the same time of the year, there are art tour programs that successively visit the three cities. The economic spillover effect of such a development is likely to be immeasurable.

In comparison, the Cheongju Craft Biennale has remained mostly a regional festival, and this, not because of a lack of budgetary means, but perhaps due to the lack of ambition. Although it purports to be a ‘craft’ platform, this biennale exhibits a mixture of craft works and artworks without any contextualizing attempts to bring forth a conceptual relationship between the craft and the visual art. But I am far from doubting that much thought went into deciding the concept of this mega event. Being an art event held in Cheongju, which is the home of Jikji (the world’s oldest book printed with movable metal type in 1377), it must have been designed to have distinctive features that makes it clearly stands out from other events in Korea. I have not given up the hope of one day seeing the future of craft unfolded through the Cheongju Craft Biennale. What I hope to see concretely is a radically new area of design being developed, or tradition being translated into a new visual language. This brings yet another question to mind. What is the future of craft? But this is perhaps too broad of a concept to discuss here even as it has a bearing on the future of the Cheongju Craft Biennale. In my view, craft will follow its own course of evolution. Its future will be naturally shaped by feedback between demand and supply, which sustains its very existence. Confining oneself within a framework called “craft,” in the name of stewardship, is in a sense self-limiting.

It is time to candidly engage with the reality. The Cheongju Craft Biennale has been held eleven times and it is now entering into its second decade. Today, Cheongju can be said to have constructed an exceptional art infrastructure. Both Cheongju and Korea as a whole have changed significantly over the past two decades. It is a time for the Craft Biennale to redefine their goal, identity, and objectives and to review its own methodologies. If necessary, it can even re-name itself and set a new trajectory to become one of the country’s four major biennales alongside the Seoul, Gwangju and Busan biennales. Although it can continue to experiment with methods of organizations, such as appointment of artistic directors, but more importantly, it seems to be in an acute need for a committees of experts to examine and critically evaluate the direction of the exhibitions and its results. Another example to be considered is the option of inviting a foreign expert as the artistic director, as practiced at MMCA. Lastly downsizing the size of the event and redistributing the budget to hold a variety of regularly-scheduled cultural events at the creative center such as the ‘Culture and Art Factory’ in Cheongju.

Seo Juno is an art critic based on Seoul, S. Korea. He worked as an independent curator/art critic since 2006 and he was the one of the final list of the New Art Frontier Art Critic competition of monthly art magazine “Art in Culture” in 2010, then he opened a space as he called curatorial laboratory ‘space O’NewWall’ in Seongbukdong, Seoul on March 2011 and he opened Ejuheon the gallery which is built in 1930’s old Korean Style house in 2015. He is focusing about the relation of the life of people’s life and the city where we live in. So, he write articles and curate exhibitions about social issues like redevelopment related with gentrification, environment, war, role of arts, and so on.
The Opening Ceremony of the Seoul Olympics and Cosmopolitanism

Eom Jehyeon

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Prologue

If exhibitionism is a game of imagining the self-spectatorship via the gaze of others, as Sigmund Freud argued, does not the Olympic Games perform a similar act of seeing? Through the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of this mega event, which stretches across the entire globe and attracts people from around the world as participants in the festival, the host country seeks to satisfy the desire for, “the self as seen through the gaze that sees in the exact way that the self expects to be seen,” through selective display of its culture. The opportunity to clutch the attention of all humanity intensifies the impulse of a host country to magnify certain parts, at the same time attempting to marginalize and conceal other parts, raises suspicions. For example, the 1988 Seoul Olympics measured the “gaze of foreigner” as the basis for justifying evictions before rushing to remodel the city. In this process, unauthorized villages and street vendors were swept away with no recourse.

Of course, the “foreigner’s gaze” is a fiction created in the game of self-spectatorship by a country’s ruling elite. Nevertheless, the power of the gaze controls reality because the foreigner is a physical being that exists in geographical locations outside of South Korea and a symbolic Other who has been objectively structuralized. How does a world that is not offensive to the foreigner’s gaze look like? That world would have to achieve, through mimesis and assimilation, a state identical to that of its foreign counterpart. Of the three practical purposes of mimesis as distinguished by a French sociologist Roger Caillois—camouflage, travesty, and threat—refurbishing and cleaning up the urban landscape while carrying out forced evictions seems closest to camouflage, the act of putting on specific patterns. However, the spatial reorganization

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1 In order to host the Seoul Olympics, the government carried out major projects, including urban redevelopment, housing improvement, integrated Han River development, and urban greening. Kim Hwa-young expressed a terror of the situation and in an article published on June 2, 1983 in the Kyunghyang Shinmun, “there is no knowing when our standard of judgement for every trivial matter shifted to the foreigner. How could we have lost all faculty of independent judgment? ... What is the nationality of the ‘foreigner’ who has the gaze that seems to be constantly monitoring our each and every move? From time to time, I worry in vain whether that foreigner is the ghost of the Korean who has lost all imaginations and judgement.”
of the urban space is not a simple mimicry, but is aimed at mating, thus leading to a discussion of travesty, a visual quality related to temptation. As Jacques Lacan argued, as long as mimesis presupposes the object that it is trying to imitate as the original, it will reveal a certain (nonoriginal) aspect without fail, and the ambiguity of the penumbra must be clarified through theory.

The Seoul Olympics represents psychotic signs of hysteria that sought to attain a specific perspective. In the meantime, the Opening Ceremony was adopted as a psychedelic stage considered to be an opportunity to manipulate "the gaze of the world" of itself. With this frame of mind, this paper will take a deeper look into the desires imbedded in the visual presentation of the performances at the Opening Ceremony of the Seoul Olympics. People commonly comment the Seoul Olympics in 1988 as an historical event in which a so called third-world Asian nation, leaped to attain a first-world perspective. However, no one has persuasively explained how a transition of such magnitude is expressed in regard to visual manifestation. Oftentimes, the Seoul Olympics is understood as a positive event following the democratization of the country at 1987, which enabled the emergence of the middle class, or it is described as a means of subsistence of political authority. Sometimes, the event is discussed in the frame of a classic redemptive fable aimed at bating the "original sin" of the Gwangju massacre, fixated only within the context of the Chun Doo-Hwan administration. Other times it serves as a suture that hastily sealed a pathological condition of the world through the system of Eastern symbolism. Opinions invariably remain as partial statements and forgetting to contrast the event with social correlations that which yields aesthetic forms, they merely explore over the classification of agencies. The Seoul Olympics were manipulated clandestinely to cover up the gaze of the middle class of the West, and thus in my view the Opening Ceremony deserves a closer investigation, for it brimmed with gimmicks that served this purpose.

This paper takes a stance that South Korea's strategy to eliminate its initial troubles, following its efforts to jump into the economic flow of the West and acquire a Western attitude on gazing the world, can inherently be found in the Opening Ceremony of the Seoul Olympics. My intention is neither to reject previous research on this subject, nor to add to an already oversaturated discourses around the balance and the unification, theories of yin-yang, so called "the three disasters", or the postmodernism. On the contrary, this paper argues that staged performances at the Seoul Olympic was an endeavor aimed to bring closure and to heal past traumas through the aesthetic practices from the late colonial history of South Korea.

Opening Ceremony

After having achieved a rapid economic development through export-oriented growth, the Seoul Olympics became a landmark for South Koreans to make their pride known to all nations. Paradoxically, this was a passage that had to be adopted in order to obtain a Western bourgeois perspective as
an Asian nation.\textsuperscript{39} That is, for South Korea to possess a Western perspective, the first issue to be cleared were the traumas produced by the blind imperial expansion in South Korea. This was indeed an internalization of what Lacan called “the law of the father”, the way in which children enter into patriarchal culture, thus undergoes a violent process accompanied with fear of emasculation. Modernism, which in itself is immersed with European universalism, spread also through a parallel process. In fact, within such process all that is considered “East” has been obliterated, and the East is facing the problem of having to ceaselessly define what the orientalism meant in its history. Imitating an entity while ignoring the history of having been exploited by that same entity is impossible. A case in point is the discord between South Korea and Japan, which is triggered from time to time due to unsettled memories of Japanese oppression. By contrast, the fact that South Korea accepted Western perspectives and attitude affirms that reconciliation took place at a certain point, albeit clumsily. As mentioned above, the Opening Ceremony of the Seoul Olympics showcased formalities aimed at the safe arrival of the Western consciousness on a superficial level. Through visual play, these formalities at the Seoul Olympic radiated meaning at multiple registers: attempting to accentuate political purity, while deceiving the local citizens, the display of intense aggression toward the Western influence, and offer to negotiate and to sublimate such a gesture (or justifying pretending to do so).

\textsuperscript{39} The Social Purification Committee, founded on November 1, 1980, and terminated on February 28, 1989, served to remove those who opposed the regime and stabilize the system. Moreover, the Committee implemented and led the social purification campaign with the aim of reforming public consciousness. A social purification campaign regards society as an impure subject and involves government intervention to realign social networks. This is in line with God’s desire to establish an order that is satisfactory in his eyes. An attempt to establish a new social order succeeds by portraying existing lifestyles as barbaric and international order as civilized. At that time, the government demanded internalization of “reasonable and orderly” daily customs of advanced industrial societies and strove to transform the public consciousness into that of a globalized member of society. Deemed barbaric, restaurants serving gaseol (medicinal dog broth cooked with herbs), bosintang (dog meat soup), nyojeongtang (earthworm soup) and snake dishes were banned from the roadside, and homeless people were rounded up to be interned in Brothers Home. (Despite the presence of the homeless being a symptom of capitalism?) South Korea is not the only place where such attempts were made. In preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government cracked down on the so-called “Beijing Bikini,” which refers to the way middle-aged men roll up their shirts to expose their abdomens. The slogan used at the time was “Put on the clothes of civilization.” These attempts to remodel people’s lives and consciousness show the same awareness of the foreign gaze.
Korean Broadcasting System(KBS) announcer Lee Chang-ho began the broadcast of the Opening Ceremony with the following words, "With blessings from the sky, and for the glory of the earth, we have prepared a stage of humanity's greatest harmony and advancement with care. This is a magnificent festival where the heaven, the earth, and man become one. We are gathered here today to become one. At this moment, at least 5 billion people on our one-and-only earth are becoming one. This is the Seoul Olympic Stadium with beautiful curves that resemble those of the white porcelain jar crafted by our ancestors. This very structure is becoming a fence that encompasses a new history and the new power of harmony. Right here, in this place, aiming for the highest number of participants in Olympic history, the highest harmony, the highest performance, the greatest frugality, maximum security, and optimal service, the 24th Olympic Games in Seoul are commencing. This is none other than our land, our city, a young public square that binds the world into one. At this very moment, all people of the world, the entire world, is headed to Seoul. Not only sports, but also culture, art, academics, and everything is converging in our country of South Korea, our city, Seoul." As if in response, it is not hard to find studies analyzing the performances of the Seoul Olympics discussing Eastern symbolism to emphasize the aspects of harmony and concordance in the Opening Ceremony. Kang Shin-pyo, professor of Inje university wrote, "Two complementary and opposing elements form mutual harmony in hierarchical order. Two poles, represented by yin and yang, interact and create harmony. This duality manifests in many forms, including man and the universe, heaven and earth, being and non-existence, man and woman, self and others, pattern and energy, reason and emotion, knowledge and action, one and many, and good and evil." Kang argued that this worldview of duality of ideologies forms the basis within the Korean cultural codes for "yes" to become "no." Moreover, Kang discovered complementary pairs within the ideology of the Seoul Olympics, "harmony and advancement." Using yin-yang logic, Kang substituted har-
mony with a spatial/synchronic horizon, and advancement with a temporal/diachronic horizon, and concluded that the event’s ideology seeks to achieve balance and synthesis with the world. A culture critic Park Jung-jin wrote, “It applied fundamental ideas of deconstructivism and postcentralism based on the formal principle of ‘unity within diversity’ in traditional aesthetics. In other words, by focusing on emotional oppression and irrationalities carried out thus far in the name of reason and rationality, it sought to embrace differences and do away with dichotomous thinking. Rather than through a complete denial, it sought to dissolve dichotomous thinking by achieving balance among dichotomies of multiple dimensions.”

The above excerpts from the writings of Kang Shin-pyo and Park Jung-jin were respectively persuasive. However, Park Hae-nam argued, “Knowing that one is being seen, and looking back at those who are looking, postcolonial subjects attain the potential to direct one’s selective presentation.” Facing a situation that offers this potential to self-direct, South Korea began to search for its foundation in its history and traditions, at the same time planning a strategy of modern adaptation and presentation. When symbolism takes place at the stage of rediscovering and structuring tradition, a unified grammar is created to give meaning to tradition by the preemptive involvement of the knowledge of the time. This is then trimmed within contemporary knowledge. Therefore, reinterpretation of semantic functions at the opening and closing ceremonies from the perspective of yin-yang, heaven-earthman, and postmodernism is not a far stretch. Actually, it might be the correct thing to do. Professor Lee Kihaa, who served as the director of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies for the Seoul Olympics Organizing Committee, said the following in an interview with the Hankook Ilbo: “Moving beyond the man-made walls of nations, ideologies, peoples, men and women, the poor and the rich, this and that religion, nature and man, and man and machine, a unified festival will be held at the Opening Ceremony of the Seoul Olympics.” In this way, the intentions in the planning for the Olympics and academic interpretations published afterwards came together to endlessly glorify the Olympic as one achievement. However, these interpretations inevitably stop at partial agreements and whenever they are compared with social facts, they rupture, proving their contrived nature. For example, after watching the acclaimed documentary Sanggye-dong Olympics, no one would possibly flaunt rhetoric such as unity, advancement, yin and yang, complementarity, and interdependence, etc. In this way, the propagandistic slogans of the Seoul Olympics were mere signs of the anachronistic perception of a generation that once believed all these ideals to be feasible.

The Opening Ceremony of the Olympics was headed by the “Han River Boat Parade”. This was the first time in Olympic history that an Opening Ceremony began outside of the main stadium. Announcer Lee Chang-ho exclaimed that the Han River, the first stage of the Opening Ceremony, became a “river of harmony” through which the world’s five oceans flowed into the city of the Olympics, that the massive fleet of 457 boats were symbolic of the world becoming one and entering the main stadium. Park Jung-jin wrote, “Unlike previous Opening Ceremonies, which were held enclosed at the main stadium, this event was planned with the idea of breaking away from the fixed notion of separating the inside from the outside and creating a fluidly linked space.” Park added, “The large display panel in the Seoul Olympic Stadium and the multi-display panel set up over the Han River enabled people inside and outside the stadium to see the inside and outside at the same time, nullifying the binary view between the interior(sacred) and the exterior(secular) of the stadium.” Park continued in his flowery style, making correlations, “For the first time at the Olympics, a scene was created where the sacred and the secular became one.” This postmodern view that considers the Han River Boat Parade dismantled

7) Park Jung-jin, ibid., p. 94.
spatial boundaries and combined with a parachute stunt – connecting the sky and the ground – seemed persuasive. However, considering the fact that the ruling elites divided the city strictly into visible and invisible zones to “refurbish” the city in order to appease the foreign gaze that they imagined, this interpretation, which lacked the basis in politics and culture, or an articulation between these two realities, seemed broken to the core.

With this in mind, one could raise a question of, how was it that no one saw the spectacle of ships in procession on the Han River to be more than a point-blank representation of “gathering of the world citizens” in the Seoul Olympic Stadium, but rather, it was correlated to the modern and contemporary history of Korea? Historically, the “ships” functioned as representing ambitions of conquest during the period of imperialism. The term *iyangseon* (“different-shaped boat”) appeared in the late Joseon Dynasty and was used for unidentified ships that arrived from various origins. From the USS General Sherman incident in 1866 to the Ganghwa Island incident of 1875 caused by the Japanese warship *Unyo*, the French invasion of 1866 (*Byeongin Yangyo*), the American invasion of 1871 (*Sinmi Yangyo*), and Ernst Jakob Oppert’s attempt to rob the tomb of Prince Namyeon, the grandfather of Joseon’s then-king, the ships historically represented destruction and devastation of the oppressed nation and its repeated turmoil. Thus the very image itself represented violence and conquest of unquestionable invasion that turned the lives of Koreans upside down. Upon seeing the seditious weapon that once dominated an era appeared on the Olympic stage, I could not hide my bewilderment because the citizen spectators on Ttukseom Island outside the main stadium were eagerly

Moreover, the prices of Olympic Village Apartments grew explosively after the Olympics, plainly contrasting the haves and have-nots. The following are the policies for lot sales disclosed in the *White Paper on the 24th Olympic Games in Seoul*:

“The lots in Olympic Village Apartments were sold under the condition that they would be used as lodging for athletes and press corps during the 24th Olympic Games before the general buyers moved in. General sales of lots were made in advance in an Olympic donation bidding system under the condition of moving in after the Games, and special sales were made to owners of buildings or land within the project area who have reached compensation agreements.” Sales permits based on financial status show a tragic contrast with the lives of people who were driven away because they had nothing. More tragically, in order to construct the Olympic Expressway, which connects the Incheon International Airport to Jamsil, and apartment buildings in Gwangmyeong, Mok-dong, Seongdong, Cheonan, Singjeong, and Jamsil so as not to offend the eyes of foreigners riding in and looking around, 720,000 people in 48,000 households were forcibly displaced.
welcoming the procession of ships. What implication can be drawn from this subversion of public perception of the ships be carried out on a national scale? As in the case of Park Jung-jin, when interpretation ends with mere correlation between a performance and superficial symbolism, the conceivable clues that the ship might convey disappear. The way that citizens were manipulated to welcome these ships were in stark contrast to the hostility toward the appearance of foreign ships in the late Joseon Dynasty. Rather than perceiving the event as “the world citizens entering into Seoul”, could it be possible to perceive the ships processing the Han River, as the attempt to elicit a voluntary acceptance of the “world (and its culture, products, and cognizance)”?

“With its cyclical and continual nature, the river heads toward harmony among the people of the world, and the path of advancement to Seoul,” announced Lee Chang-ho. Following this, Park Jung-jin wrote, “The Han River Boat Parade not only metaphorically expressed the fact that the world is on one plane, but also allowed people around the globe viewing through television to feel the future of the global village and the zeitgeist that unites all. Both small and large ships floated down the Han River, as wide as the sea, moved past “the Age of Exploration” and the hegemony which aimed at conquest and domination, and dropped their anchors at Jamsil Port by the Seoul Olympic Stadium. This event served to articulate the Olympic Games as a festival that truly unites the world from every direction, establishing a statement, ‘the world is one’ at the start of the ceremony.” Yet, such interpretation of Park’s leaves much room for reevaluation. The anticipation that unity, which was established as the Olympics beseeched peace, often fell short by the gap between its arrangements and manifestation. To start off, the research data of the city migrants around this time in Seoul(COHRE) showed that approximately 720,000 people were displaced from their homes for the purpose of hosting the Seoul Olympics. Furthermore, around 1.25 million people were evicted to make room for the site of the Beijing Olympics (according to a study by the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions). The London Olympics advertised abroad about collaboration with local artists while destroying the lives of residents by redeveloping the poverty-stricken Newham district of East London. These examples showed that someone’s peace was destroyed everywhere an Olympic Games were held. As social critic Park Kwon-il stated, “The Olympics, World Cup, and other sporting events are the ultimate guilty pleasure in that they spread a myth that clean and fair festivals are possible regardless of the misfortunes around the world.”

Park Jung-jin’s naive view painted the boundary between the sacred and the secular rather grimly, providing only superstitious ambiguity that multiplies the paradoxical myth of the Olympics. The notion that the Opening Ceremony sought to inject us, by citing the continual and cyclical nature of the river, was none other than the new world order. The Han River Parade borrowed from the laws of nature that, “the highest form of goodness is like water” and contributed to the work of conquest, likening the history to the nature. It seemed to been an attempt to argue that the tides of certain historical periods were natural developments rather than manmade occurrences in history. Such attempt seemed to deter any possible inquiry and it was aimed at leading people to follow the given order without objection. On the other hand, citizens watch the parade from Ttukseom and chant endlessly. Their passionate welcome was a harmonious prelude: sung by Asians on the border of the third world, pledging to conform to the high waves blowing in from the rest of the world so as to attain the perspective of the first world and become cosmopolitan.

The angle of the camera shifts towards the Seoul Olympic Stadium as the Greeting the Sun begins. Composed in four parts, Greeting the Sun was performed in the order of: “the road of Dawn”, “Dragon Drum Parade”, “Heaven, Earth, and Man” and “The Primordial Light.” A folk ritual called gillori, which combined Confucian procedures and characteristics of the guta ritual officiated by a shaman, often accompanied by song, dance, and performance, was adapted in “the road of Dawn” as a cleaning ceremony and declared the Seoul Olympic Stadium as a sacred space. Traditionally, gillori is a prelude per-

formed before the start of daedongnori (festival of performers and audience), with bands of performers passing through the village and heightening the mood to attract an audience. As such, these series of events revealed that the entire Opening Ceremony was arranged as one gut stage. Here, the political and religious elements supported the Opening Ceremony: the ritual “consecrated” the Seoul Olympic Stadium as a microcosmic space in which “the principles of the universe” were embodied, and the following events were to be viewed and enacted as political efficacies in which they were inherent in its organizations. In this way, the viewers around the world were not simply viewing the Opening event, but were given the “blessing” by the “retinal baptism” through seeing the shape of world reflecting the universal principles. The messages of the ritual were clear: coupled with principles of the universe, the ritual implied “the transcendental plausibility”, which was aimed to exercise political agencies to expound upon the heterogeneous view of the universe.

To put it in another way, consider the event “The Primordial Light”, a performance that intended to take the Seoul Olympic Stadium back to the day one of the cosmos. What could be the implication behind the returning to the birth year of the universe? “In ancient rites, specific subjects performed a role of mythical representation, creating a “new time” through reviving the source of creation embodied in the first event. It was a highly political synthesis to acquire new power over the operation of the universe by reclaiming collective time for the survival of a group. In a way, this was an epistemological act of regaining the mechanisms of the world by initiating the axes of Time and Space.”

However, in the case of the Seoul Olympics, the strategy of “returning the historical hour to zero” neither involved a special subject performing the role of mythical representation, nor did it revive the creative source. Further, it was not to serve a mere daydream of whitewashing the experience of being subjugated. The purpose was to go a step further: to provide a platform to rewrite history in the eyes of all mankind.

Once the main ceremonies with the torch lighting was completed, the post-celebration began. About Great Day, the first event of this part, Lee Chang-ho stated, “The world was created for the first time, and the scenes of great days are unfolding, with all of humanity living in peace. This dance extols the heavens for bestowing this land with mysterious energy and invokes blessings from the heavens.” What was the reason behind stipulating that the first day was a great day? There are two possible explanations. The first is to reproduce national mythology: the beginning of time with a divine altar tree and a parachute descending from the heavens. All Koreans would have recalled the Dangun myth, which tells of Dangun’s father descending from the sky onto a divine tree at the top of Taebaeksan Mountain. Great Day performance merged national mythology with the present in a sophisticated presentation. Park Jung-jin wrote, “High in the clear sky, one hundred parachutes appear as dots. As if summoning gods, they spread their wings above the stadium to form white flowers, then create compositions of various colors and shapes. In the stadium, 800 female students out of uniform welcome the parachutes. This is the meeting between heaven and earth, man and woman, and yin and yang. The parachutists in formation of the Olympic emblem, signifying a blessing from the heavens, land softly like angels.”

To this, Kang Shin-pyo added, “The suspenseful and thrilling parachute stunt captivated the audience. It was only regretful that TV could not show this spectacle perfectly. This modern stunt was followed by ‘Flower Dance,’ which eased the audience’s tension. This programming order was especially meaningful. Jet planes, helicopters, and parachutes, which were designed for military use, were employed in the sport of skydiving. This transformation into paraphernalia of peace and entertainment represents the very ideal of the Olympic Games.”

In the face of such interpretations, one begins to wonder in what ways these repetitive, highly dubious and questionable views were made possible.

10 Eom Je-hyoon, “A Visual Guide to Art as a Disease,” Critic-al, 2018
In the case of the parachute event, the parachutists were composed of Special Forces and members of the International Parachuting Commission. The Special Forces were an organization established in 1961 with the name Special Warfare School, under the ROK Army 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), and was charged with fostering special warfare noncom officers and various special warfare training. The 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) (renamed 1st Special Forces Brigade [Airborne] in 1972) had been mobilized in coup d’états and the creation of the military regime. Further the group participated in the May 16 military coup d’état in 1961, and in the Coup d’état of December 12 in 1979, taking the Ministry of National Defense by force under the command of Brigadier Park Hee-do. They also assisted in the inaugurating of the Chun Doo-hwan administration, and Chun himself once served as the brigadier of the 1st Special Forces Group (what is more, at a later event titled, “Beyond All Barriers,” the 3rd Special Forces Brigade [Airborne], also known as the “Flying Tiger Unit,” appeared under the name “Flying Tiger Taekwondo Team” to give a “power breaking” demonstration. The 3rd Special Forces Brigade [Airborne], along with the 7th and 11th Special Forces Brigades [Airborne], was involved in the bloody suppression of the Gwangju Uprising Movement.) Notably, what were the implications of these events which played along with the unraveling of the Dangun creation narrative? Plausibly, wasn’t it a devious scheme to envelop the militant force in the aura of creation mythology to legitimate the administration? In this way, they perversely turned the Korean citizen’s deep-seated hatred against the military into a grand welcome. As seen before, even the scholars went along to praise the Olympic events with every manner of elaborate rhetoric. In the eyes of spectators, it won’t be an overstatement to say the 1988 Seoul Olympic Opening Ceremony was watching performances where an administration borne out of vile acts, disguised itself with the sacred.

Upon investigating such occurrences, Oh Ja-eun, professor of KAIST, offered her view in “The Unconscious of the Olympics - Between June 1987 protests and the 1988 Seoul Olympics”: “Even if it does not signify a physical confiscation of power, the time headed towards the Olympics was a ‘pro-

spective time’ for the military dictatorship to change its face and elongate its physical life. Paradoxically, the Olympic Games, after eliminating the grounds of criticism of dictatorship, were able to conceal more in the end. This was a paradoxical situation wherein the Chun Doo-hwan discourse was continuing with the absence of Chun Doo-hwan.”

Considering the fact that the Opening Ceremony was designed to do away with national trauma and to obtain the first world’s standpoint for South Koreans, the reversing perception of procession of ships as I described above, was consistent with what I will unfold in the second implication. The following event “A Good Day”, in which the title itself conveyed a nationalist and pro-administration ambiance, the second meaning ascended retroactively in the beginning of the consecutive event, the “Chaos.” The following is Lee Chang-ho’s description of the “Chaos” that came after the “Flower Dance,” which was a symbol of peaceful reign. “846 performers have come out with 838 masks, 198 types from 60 different countries. They represent good and evil, love and hate, creation and destruction. The performance was metaphor of a failure of mankind to have a harmony between different values and characters, and conflicts and divisions resulting in a scattered chaos. This represented the conflict and division of ideologies, races, and genders.” This statement expanded the conviction of the argument, what does this performance imply as the peaceful era (A Good Day) shifts into a period of confusion (Chaos) with masks from different countries, other than suggesting the transition as a metaphor of the temporal shift in Korea’s modern history? From the viewpoint of the West, the period of imperialism might have been a time of inscribing and editing a “manual” to establish the global order, but in the East it was a period of plight, which uprooted the perceptions, knowledge, notions, past, and future in its entirety. The scene invites the “Others (the West)” to witness the destruction of peace and harmony amongst “Us (the East)”. The second implication of A Good Day can be found in

this attitude, similar to Gandhi’s approach of contrasting the lives destroyed by capitalism by physically displaying the spinning wheel.

At the end of Chaos, camera shifted to the roof of the Seoul Olympic Stadium where ten Korean folk masks appeared. The way in which this scene was structured reminded me of a work by American conceptual artist Barbara Kruger, “Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face.” While Kruger’s work subverted the privileged position of a male viewer by revealing the objectification of women carried out by premeditated masculine gaze, the towering Korean folk masks on the roof surrounded the audience and stared at the audience, that they are also the object of observation. In this regard, the folk masks can be interpreted as the “eyes of retaliation” from the East’s point of view, which had exhausted itself as the West-centric worldview was established. To put it another way, the authority of “Adam” in attributing a universal language to the world, so far belongs to the West. Consequently, then for “Eve”, her means of understanding the world was only by the way of Adam’s consciousness. By the time she entered the world it was already distorted, thus deprived of not only of the apparatus of her own thoughts, to perceive and measure the world, but the world in its entirety was assaulted. The masks represented a challenge and retaliation against “Adam’s authority” represented by the West. The masks extended the stadium spatially by renewing the divide between stage and audience, and larks with the ensured comfort of the audience. Amidst this visual disruption, the chaos within the stadium gradually faded away. Without any “bloodshed”, the gazes retreated itself. Perhaps, the masks implied more than the one layered message of relativism, which is to say, “when you look at us, we can also look at you” and still further, “this is the new worldview we will inhabit in history (or in imminent future).” Yet, it will be reductionistic to consider this performance as an “ambitious warning” that “the gaze of those who rule the world can always be subverted”. In fact, as you will see in the following, the revenge plot did not lead to total rejection of the Western-centered world, but ended as a one-time event that recompensed historical humiliation, thus paradoxically fulfilled the conditions necessary to internalize the Western consciousness. For a non-Westerner to enter the world as a cosmopolitan, there are two requirements: first, one must understand Western values and be able to use his body to reproduce Western customs and gestures. Secondly, one still must obtain one’s individual characteristics which reflects the uniqueness of one’s own people.

Finally, through Seoul Olympic South Korea was finally able to assimilate with the West by a new foundation for tradition and renewed history, sealing the wound of the Korean nation from an aesthetic point of view through the Opening Ceremony. Any transformations occurred that in realms can be called subconscious. Further, by suppressing the fear of ships imbedded in the collective subconscious of Koreans, South Korea’s endeavored to rewrite history from the perspective of the defeated, and further by adopting the folk masks to bring a spatial disruption, making the world to witness its fervent clamor of resistance toward the established order.

Epilogue

The fact that Korea’s first McDonald’s and Vienna Coffee House franchises opened in time for the Olympics was significant since it indicated the culture of Western diet, which facilitated assimilation with the West in the most non-mediational way: through a oral sensory. It is common knowledge that fast food franchise and cafés represent more than simple local restaurant and they facilitate a faster but mind-numbing lifestyles, and bourgeoisie attitude towards consuming spaces. Thus this is not an exaggeration to say that the internalization process of Western conventions is one’s own right. Some might say that the opinions of Kang Shin-pyo and Park Jung-jin, which I repeatedly disagreed, were proper understanding of the significance of the Seoul Olympics, and that it is nonsensical to argue that it was an aesthetic cleansing of traumas from modern history of Korea. However, I am perpetually convinced not to concede my view. In one account of the face of looking at the monument, “The Seoul Declaration of Peace” designed by Kim Joong-up, which words were carved into a
stone that surrounds the Olympic Flame in the middle of the World Peace Gate, the order of the languages were, French, Korean, and English. Of all languages, why were these two foreign languages chosen? The fact that these languages were carved indicates that the text was engraved for the speakers of these languages. In this context it is hard for me to stop questioning what seemed to be a bleak relationship between the Seoul Olympics and modern history of Korea, in the language of the two countries which crusaded against Korea in 1866 and 1871, respectively, while peace was being recited.

Through these temporarily gestures of unsettling Western-centric visions, South Korea was encouraged by momentarily elevated pride and found confidence in which it never had. However, pride without genuine, inherent change won’t stand the test of time. As displayed by the mainstream self-deprecating pun, “Do you know kimchi?,” South Korea’s dissatisfactions always manifested in attempts to estimate the position of the Western point of view. Numerous broadcast programs revealed South Korea’s celebrities performing in Europe, and promoted Korean food, and Korean beauty products. Further, few programs revisited the different corners of South Korea but seen from a foreigner’s perspective as if to seek their approval. Needless to say, the approval cannot remain valid forever and this continuous search seemed to resemble the repetitive behaviors of those with obsessive compulsive disorder. Of course, the more disquieting misfortune was the numbness over this whole tragedy.

“New Painting”: “Painting in Crisis”
theory as a point of departure
Ban Ejung _ 136

A Landscape as a poison:
Praxis of Landscape in Independent
Documentaries
Lee Do Hoon _ 152

From Net Art to Post-Internet Art:
Open Possibilities of Post-Internet Art
Nathalie Boseul Shin _ 168
“New Painting”: “Painting in Crisis”
theory as a point of departure

Ban Ejung

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The background to the “Return of Painting”

It is often argued that media art and the multimedia art have been the two representative forms of mainstream art today. It is confirmed through a number of recent major exhibitions to see how pervasive they have become, which is also reflected in enlisted works of aspiring artists as their primary medium, revealing a certain trend in the artworld. Significant rise of painters making the finalists or becoming the winner of the major art competitions. To perceive such a movement as a temporary return of the passé seems inaccurate: rather, this “counterattack of painting” should be read as a shift in the artistic landscape and the emergence of new form of paintings.

A continuing series of exhibitions encapsulating this emerging trends of painting were found in 2015. Our Awesome Moments (Feb. 27-Jun. 5, 2015) at the Hite Collection, featured the works of thirteen painters in their mid-20’s to early 40’s (Kim Minho, Park Jong-ho, Baek Kyung-ho, Wang SeonJeong, Yoo Hansook, Jang Jaemin, Jeon Hyun-sun, Jeong Yu Sun, Chung Eunyoung, Jo Song, Choe Suyeon, Choi Jeong-ju, Heo Suyoung), who were nominated by six artists from an older generation (Kang Seok Ho, Kim Jiwon, Roh Choonghyun, Yoo Geun Taek, Choi Gene-uk and Hong Seunghye), is a case in point. Another exhibit was the Crossing Plane: Unit, Layer, and Nostalgia (Nov. 27, 2015-Jan. 31, 2016) held at the Ilmin Museum of Art, which showed works that reconfigured the two dimensionalities of plane as a condition and the element to be developed and foster.

Also The Adventures of Korean contemporary Painting: I Will Go Away All By Myself (Sep. 26, 2019-Mar. 9, 2020) at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) Cheongju was an exhibition that attested to the lasting and undiminished relevance of painting as a genre. This exhibition at the MMCA highlighted on how painting, the oldest genre of fine art, has lasted in the field where various of forms of media compete for prominence. Notably, the Chong Kun Dang Art Award was an award sponsored by a pharmaceutical company (Chong Kun Dang Pharm.), dedicated to supporting artists with a
It has been awhile since media art, multimedia art and the cross-disciplinary art has been gaining prominence on mega events such as biennales. The media dominated culture of today and its rapid transformations of the environment has continued to put pressure on historical genres of art, imposing them to redefine themselves. Conceivably, this is due to the fact that the outset of paintings as a genre can no longer resonate with contemporary experience in the current context. In fact, the paintings that are acclaimed in today’s art scene bear a little resemblance to traditional paintings which we are familiar with as they are “new paintings” with a whole-new bearing. Particularly with new aesthetic experiments that have not been attempted before were found in paintings since the millennium, an era marked by the emergence of new media and online culture which began to dominate the world.

**New Paintings**

Arguably, there are three aspects that could explain this return of two-dimensional paintings. The first to consider is the growing sense of viewing fatigue of media and multimedia works that has taken over biennales and often, the entire space of the exhibition.

In another sense, the new paintings that reflect the esthetic preference and the sentiments of the new media generation, carry with it a sense of contemporaneity more so than media art. Considering how the biennales seem to have lost their momentum even though their numbers continue to grow in various cities across the country, there are undeniable signs indicating that art fairs that have branched into specialized genres over the years are emerging as new forces in the art world. Although characteristically the main purpose of art fairs is to sell artworks, it is undeniable that they play a substantial role in the art world in obtaining appreciation of paintings for artists and as well as the collectors. Unlike biennale-targeted works that are difficult to grasp and sometimes overly experimental, artworks has a broad appeal when it can directly lead to focus in painting.

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1. Hite Collection, Our Awesome Moments, 2015
sales, satisfying both the producers and consumers: naturally, the recent rise of art fairs were also major factor that hauled in the return of the rise of painting.

Classifying paintings into figurative/abstract works seems anachronistic as they are less frequently used terms today. Notwithstanding, it remains that some works are more suitable to be considered as abstract as they are without any representation of subject and some are suitable as a figurative rendering of a specific subject. However, the figurative/abstract dichotomy is no longer commonly practiced today when discussing a painting.

To return to the discussion of 'new paintings', this new generation of paintings is often perceived to be different from previous generations of paintings in terms of their relationship to storytelling. In a traditional sense, a narrative element was one of the indicators that differentiated figurative paintings from abstract paintings. The proponents of abstract art would argue that narratives have no place in a painting as they belongs to the realm of literature, which only undermines the purity of the visual art. However, in contemporary paintings, a reversal has taken place in the relationship of figurative and abstract paintings to storytelling. There is an overall deficit of narrative content in paintings of today, whether figurative or abstract, with the role of storytelling reduced as an incentive to instigating visual composition. In other words, the aspects of storytelling has less presence even in figurative paintings. On the other hand, in abstract paintings, it seems that coincidental narratives play a role in serving the dynamics of visual display.

Abstract art: The Aesthetic of the Post-internet Generation

In case of the Korean art world, abstract art has been largely perceived as the precursor of Western modernism as well as an emblematic genre of the art of the mid-20th century.

Such a perception first emerged in the 1950's in Korean art world, which is also why the birth of modernism was generally regarded to coincide with the emergence of abstract painting in the timeline of the history of Korean modern art.

Long after so called the death of abstract art movement, it is still not rare to find abstract art as recent as in the 2000's. However, in the case of contemporary abstract art, there is no trace of pursuing a dogmatic 'purity of media' as it once did in the past as the main driving motive. If anything, the enduring appeal of abstract art in the contemporary art should be explained by the aesthetic preference of the post-internet generation.

Here, I will explore the abstract presentation in the contemporary art with the premise of the contemporaneity of 'post internet' as the triggering apparatus of abstract art of the 21st century, which distances itself from the abstract art movement of the modernism in the 20st century: a movement embedded with the dogma of 'purity of media' with an absolutist stance.

As of today, abstract art has run its course and artworks with an abstract presentation are continuously being produced. This is not just with paintings, but also includes three-dimensional work and therefore not confined to any single medium or genre. More importantly, such an aesthetics are no longer labeled as an abstract. This is perhaps because the term "abstract" is strongly evocative of the aesthetic of a bygone era to be summoned to define the specific currents of today. It seems that a work with an abstract appearance is only a coincidental result after variety of methodological experiments, but it is not an end in itself. That would be the biggest difference between the abstract art of the modernist era and the art of 'abstract presentation' in contemporary times.

One of the key aspects to which Korea’s abstract modernism from four decades ago is enjoying its belated heyday currently, is de facto a fortuitous result in the demands of the art market. This genre of works significantly differs from the works with abstract presentation found in the contemporary art, which is induced by the emotional sensibility of the post-internet generation. Further, if the abstract art of the older generation presupposes the denial of narrative element, most of contemporary artwork with an abstract presentation involve a specific narrative in the backdrop.
In case of the paintings of Woo Tae Kyung, the surface filled with various indefinite shapes and patterns are in some ways reminiscent of constructivism from a century ago which was regarded as the precursor of abstract painting, or that of early cubism. Her canvases are full of the same indefinable and indescribable units that once characterized these currents. However, Cubism used ‘cubes’ as defining unit to reconstruct a subject, and the abstract painting in their heydays in the early to mid-20th century had distinguishable ‘grid’ units. But in Woo’s abstract paintings, there was no unifying units or standards as her painting, turn-by-turn, resembled water waves, tree branches, electromagnetic waves or full blossomed flowers which were fluid and ever-changing.

Then how exactly are these indescribable and amorphous patterns created? As you get closer to the surface, you can find small images printed all over the canvas. The artist searches the web for specific words and collects image files. Then she prints just the parts of the file on a canvas in random order, but the percentage of the parts printed on the canvas are in fact less than 1%. The results of which the artist’s arbitrary filling of the blanks on the canvas from the 1% of color dots. Woo Tae-kyung’s abstraction for example, the keyword selected in <Parasitic painting(p.p) 19> (2016) is an adverb called ‘dugeundaogeun (doki-doki)’, which was a random keyword she found through a search engine and collected some 200 images from the logos of Starbucks, Japanese banknotes, the CGV log, McDonald ice cream sundae or views from an airplane window: images with no real relation to one another. The artist printed an arbitrary chosen image from the 200 images onto the canvas, then filled the spaces around them with various shapes with forms and colors from the collected images. These paintings with amorphous shapes, although they may seem to have some sort of consistency and organization, are in fact an assembly of eclectic images that are very little related to one another.

Essentially, Woo’s atypical pattern painting may seem to have some sort of consistency overall, but her work should be considered as the ‘autonomous painting’: that is, the sum of images are very little related to one another and
are absent of any narrative element. Such a new method of painting illustrates one aspect of post-internet art. It references a collective culture emerged in the backdrop of social media and a new esthetic born out of new media, which are a representative of inherent sense of esthetic of the internet generation. What Woo has accomplished is the shaping a new type of coincidental aesthetic result using random visual results from compositing images intermittently and without any logical link between them.

'Yusa-hoehwa (pseudo-painting)', a term coined by artist Yoon Hyangro to describe her paintings, seems to be catching on in Korean art circles. Yoon simulates the various popular contemporary media, which have pushed aside painting as an outdated genre and creates paintings that may come across as a convincing alternative to the paintings of the past. Yoon’s works resembles that of a painting, or print work: and at first glance it is hard to configure types of methods used to produce her work. Yoon’s works are made by several dozen superimposed pages from manga that are deleted of dialogues and characters but left only with lines of motion that conveys movement. Such works appear like a typical abstract works as they seem entirely devoid of thematic or narrative content; however, though made abstract, the images retain enough of their original aspects to evoke manga for anyone who is familiar with them. Devoid of stories and context but only with the particular ‘temporality of animation’, her silent surface may deliver a tacit understanding to the contemporary viewers. Screenshot(2018) series is another such case: by omitting any contextualization and magnifying certain details, across the surface of her works bears the sensibility of contemporary culture.

Artist Lee Jeong Bae who has a background in the Oriental painting, belongs to the generation that experienced the new cyber world of internet in their collegiate years. If the artistic gesture of post-internet generation is about connecting the digitalized visual experiences of the new media to create new art, it can be said that the artists of Lee’s generation for whom the internet became the mainstream in their 20’s, were brought up to trust the hands on process of art making-using physical materials, and obtaining online materials as important supportive resources. His amorphous shapes were made with FRP and resin and displayed flat against the wall, which was considered to illustrate a new form of art that emerged between the blurred categorical boundaries of two-dimensional and three-dimension art.

His work Park (2018) is a series of a flattened three-dimensional pieces with sharp edges painted in appealing colors for the eyes of public. These works were almost purely abstract as they lack visual clue to a thematic content or narrative subtext. They were inspired by the rectangular plan that was ubiquitously used in parks, such as the Seine River Park, Notting Hill Gate Park, Yeouido Park, Central Park and parks in Santa Monica, and other renowned attractions around the world. His works envisaged urban planning utilizing rectilinear shapes to optimize for the control and management of urban spaces.

**Formless Aesthetic of the Post-Internet Age**

There was once a period when willingly letting go of the representation - an intrinsic function of art - became a central movement: an era prevailing with a belief that modernity equated with the abstract art. This dogmatic belief that abstract art was the final stage of fine arts, mobilized the golden age of abstract art to the international artworld about the same time. The golden days of abstract art are now gone and hardly anyone today subscribes to such an idea as the purity of the medium itself as meant to justify the hegemony of the abstract art. In spite of this, there are continuous stream of contemporary artworks that are produced today, which adamantly refuse to represent anything: further, the word ‘abstract’ is no longer used today to describe the works in abstract appeal. Instead, today’s works that resemble abstract art are often considered as a statement of contemporariness, capturing the essence of the spiritual and psychological makeup of the post-internet generation. Among artworks that resembles ‘abstract’ appearing, some are summoned by the post-internet generation as a way to improve contemporaneity.

In contrast to artists of the modernist generation from the golden age
of abstract artists - who turned their back on representation and called all of their works “Untitled” - today’s abstract-style artworks are rich in storytelling elements and even appear to be driven by them. Much of the narrative subtext of these works seems to be made up of personal experiences of living through an age that is oversaturated with images. After the era of modernism in which the genre painting voluntarily chose to part ways with representation, it had to carve out a new path forward for itself. The emergence of abstract-style art in recent decades is also a testament to the fact that the aesthetic experiences of the current generation of artists, who were brought up with the internet and new media, may be radically different from those of preceding generations.

**Figurative: Paintings void of stories**

It is impossible to sum up the current state of figurative painting in just a few words. To mention only the most salient features, it can be the deficit of storytelling. Given how fundamental storytelling is to the genre of figurative art, its absence almost makes a work no longer figurative, even if they retain the appearance of it. One of the reasons why storytelling, this simple and convenient method of distinguishing figurative from abstract art, fell out of fashion was that it was no longer effective. Today’s art scene abounds in seemingly abstract works, however mediated by storytelling and despite their ‘seemingly figurative’, are without any storytelling element.

What can the lack of narrative elements in the ‘seemingly figurative’ contemporary paintings be attributed to? One possible aspect to this is that a myriad of new media today are relatively better adapted for storytelling than painting, disintegrating its claim to storytelling as a medium. As the emergence of photography pushed painting to experiment with the abstract art during the 19th century, the genre is moving away from story telling to distance itself from the surplus of narratives produced through the new media: also, by strengthening the older and more inherent attributes of paintings while retaining figurative qualities. Moreover, similar to the social media in which communication takes a condensed form, painting may be adopting a method that communicates through an instant visual stimulus.

**Working with the Basic Pictorial Tools of Painting**

There is a recurrent iconography in the works of artist Jeon Hyun-sun across her various exhibitions, where cylinders, spheres and cones that are the recurrent motifs in her paintings, which remind one of Cézanne’s painting theories. Moreover, such a pictorial plain encourages the viewers to consider the artist’s self-consciousness and ask fundamental questions like “what is painting?” Meanwhile, a gigantic peach or the figures dressed in medieval-style clothes that seems completely out of place, clearly harks back to surrealist experiments of the early 20th century and the otherworldly imagination produced by them, even if a contemporary twist is added to suit the 21st-century context. In some of her works, a canvas is divided into four parts of images that are unrelated to one another that are placed side-by-side, as though attempting to create a painting version of a non-linear narrative, which is considered by many the hallmark of media art. One of the units appearing in Jeon’s paintings is a fluorescent-colored square like a Post-It-Note. Reminiscent of the grids of modernist paintings, while also being evocative of the Microsoft Windows screen, these small squares are simple yet original units that are rooted in the tradition of painting, at the same time as a reference to the contemporary imagery of our time.

Gray is the dominant color in Jeon’s paintings. Her fluid brushstrokes with spilling effects and her canvases in different sizes are displayed in random order to create the whole plain, places her work with focus on painterly elements rather than the effects of storytelling. Besides, it would be of no importance to consider narrative elements in a painting of multilayer triangles or squares. Her works are attentive to the arranged color tones - largely resting on the random distribution of repeated shapes and the texture of brushwork - they may strike one as similar to the visual grammar of abstract art that dominated the early
to mid-20th century’s artscene. Her paintings do not completely negate representation; through her unique colors and the random realignment of canvases that add visual interest to her works, Jeon presents an aesthetic that is yet distinct from the one that prevailed among artists of earlier generations.

Choi Eun Jung is another artist whose work may be said to rethink the challenges to the basics faced by the contemporary painters. Choi goes to extreme lengths to avoid using the basic method of display for her paintings. Her work are sometimes realized on canvases with altered shape, instead of a regular rectangular canvas. Other times, she uses various additional apparatuses so that her canvases are not placed flat against the white wall. Geometric structures made with masking tape or thick blobs of paint with wriggling texture or made to sway like leaves of grass protrude from her canvases. Though they are figurative paintings, nothing is clearly represented. Even the common and mundane objects such as squares, would appear distinct next to formless blobs of paint.

Building upon the traditional Language of Painting

There are figurative paintings that rivet our attention, though the themes are difficult to grasp, because their unusual visual features. These paintings are often evocative of the style of the Northern Renaissance painter Hieronymus Bosch or that of surrealist paintings from the early 20th century. In other words, the pictorial scene found in these works with great open spaces in which the events and things that are unrelated to one another displayed across them, like the works of Kim Eun Jin. Her large scale canvases impress the viewers with the vast array of brilliant colors and rich in details. In an age where excess of visual media are produced and consumed routinely, Kim’s works encourages the viewer to think about the painting in an ontological sense as to how this antiquated genre can still be of relevance. Her works, faithful to the representational and storytelling features of painting, are as though a painter’s statement of position at a time when painting has come under pressure to reinvent itself.

If the crowds densely populating Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings appear to converge into a single theme, the innumerable events of Kim’s canvases are unrelated realities that merely share the same space.

Kwon Soon-young is another artist whose works reminds the viewers of Bosch’s epic imagery which unfolds in an open and indefinite plain. Kwon’s work seems to be a reflection of the contemporary subcultures married with girlish sensitivity as grotesque yet cute beings appear in her works. Many of her work carry a presence of eroticism where a suggestive and sensual candle wax drops frequently appear.

The ‘staging’ in Painting: Escape the Two Dimensional

With new media monopolizing the storytelling as a tool in proliferating the production of new narratives, the narrative aspects in painting has become relatively less important in differentiating itself as a genre, as well as in critiquing the work of painting. With this structural changes in backdrop, there has been an increasing number of painters ‘staging’ the exhibition spaces in recent years. This appears to be the most radical step taken so far toward erasing of the traditional categorization between two-dimensional and three-dimensional art. Artist Jeon Hyun-sun for instance displayed five paintings in three rows, presenting them as an organic whole, thus magnify their visual effect. Other staging elements used by her include leaving one of the walls of the exhibition venue empty or lining up small paintings on unrelated themes together. Moreover, there is a subtle sense of continuity that runs through all the exhibits in her shows, even though one is unable to pinpoint the recurrent iconograph. This could also be considered as an added element of staging, insofar as it is not an effect that results directly from individual exhibits.

Staging paintings as installation was also frequently found among solo shows of artists Baek Kyungho, An Gyungsu and Kim Hyosook. Rather than displaying canvases at an eye level by horizontally and vertically aligning them, they carefully select spots for each works as though creating an installation piece and adjusted lighting accordingly. Staging the painting as an installation
piece has indeed become a device to fill the missing gaps where the differentiating the painting with a storytelling as a medium has largely been lost.

**The Cycle of “Crisis discourses”**

There is a long-standing pattern in the art world when prospects of a specific genres fade and are destined into crisis, as in the case with Oriental painting, which was overshadowed by media art. Further, the field of art criticism also makes the list of genres potentially in crisis. The crisis of paintings discourses would often be discussed as a fact, rather than opinion or theory; but presently, it seems painting as a genre have evolved into a new direction by adopting into the changing media landscape. Meanwhile, the rise of the “alternative” paintings, where the narrative has almost completely vanished, seems to have placed new challenges for art critics for the interpretation of works. This explains why some of the recent texts found in the painting exhibition are overloaded with rhetoric and rather oxymoronic phrases that seem unrelated to the artworks. In this way, it would be fair to say that media art, which is time-and-place-based art or multimedia works with its complex arrangement, is more accessible for interpretations than the paintings. And this challenge of interpretation has diminished the roles of art critics with regard to painting works, while the parts for exhibition curators has commensurately increased. This crisis of art criticism is related to this phenomenon of painting steering out of risk by reinventing itself as “new painting.”

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Ban Ejung has published regular works of art criticism in the JoongAng Ilbo, Sisa IN, Cine 21, and Hankyoreh 21 and appears regularly on art panels for the Traffic Broadcasting System, EBS, and KBS Radio. He has been a review and nomination committee member for various art-related competitions, including the JoongAng Fine Arts Prize, Dong-A Art Festival, SongEun Art Award, and Hermès Foundation Art Award. In addition, he has published non-art-related current events columns in the Hankyoreh and Kyunghyang Sinmun newspapers. He has authored the books Object Decoder (Semicolon, 2013) and A Bright Red Art Confession (Monthly Art, 2006). He has also co-written the works To the World, Perhaps to Myself (Golden Time, 2013), How Do I Write? (Hankyoreh, 2013), Amusing Revolution (Text, 2012), Wow! I Succeeded (Hagisiseup, 2009), and Master of Reading: Homo Bookus 2.0 (Grinbi, 2009).
Lack of Landscape

Recently, there were few independent documentaries that have attracted a critical attention from domestic film festival circles of South Korea, where both the excess and the lack of landscape are simultaneously detected. Many of these films shed a light on the social conflicts in provincial areas such as Miryang, Gyeongnam-do(province); Gangjeong, Jeju-do(province); and Seongju, Gyeongbuk-do(province) as their main motives, and in the process, capturing the natural, idyllic, and pastoral landscapes of the local regions. In these scenes, the camera would enter into the landscape and at other times, the landscapes would force its way into the camera frame.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to assert that the recent independent documentaries have captured the landscapes adequately, and the filming a ‘pro-filmic’ landscape from reality does not necessarily guarantee the producing of landscape images. Even if a real landscape was used as a background, setting or location for other elements, there are situations where they are not perceived as landscapes. The American art historian W.J.T. Mitchell stated that landscape is not an artistic method but a type of medium and it is recognized only when it acquires meaning through a specific perspective.¹ Others argue that a landscape should not always be viewed at the level of representation, but be evaluated based on whether it has an aesthetic autonomy. In other words, that one must recognize landscape as something independent from the domain of meaning.

Meanwhile, in his research on the concept of cinematic landscapes, Martin Lefebvre identified the landscape more rigorously.² Lefebvre argued that while landscape according to a dictionary definition refers to any physical or natural outdoor space, landscape in the realm of visual arts is not secondary to events, actions, or narratives, such as the background, the stage, and the

² Martin Lefebvre, "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema," Landscape and Film, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2006).
scene, but that it has an autonomous center. He further described that in all narrative-oriented media such as films, dramas and documentaries, what we habitually call landscapes is the stage in which events and actions takes place. A characteristic of such a setting is that it can be infinitely categorized into smaller units, as well as expanded into larger ones. In other words, a setting has a tendency to extend from a peripheral element to a central element. In *Employees Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895), a short film by Louis Lumière, the architectural space of the factory, which was its setting, served as the basis to evoke larger units of space such as Lyon, France and Europe. On the other hand, a landscape situated itself beyond ‘diegesis’ and was constituted by the dynamic between the observed subject and the observer. Other examples of films with adequate uses of landscape by placing them in right places, or making it the center of the cinematic experience, includes works by Walter Ruttmann, Joris Ivens, Michael Snow and David Rimmer. True, landscape is certainly not an exclusive to experimental films. One can encounter landscapes that step out of the narrative at certain moments in films by D.W. Griffith, F.W. Murnau, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock or Yasujiro Ozu as well. As such, films may alternately use a narrative approach and a visual approach. A space can have a shifting role in a film, becoming a background, setting, location or a landscape. However, such a shift presupposes the director’s own set of standards and rules in their praxis of profilmic landscapes.

In this view, it would be not incorrect to call the current excess of landscape in the recent independent documentary films an “excess of stage.” Such a phenomenon can be explained in part by social conditions in Korea by extended ruling of the conservative party, which lasted nearly ten years. During this period, the country was transformed into a gigantic civil engineering site with the so-called ‘four rivers project’ and other large construction projects like the Miryang power transmission tower, Gangjeong naval base and the deployment of THAAD in Seongju causing tensions and conflicts in concerned communities. None of these projects were intended to benefit local residents, but were designed for the benefit of the city, corporates and the country as a whole. As
Henri Lefebvre pointed out long ago, cities do not simply expand physically, but also transplant an urban social order everywhere in the world through forcible imposition. In a capitalist system in which urban growth and expansion is forced upon every part of the country, the difference between cities and rural areas becomes gradually removed, as a new growth takes place according to an urban order. Meanwhile, places with a natural landscape are abstracted as they were capital. This phenomenon is dubbed “placeless-ness,” which means the loss of a sense of place.

Against such backdrop of circumstances, documentaries with similar visual appearances and themes emerged as though they were aiming for a shared goal. A pattern of repeatedly making films in the same genres with similar landscapes can easily be found in American cinema, which has long contributed to building of the country’s image as an empire. According to Maurizia Natali, Italian scholar and writer of film studies, commented that with the invention of dramatic narratives and genre-specific plots in traditional Hollywood films, urban scenes and landscapes have become an essential tool for creating spectacular aesthetic effects, spreading demagogic messages and producing psychological resonance. As it was pointed out earlier, the film-making trend in which landscape has a message beyond being a mere sight to behold, has been found in recent Korean independent documentaries. In films such as *Miryang, a Welcome Guest* (Hah Saet-byul et al., 2014), *Legend of Miryang* (Park Bae-il, 2013), *Miryang Arirang* (Park Bae-il, 2015) or *Four Seasons, Malhae* (Heoh Cheol-nyeong, 2017), images of village elders sitting on the road leading to the power transmission tower construction site to form a human barricade, or villagers working in their paddies and fields recur and repeat. Meanwhile, in documentary films about the construction of a naval base in Gangjeong, Jeju, such as *Jam Docu Gangjeong* (Gyeongsun et al., 2011), *Gureombi, The Wind is Blowing* (Cho Seong-bong, 2013) or *The Memory of the 25th Hour* (Kim Seong-eun, 2016), placeless-ness is illustrated by contrasting the images of Gureombi Rock before the start of the project - which proceeded in spite of local resistance - with its image after it was destroyed by the construction project. These films have replaced the various landscapes with similar meanings, voicing a shared perception that the natural landscape has been damaged by governmental power and capital.

Some may argue that this similarity of landscapes is due to the films’ shared geographical identity and the same social changes. But the crux of the issue is not on the conditions of production of such landscapes, but the ways of its production and method. One aspect of independent documentaries set in places like Miryang, Gangjeong and Seongju have in common is that they create an oppositional relationship between local residents and public authorities, with the dividing line between them often represented by barbed wire entanglements or fences that are symbols of exclusion. Other binary pairs ensue from this initial dichotomy, such as that of civilization and barbarism, city and countryside, men and women, the state and civil society or good and evil, to feed into the narratives of humanism and political correctness. Just like Western movies where a nation-building landscape unfolds through the territorial war between the cavalry and the Indians, these independent documentaries set in Miryang, Gangjeong and Seongju weave a narrative for building or restoring of a community. In these films, the landscape is primarily a place where key events take place, and conflicts occur. Landscape in these films are also physical and spiritual dwellings of the characters, a place where forgotten history and memories from an oppressive past linger, and a physical location where social relationships have been destroyed. For this reason, backgrounds, settings, and the field in the films are reduced to symbols that imply placeness, humanity, collectivity, and communality destroyed by the power of the state and capital. Moreover, landscape becomes charged with cultural significance, even if the exact nature of this significance varies depending on the political, ethical and moral views of their respective directors. In this sense, the landscapes in independent documentaries produced in recent years—or their setting to be more

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accurate—is a "medium of cultural representation" rather than an autonomous landscape. In discussing the treatment of landscape in independent documentaries produced over the last few years, attention should be given to the way of treating such landscapes as a cinematic element. Such a focus tends to lead towards an echo-chamber of how educational and compelling, and how they have advanced public interests at the expense of making sufficient aesthetic judgement. It is necessary to examine whether landscapes are used as beneficial drugs or poisonous tool in independent documentaries.

**A creative manipulation for landscapes**

John Grierson was among the early film makers to have understood the importance of natural elements in documentary films. Grierson stated that Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926), a film about life among Polynesian aboriginals, that this film had a documentary value and was primarily achieved through "a poetic sensibility for natural elements." Afterwards, Grierson argued in his other writings that documentaries place new artistic forms on raw materials obtained from observation or selection from life itself, building stories based on indigenous actors or indigenous scenes, and based on such elements interpret modern worlds: it is a "creative work". In other words, for Grierson documentaries is a genre that creates narratives, characters and drama with raw materials drawn from life, including natural elements. Although Grierson never expressed the view that landscapes can be autonomous, there is however no doubt that he regarded them as a formal element of films.

To put my concluding thesis ahead, in short, is that some of the independent documentaries produced in recent years which have rural towns as their "setting", failed to use a consistent methodology in their treatment of landscape. For example, what we perceive as landscape in these films is, in fact, either a tool to communicate a theme or message or a simple filler of ‘dead time’

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devoid of any real function or purpose. This quasi-landscape oscillates between being a tool with a specific function and an aesthetic form, and for this reason, can be neither a setting nor a true landscape.

Consider the ‘Four Seasons, Malhae’ by Heoh Cheol-nyeong, for example. This film tells the life story of Kim Malhae, a resident of Miryang where the community has been torn up by a recent power transmission tower project. The life story of an old woman, who has witnessed all major events in the modern history of Korea from the Japanese colonial period to Korean War and Bodo-yeonmaeng (ideological re-education program for “communist sympathizers”), is interwoven with scenes from her everyday life. Although the film clearly intends to make Malhae into a living witness of modern history, it falters in doing so. There are a number of reasons that explain this failure. To begin with, as the story is told mainly through Kim Malhae’s testimony and that of her friends and relatives offer a glimpse into the modern history of Korea which remain rather superficial. Furthermore, the film falls short of describing the relationships between the key characters, which makes Malhae, the main character of the film, appear socially isolated. Although it has the merit of having documented a chapter of history based on oral history, a film that proposes itself to be a microscopic inquiry into the modern and the contemporary history of a country cannot simply rely on oral history. As elements like oral history, drama and landscape do not converge with one another, and Malhae’s life is fragmented as a result. Due to this cacophony between central and peripheral elements, the film appears to lack any special conflict, event or drama, even though it has a central character. This failed setting in which events, actions and the narrative do not come together to form an organic unity is repeatedly interspersed with quasi-landscapes that has no autonomous landscapes.

The hollow formation of landscapes in Four Seasons, Malhae are made obvious from the very start of the film. Its opening consists of six shots that are alternately situation and action shots. The first is a full shot of the main character Malhae standing in the mid-slope of a mountain, followed by a close-up shot of bracken fern. The scene then transitions into one in which Malhae is shown harvesting some kind of herbs. These two shots, together with the first full shot explain the nature of Malhae’s activity. The natural landscape in the mid-slope of a mountain shown in these three shots, therefore serves as the setting for Malhae’s activity. However, the frame that follows immediately after is a bit puzzling as the scene changes into an unknown grave mound which fills the screen. This grave, which is located near where the first shot was taken, but was not visualized in the initial shot, now appear as though it has emerged from a totally different time and space. In the following frame, we finally perceive the grave mound appearing beyond the shoulders of Malhae, bent over harvesting bracken fern, and are able to situate it. Due to the order of the scene successions, the opening sequence struggles to maintain its temporal and spatial continuity. The viewers now realize that this sequence of shots successively fragments, extends and reintegrates the image of Malhae harvesting bracken fern in the mid-slope of a mountain, as well as the reality and the space in which she finds herself. But there remains an unanswered question: to whom does the grave belong in the opening sequence? Even upon a careful look, the viewer is unable to figure out much about this grave as the film is forcing an image upon the viewer, while withholding all pertinent information about it. Such a strategy of forcible exhibition, coupled with concealment, is also utilized in the final shot of the opening sequence which focuses on Malhae, who soon disappears behind a rock, leaving only the green thicket to fill the scene. Something is made to disappear in order for something else to be shown, or something is silenced in order for something else to be shown. Thus, the opening sequence is indicative of a hidden directorial desire to exhibit something, at the same time, concealing it. However, the intent behind this gesture is unclear and will remain so, unless the viewer can find out more about the grave.

The grave mound from the opening sequence later reappears at the halfway point of the film and in the most ambiguous possible way. There is a scene
in which Malhae climbs up a mountain slope with great efforts to stand in front of a barbed wire entanglement. She places a glass filled with soju on the ground in front of her and bows toward it as though carrying out a memorial service. She then speaks to the camera, saying that her late parents-in-law were laid to rest beyond the barbed wire entanglement. With a view barred by the barbed wire entanglements, the camera is unable to show clearly the graves that lies beyond it. In fact, the graves are invisible to the viewer for all intents and purposes. Thus, it is difficult for the viewer to make any connection between the graves beyond the barbed wire and the grave from the opening sequence. There is simply not enough cinematic information for the viewer to associate the two or notice any differences between them. The only available means to obtaining the missing information about the graces would be hearing it directly from the director of the film. The background information surrounding this grave, not provided in the film, is apparently as follows: the barbed wire entanglements were set up during a construction project for a power transmission tower to restrict residents’ access to the site, and the grave of Malhae’s parents-in-law happened to lie beyond the entanglements. Years later, this grave was moved elsewhere, which is where Malhae was shown harvesting bracken fern in the opening sequence. In sum, by showing the image of Malhae lamenting in front of the barbed wire entanglement, the film appears to be trying to give a special narrative and symbolic significance to her separation from her parents-in-law’s grave. Since the barbed wired entanglements that caused Malhae sorrow and grief can be construed as a symbol of state violence against individuals, this has the effect of transforming places, spaces and landscapes around her into elements driving a grand narrative about national ideology. As this larger narrative with themes of greater significance emerges, the story of Malhae, the main character, becomes overshadowed and sacrificed by it.

Hence, both the grave mound that suddenly appears in the opening sequence and the invisible grave beyond a barbed wire entanglement toward the middle of the film are hollow landscapes, created by the director’s desire to extend it into a grander narrative. They are not landscape settings in a real sense insofar as they bear no meaningful relation to the film’s narrative, actions or events. Nor are they visually spectacular or aesthetically autonomous landscapes. The landscapes in this film are at the limit of the viewer’s perceptual capabilities, as they appear and disappear as though a mirage. They are the residues that fail to register with the viewer’s perception, of both imagination or its meaning.

Park Bae-il’s Soseongri (2017) is another film which had sufficient conditions for a successful use of landscapes, but seemed to have missed its potential. The film appears hesitant in its treatment of landscape, seemingly unable to decide between the narrative and the visual elements. Before I start discussing Soseongri, I have to point out the fact that Park’s recent output appears to have followed the same pattern that he has accustomed us to, almost seemingly like he is repeating himself. His recent works like Legend of Miryang, Miryang Arirang and After Breaking the Silence (2016), and including Soseongri, rely on the same cinematic method in which the faces and voices of the characters are merged with the places they live, spaces and landscapes of which they are immersed. For example, the opening sequence of Legend of Miryang is composed of a series of shots showing a lake, magpies perched on an electrical pole, paddies and fields to paint a pastoral image of a rural village in Miryang. After these landscape scenes, the film successively shows a woman toiling in the field, another woman having a meal with other villagers inside a tent set up as a rallying point for the people protesting the construction of a 765kV power transmission tower, and another woman in an encampment protest, conversing with other residents. These women, all of them squarely facing the camera, introduce themselves by stating their names and that they are residents of Bugok-myeon (township), Changnyeong-gun (county), Gyeongsangnam-do (province). The film tells how the power transmission tower project has pushed the residents of a small peaceful rural village out into the streets to protest, leaving their daily activities aside. Legend of Miryang is therefore an epic tale of their fierce battle against public authorities. The profilmic landscapes in this film are used as a
setting for its events, actions and narrative as well as used by the residents of this village to give voice to their concerns.

On the other hand, in *Soseongri*, settings and landscapes blend with each other and are oftentimes mixed up together in a disorderly fashion. In some cases, a landscape is shown when there should be a setting and thereby the narrative is stalled as a result. In other times, images of a scenery that was used as a setting and not as a landscape are shown, thus creating dead time. Concretely, *Soseongri* deals with events that occurred on April 26, 2017. It documents how the lives of the residents of Soseong-ri (village), Chojeon-myeon (township), Seongju-gun (county), Gyeongsangbuk-do (province) were transformed by the surprise deployment of THAAD that took place on this date. Like in *Legend of Miryang*, a series of pastoral scenes are shown successively at the introduction of the film, which is then followed by images of local residents on their daily activities in the paddies and fields. Against the backdrop of this setting, the experiences of local residents are communicated through their own voices. The most obvious difference between *Soseongri* and Park’s previous films is the use of voiceover: in other words, the voices of residents are used without being accompanied by their images. The voices of the people of *Soseongri*, separated from their body, are merged with still landscapes that succeed one another. As a matter of fact, there is hardly any interview scene at all in this film. The interview audios with the residents, which was personally conducted by the director is overlaid on the scenes of daily activities in the village. This has an effect of making the voices of the villagers, now deprived of their bodily seat, to freely float in a cinematically created artificial world. At the beginning of the film, the unity of the voice and body are maintained, but as the film continues, the voices become increasingly disembodied. Also, there are moments in which several voices are heard at the same time, so that they gradually become noise rather than signals. As this goes on, the collective memories of the people of Soseong-ri and their empirical testimonies that the film is trying to register through their voices slowly lose the impact. Likewise, the images of solidarity and cohesion among the local residents the film is trying to portray are also severely undercut. *Soseongri* comes across as a filmic practice found in slow cinema; however, the directorial ambition to maintain an aesthetic continuity of landscape was disserviced by turning the landscapes into a poisonous element.

The main reason why the continuity of landscape ends up sabotaging the film is that this style is simply not suitable for conveying the spatiotemporal experiences of Soseong-ri, a village brought to a crisis by a high-tech defense installation project. Direct mentions of the deployment of the THAAD missile battery appear only at the midpoint of the film. The first half of the film depicts the peaceful daily lives in Soseong-ri, a sleepy little village like any other rural village in Korea. The second half deals with tragic tales of how this peace in the village comes to an abrupt end with the deployment of THAAD. There is a strong emphasis on the continuous succession of autonomous landscapes often found in epic narratives. While proposing itself as a social documentary about the calamities that befell a rural village, the extreme emphasis on landscape brings the sense of time to a halt. If the goal was to dynamically portray the process of destruction of a community by creating a sharp contrast between the peaceful daily life in this village prior to the fateful event and the current physical and psychological trauma, the film should have embedded a deeper understanding of the spatiotemporal organization in this community through a long-term observation of its history from an anthropological perspective and consultation of related records. For example, the film should have shown how labor, family and community customs, and rituals are organized in this village, according to the seasonal rhythm of time, through the daily meals or activities in each season. It would have been also necessary to describe how the past, present and the future crystallize in the present space of Soseong-ri. Without such an effort to recreate the spatiotemporal organization of the local community, the film simply combines voices that are severed from the bodies of the speakers with still landscapes: a choice seemingly based mainly on a stylistic decision, bringing forth ambiguity to the ultimate goal of this film.
**Toward a Creative Reinvention of Landscape**

Landscapes are like a double-edge sword that one cannot avoid. While landscapes can seamlessly bridge the functions and the meaning of film overall, or serve as an individual aesthetic form, it can also be a force detrimental to organic unity between the cinematic elements. In recent independent documentary films, there has been an overproduction of landscape images. The process of displaying rural environments in response to social changes and of embracing the cinematic practice to creatively manipulate the landscapes as an immediate task, the landscape becomes subordinated to the narrative and its meaning. In this sense, the excess and also the deficit of landscape is shown simultaneously. Whether the landscape will be a medicine or a poison for an independent documentary depends entirely on directorial choices and decisions. Inventing landscapes that matches a director’s vision seems especially important for independent documentaries that are intended as a form of social engagement. Rethinking the Grierson’s remark about the creative work of the natural elements, both independent documentary makers and critics of today must turn their eyes to the praxis of landscape and its effect on the film.

Lee Do Hoon studied video and culture, with major writings that include *21st Century Independent Film* (co-author, Association of Korean Independent Film & Video, 2014) and the articles “Spatial Reproduction and Emotional Loss” (*Journal of Image & Film Studies*, 2014), “Korean Independent Film and a Chronicle of Impoverishment” (*Journal of Image & Film Studies*, 2015), “Warrior of Street Film: The 19th Century New York Ghetto Photography of Jacob Riis” (*Journal of Aesthetics and Science of Art*, 2017), and “Contemplative Film, Essay Film: Commentary toward a Theoretical Approach to Essay Film” (*Contemporary Film Studies*, 2018). He has also co-translated the book *War on Terror, Inc.* (Galmuri, 2016). He is currently an editorial member for the video criticism quarterly *Okulo*.
From Net Art to Post–Internet Art: Open Possibilities of Post–Internet Art

Nathalie Boseul Shin

Granada, Spain. The game begins once a player wears a smart contact lens. Now the present-day Granada is interlinked with the Granada of medieval period, and the player must protect oneself from the enemies from the medieval ages. The plaza turns into a battleground, the antique shop transforms into the items store for the game players. The player roams about the city, defeating enemies and earning points to move up to the higher level. The city is now a backdrop for a game—a game that does not unfold in front of monitor, keyboard, or mouse. Neither does it require fancy goggles or data gloves. A contact lens and a login ID for the WIFI is all it takes. A simple hand motion will log you in and out anytime and anywhere, even while walking down the street. So it would not matter if the player is new to the city and doesn’t know their way around. The navigation feature embedded in the smart lens will guide the way. A seamless coexistence of virtual and real worlds: here in Granada, the dichotomy of virtual and real no longer valid.

The recently aired cable TV series, Memories of the Alhambra, is a mystery surrounding the development of a network-based multiuser AR (augmented reality) game that takes place in Granada, a place where real and virtual spaces perfectly overlap. Of course, the story is still (yet) only fiction. For instance, for a Korean player to be fighting assassins from the Joseon-period, out in Gwanghwamun Square through real-time rendering by AR technology and not on a computer screen, there are quite a few technical advancements to be solved. It’s been said that Samsung Electronics has applied for a patent regarding a smart contact lens and the manufacturing and operational technologies, nevertheless the technical challenges such as power sourcing, heat issues, and materialization of real-time, and importantly, the user-centric location-based video projection, are all concerns to be addressed before such a contact lens can be commercialized. However, this means that while the technology is far off, it is not impossible.

Who would have thought in the 1980s that so many people would
be using this device called a “smartphone” today? As the saying goes, maybe imagining is the most dangerous act since human beings will realize almost anything they can imagine. We are living in such an age when old science fiction movies have become real: we talk to our TVs; a sleep monitoring system wakes us up in our best condition in the morning; we read books on our computers; and computers select music and books according to our tastes. Perhaps, it may not be appropriate to say computers “select” for us, but what can be said about our contemporary condition is that our surroundings communicate and that we live in an era where everything is hyperconnected through the world-wide network. In another words, this post-internet era is the future we’ve arrived.

In this essay, I intend to outline the characteristics of the contemporary era which is often called the “post-internet era,” and explore different aspects of artistic phenomenon that have emerged in accordance with the transformations in technology and our environment. But before analyzing the beginning (or the progress) of the post-internet era in a theoretical sense, let us take a closer look at exhibitions and works of art that specifically recognize the key characteristics of this era, and how it differs from those of the early internet era.

There are a few notable changes and indicators observed in recent internet-based art, though it would still be premature to list them as “post-internet art.” Further, the terminology “post-internet”—as with many other names with the prefix “post”—is ambiguous and its debatable nature makes it hard to define them specifically. Regardless, the internet/network-related characteristics found in recent arts are clearly distinguishable from those of the early internet-based arts, thus for the sake of convenience I will use the term “Post-internet art” to categorically refer the works that characterize the current “post-internet era”.

Nevertheless, the term “post-internet art” is widely used. Kim Jihun’s feature article “Post-Internet Art: Is It Over?” in the November 2016 issue of Art In Culture adequately circumscribes up the term. Quoting Marisa Olson, Kim writes “According to Olson, post-internet art comprises all kinds of artworks produced in reaction to the phenomenon in which online language, style, and behavior basically infiltrate into offline life.” In an interview in 2013, Olson emphasized that post-internet art is “art that couldn’t/wouldn’t exist before the internet (technologically, phenomenologically, existentially) and bin the ‘style’ of or ‘under the influence’ of the internet in some way.” (https://romanroadjournal.com/post-internet-art-the-search-for-a-definition/)

1. Post-Internet Era/Art

The first recorded use of the term “post-internet” was in the mid-2000s, during a discussion between the editors of an internet based arts and culture magazine Rhizome and artists Marisa Olson, Gene McHugh, and Artie Vierkant on the “Net art.” Here, Olson said that internet art refers to works of performances, songs, texts, and installations derived from the act of surfing on the web, or downloading source materials, rather than the art that can be viewed online. Guthrie Lonergan and Cory Arcangel have also echoed Olson’s view and said the term Net art refers to being “internet aware.” Based on these references then, post-net art, much like internet art, can be said to have originated from Dada, Fluxus, and art movement such as the net culture, but what differentiates the two is, whereas net art and telematic art pay close attention on the internet as a “communication technology”, post-internet art considers the internet as a “medium”. In short, post-internet art does not instrumentalize the internet as a tool: rather, it is devoted to the utilizing and analyzing of the “environment of internet” as an impetus for change in social structure, whether it be on a virtual or physical strata.

There is nothing new in the fact that technological progress played a significant role in eliciting change in art. However, considering how the technological development and the recent expansion and distribution of the internet have been destabilizing the most fundamental aspects of art, it offers critical objectives for a further exploration. Beginning with how we recognize the authorship, to how collaboration and materiality are conceptually defined, and to ways in which art world structurally operates; where and how the artworks are created, exhibited, sold and collected are all scrutinized and questioned.

In this sense, clearly the post-internet art is neither “about” the internet, nor about works “on” the web, and still not about the works produced “after” the advent of the internet. Rather, as pointed out by Olson, it encompasses an
extensive range of activities surrounding the internet environment. The distinction between internet art and post-internet art is well described by Mark Tribe’s interview with Art in America. “Internet art was a movement that arose in 1994 and waned in the early 2000s. Post-internet artists stand on the shoulders of net art giants like Olia Lialina, Vuk Ćosić, and Jodi, not in order to lift themselves higher into the thin atmosphere of pure online presence but rather tocrush the past and assemble the fragments in strange on/offline hybrid forms.”

3. From Net Art to Post-Internet Art

The immediate prelude to post-internet art was net art. As widely known, the story behind the birth of the term “net art” is quite interesting. In 1996, Vuk Ćosić received an email from Alexei Shulgin, and for some reason the text was indecipherably broken: “[..]J8~g# |;Net.Art –s1[..]” Among the enigmatic series of symbols, Ćosić was only able to make out the words “Net.Art” and thus began the use of the term. It was later circulated upon usage at an art festival and eventually created a new wave. Major net artists include Alexei Shulgin, Olia Lialina, Jodi, Vuk Ćosić, and Graham Harwood, and among major theoreticians are Tilman Baumgärtel and Josephine Bosma. At the time net art can only be accessed through the internet and often reflected the level of available technology of its production (such as works with green text blinking on the black screen for example) or utilizing the found glitches in new technologies. Unfortunately, net art failed to make vigorous use of high technology or enter into a mainstream genre in art, regardless, it has effectively addressed subjects such as art history, politics, language, and connectivity.

www.jodi.org (1995), is probably the most symbolic work that epitomizes the characteristics of net art. As you enter the website, a black screen filled with green ASCII codes appears. Generally recognized as a screen when an error or a software malfunctions, this random sample text is in fact a picture of an atomic bomb drawn with ASCII codes for those who understood source codes. Mark Tribe explains that “jodi.org can be seen as a formalist investigation of the intrinsic characteristics of the internet as a medium.”

4. Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesman, the artists behind jodi.org, utilize elements such as coding, software, pixels, and animation to expose the aesthetic and conceptual possibilities of the internet and what it can be.

My Boyfriend Came Back from the War, another famous work of early net art by Olia Lialina, rests on the method of fragmented storytelling. When you open the website, the browser splits into two, and when you click on the image of a woman on the upper right side, the screen splits again as the text “Where are you? I can’t see you.” appears on the center of the screen. When you click on the text, the screen divides again. The phrases and images continue to split as they narrate a story—a classic hypertext narrative. This work was originally designed for the now extinct Netscape Navigator 3.0 the Gold Edition browser and cannot be accessed in the original form, but thanks to Rhizome, the work is archived and presented in an emulated form and the public is able to appreciate this early work of net art without technical hassle.

As such, net art must be connected to the internet, operate on a web browser, and unfold through links and clicks. In other words, it is an arrangement that will vanish without support of electricity and browsers. The fact that a large number of early works of net art are now inaccessible due to upgrades in browsers demonstrates this characteristic of the net art. Earlier stage of net art perceived the internet as a new space and conducted various experiments on this platform, but it couldn’t help but be restrained by the limits of the interface due to its immaterial and network-dependent nature. In this sense, the expansion and evolution of net art through collaboration with other genres can be interpreted as attempts to overcome these inherent limits.

In “From Net Art to Post-Internet Art,” Raivo Kelomees summarizes net
art’s development curve in five stages:

① Preparatory stage in the 1970s–1980s in various places and continents, technically rather modest, but novel as far as innovation goes (projects by Roy Ascott, Robert Adrian, Douglas Davies, Nam June Paik, and others).

② Projects based on the real internet, first half and middle of the 1990s: birth of “net art.”

③ Software art and the generative art trend, partially coinciding with net art (Alexei Shulgin, Olga Goriunova, and Amy Alexander).

④ Net art’s trend of becoming more physical with sculptural, architectural, performative, and installation projects (still ongoing, in Estonia e.g. Timo Toots and his versions of “Memopol”; etoy.com, Heath Bunting’s projects, Paul Sermon’s telematic installations, Varvara & Mar’s “Binoculars to … Binoculars from …” and “Speed of Markets.”)

⑤ The post-internet art trend, which emerged from the internet environment, but its contacts with net-based practice were indirect: the net experience and content became more physical: the second half of the 2000s to the present (Marisa Olson, Gene McHugh, Artie Vierkant, and others).

As mentioned earlier, the immateriality of net art naturally led to the expansion by mergence with other genres, which eventually led to the emergence of post-internet art as we know it. In this context, it is not inaccurate to say that net art was the point of departure of post-internet art. But what is worth noting is that having derived from net art, post-internet art, unlike its matrix, does not only exist on the internet but also in the real world simultaneously.

That post-internet art exists as objects with materiality in real world, unlike net art, and suggests a greater potential for change than one might expect: it indicates that post-internet art, unlike other technology-based art, has the potential to expand from being a subgenre or a subdivision in the contemporary art world. That is, in this context a works of post-internet art have the potential to be exhibited in white-cube, appeal to the existing collectors to be purchased in the art market, or collected, which significantly differentiates itself from net art. In fact, due to this reason, the works referred to as “post-inter-

3. Art Post-Internet

In the spring of 2014, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCAA) in Beijing held Art Post-Internet (March 1–May 11, 2014), an exhibit to recapitulate the post-internet art. Allowing the fact that this exhibition was held while the post-internet phenomenon was still unfolding, it was significant as it offered the grounds to consider how the post-internet phenomenon manifests in art, the different types of methodologies, and moreover, the ways in which the post-internet art is contextualized and defined.

In the introduction of the exhibition, curators Karen Archey and Robin Peckham explain the featured works in terms of seven sub-categories: distribution, language, the posthuman body, radical identification, branding and corporate aesthetics, paintings and gesture, and infrastructure. There may be different opinions as to whether such categorization is something that only applies to post-internet art and obviously there is a need for further discussion, but it is true that aspects of the sub-themes are undeniably recognizable in the works shown at the exhibition.

Many keywords in our daily lives have rapidly changed, but the development of information technology, expansion of the online network, and shifts in distribution channels have brought more fundamental changes to the structure of the art world and the ways in which artworks are produced. Clearly, there are more diverse platforms to engage with works of art than ever before. While physically attending exhibitions and reading exhibition catalogues are still in existence, now a large share of the public encounters art work through online and via information technology: art blogs, YouTube channels, gallery or museum websites, and so forth. However this doesn’t illustrates the fact that channels

that offer information on artworks and artists have become diverse; the crux of the issue is that this phenomenon prompted fundamental changes in understanding the work of art as an “object” and its documentation, not to mention social aspects of those who experience the works and how artists utilize the network in their work processes.

Vierkant’s works candidly address these issues. His work *Image Objects* (2011) can be seen as a work that combines material/physical sculpture and immaterial image. *Image Objects* consists of a series of works, which seem like composites of images taken from afar, isn’t so simple to produce as it seems. To begin with, the images are born as digital files—a form open to infinite variations. The files then are manipulated through image software and delivered in their manifested forms. These altered images are printed onto Dibond panels with UV rays in order to create depth to be transformed into photographic prints, after which are cut out to exactness to achieve sculptural presence. In this process, the boundary between the artwork and the act of artmaking becomes blurred, and the secondary experience of encountering the work online ultimately become a poignant aesthetic experience.

Further, language is a field that cannot be overlooked when discussing post-internet art. As a communication medium, internet has transformed the way we speak and think, and in that process, visual language has become ever so crucial. Moreover, as through the internet, the world became interconnected and the English language as the universal script on the internet. Jon Rafman and Rosa Aiello’s *Remember Carthage* (2013) is a short film with a poetic narrative rendered through the various visual apparatuses, effects, and editing techniques used in ‘machinima’, a real-time computer graphics engines used to create a cinematic production. In it, the dreamlike narration with an air of melancholy was done by the machine generated voice and not by human.

“The post-human body” is another central element in discussing the post-internet art. An Estonian installation artist Katja Novitskova’s *Approximation* focuses on the idea of representation, and considers the relationship between the human body and the surrounding nature. Similar to the celebrity billboards, by blowing up found images of animals online and printing them at large scales onto aluminum panels, the artist associates the viewer’s eyes with the camera lens and turns the bleak white cube into a lush ecological habitat.

Yet another crucial subject is the “online identity”. The curators of *Art Post-Internet* describe the online identity in the era of post-internet as a “radical identity.” The everyday reality that exist anytime and anywhere through online platforms is often examined as a “flattened subjectivity.” Equally, it was clearly manifested through the phenomenon of “camgirl” in today’s social media as one’s identity is easily grouped together, repackaged, and branded.

A web video work by a British installation artist Ed Fornieles titled “Pool Party”, presents a parody of the youth culture by depicting archetypal characters often observed in the popularized media. The scenario unfolds in a party scene somewhere in Los Angeles as the youth gathers for a ‘pool party’, which results in a physical fight, then a reunite, and finally with a murder case, all produced with video filters such as a “fake Super 8 dust” and glitchy effects which gave the piece a “cheap social media aesthetic”; resulting with the parodied version of reality TV shows.

Lastly, the *Art Post-Internet* adopted a new method of production and distribution of exhibition catalogue as well. Conventionally the visitors would have to purchase a thick, hardcover exhibition catalogues at the museum store or a gift shop, but the *Art Post-Internet* offered a downloadable catalogue online. There is nothing distinctive about downloading an exhibition catalogue from the museum website nowadays, but the interesting aspects was as the catalogue was downloaded, the IP addresses of the downloaders and the total number of downloads were recorded and exhibited like numbers of a printed publication on their website.

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7) [http://artievierkant.com](http://artievierkant.com) (archive from 2008 to 2014)
9) [https://vimeo.com/5705874](https://vimeo.com/5705874)

9) 《아트, 포스트-인터넷》 도록 pp.8-9.
4. Open Possibilities of Post-Internet Art

Admittingly, there is a limit in which examining the new movement of art through exploring a single exhibition. Further, as commented by the curators of Art Post-Internet, the suggested keywords and categories at the exhibits are only means to explain the characteristics of the works featured at the exhibition and the works weren’t necessarily selected or curated with specific categories of the Post-Internet art in mind. As such, it would be fair to say that the works at the exhibit were not confined by their chosen categories: in fact, they represent diverse interpretations of post-internet art to the point where they even seem mutually exclusive, much less conform to a single definition. For instance, there were works that intentionally emphasize the aspects of network, while others explore realms such as the physicality of bits and bytes, the social impact of the internet as an archive, the essential changes in image, distribution of cultural objects, participatory politics, and the concept of materiality, approaching the concept from diverse angles.

Regardless, Art Post-Internet saw a wide spectrum of post-internet art from the perspective of artistic practice, understanding it within the process from conception to materialization, and distribution that has manifested with network-consciousness, thereby leaving possibilities open. As such, post-internet art is technically open to various methodologies and techniques in the advertisement rhetoric, graphic design, commercial branding, visual merchandising, and commercial software tools. Material wise, it encompasses an extensive range of subjects from internet politics, public surveillance, data mining, materiality of the network, the posthuman body, and open-source movements.10

Whereas prior technology-based media arts sparkled in the minor fields occupied by a handful of technologically apt geniuses, engineers, and technicians only to fade from the contemporary art scene or remain in their own leagues, the post-internet art has instinctively permeated and settled in the conventional art world. At a glance, these works don’t seem so different from conventional photographs and videos, but they are distinct in terms of how they’re produced and how they interpret and treat image. Post-internet art infinitely draws images and videos from around the network, modifies them using software, converts the immaterial data into material forms, and twists them. Like drones, post-internet artists see the world through a mechanical eye disengaged from the human body to capture and edit from a virtual perspective. Needless to say, reality remains solid but the presence of a virtual reality is superimposed atop. Reality and virtual reality thus become loosely attached to form one spacetime, and within the spacetime, art attains room for a broader scope of expression and experimentation. And it is these kinds of attempts that we call post-modern art today.

Whether post-modern art will have resilience and exist in a longer lifespan or wither away as a fad of an era is still to be seen. However, what is certain is that the network environment unfolding around us is a new world with infinite possibility for artistic exploration. Through many experiments, we will continue to learn from the environment, one aspect after another, and as always, there are countless artists who are ushering in changes today through various new attempts.
Theory Study

I will not live the way you want:
Thoughts on relation between Screen,
Gender, and Visual Arts
Kim Shin Sik _ 182

Representations/Machines/Objects as
the World: Recent movements in Korean
Contemporary Art
Jeung Gangsan _ 198

Nonlinearity of Meaning and Structure
outside Structure
Jung Hoon _ 218
I will not live the way you want: Thoughts on relation between Screen, Gender, and Visual Arts

Kim Shin Sik
- Published on Nov. issue, 2019 on Art In Culture

Some time ago, I posted a gif file from the Japanese anime series called the “Hell Girl” on Instagram, before I finished watching the series to the end. In the first episode, a girl named Mayumi is a victim of ijime-school bullying, and dreads going to school. One night she comes across a strange website called “Hell Communications,” though it is in fact more accurate to say that the website came to her. The website was set up to help people take revenge on those who have wronged them. Mayumi was aware of the fact that connecting to this website puts her own life in danger but decides to try it nonetheless. After she signs up with the revenge service, using the input window on her computer monitor, Enma, the hell girl, emerged from cyberspace into the real world, and the two became friends. Mayumi later found out that Hell Communications has a long history, predating the PC era. She learned that years ago in the age of ‘printed media’, Hell Communications ran newspaper ads to reach those who were interested in their services. In Video Girl AI (better known as Denei Shojo), there is a video rental store that is visible only to those with a broken heart. Likewise, in Hell Girl, only those who bear a grudge against someone can see the contact information of Hell Communications. In the days of pre-PC era, it was only those vengeful clients would witness the contact information appear magically in a newspaper: a moment in which a paper surfaced for resolving grudges transformed into a screen surface.

The introduction has become longer than I expected. Like most people of my generation, I have lived through the CRT (Cathode Ray Tube) TV era, followed by home video and computer screen eras before arriving at today’s flat screen era. At some point in this journey, I started to question the relationship between the screen/vengeance/ or fulfilling of a wish. This has been my main subject of interest in which I probe of the relationship between the screen and gender in contemporary visual art. There is also one more subject I have yet to introduce, which is central to this topic: the “mode.” This chain of relationships between visual arts, the screen, and gender has directed me to reflect on the “mode” as a key concept. On screen, women’s principal role has long been that

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of a “mode”: a mode of emotionally comforting someone. The long history of portraying women as a mode dates far back as the film *Metropolis* in which this role was fulfilled by Maria the robot. Today, the legacy of modes found in Maria the robot lives on among others in the form of soothing female voices made with artificial intelligence (AI), such as voice recognition apps. However, there is surprisingly a little debate on how the figure of women was unwittingly arranged to become a mode in our everyday culture. In recent years, a number of visual artists have brought this issue to our attention in their works. Also, outside the realm of visual arts, several novelists and short story writers have taken on this subject, assisting us in grasping the relationship between the screen, gender and mode in the visual art.

**Mode and Mood**

Let us start with the basics. First of all, there is no mode when it comes to the mood of a subject. Media artist Song Min-jung takes the ‘modes create moods’, and ‘modes are created for moods’ as the superimposed premise of point of departure. Between a human and an object, which is more suited for generating a mood? Jean Baudrillard in his *System of Objects* (*Le Système des Objets*), stated that objects overall are superior to humans in generating a mood. What is impressive about Song’s media art work, the *Serious Hunger* for example, is the way she spatially arranges objects. The uniqueness of the mood found in this work is not so much due to the distinctive ways of displaying objects as the simple fact of being “placed there.” Here, the uniqueness can be considered a kind of parentheses. What is unique is also always strange. Uniqueness is a feeling of distance that makes it impossible to approach something even though one is attracted to it. This could be precisely because of the screen. Each of us who are gazing at these “feeling advertisement” by Song through a screen of our personal device. Our screen is the medium that goes between us and this “feeling account” arranged by the artist.
However, it is difficult to conclude whether the screen is a device for promoting the audience engagement. Song borrows from the characteristics of online accounts and advertisements then conducts a performance of sending the packaged mood to the viewer, but it is not certain whether it results in transferring the mood to the intended completion. With the message, "Bringing you happiness and sadness" displayed, Song shows us objects that translate these moods. However, the actions of these moods are created by the artist’s arrangement and placed objects, which take on different shades according to whether or not some of them are damaged. The variation in their exaggerated colors seem to only be effective until they hit a transparent wall, which is also their (invisible) final destination and the goal. In other words, while Song takes the screen into account as viewers engage the “feeling advertisement”, it is devised with a boundary where the feeling which is activated in the virtual advertisement, only to be deleted once the encounter has been made. In brief, the screen is a double-layered device. These screens are not fixed together like one glass pane on top of another, but stand at a distance from each other, facing one another. According to Serious Hunger, the feeling is precisely the space between these two screens.

Prompted by Song’s project, one can view the reality outside of the screen as such. Consider you are about to subscribe to variety of apps and social media to experience a certain mood. Corporations which are “designers of feelings”, and you the spectator and the customer, are transmitted the feeling you desired over the digital network. But does this feeling indeed reach you sufficiently? Let’s see this from a point of view of a consumer. When you buy a certain feeling from a feeling designer, was it delivered to you in time, before your own desire for it expired? You might be hesitant to say yes, or you might just prefer to tell yourself and that it was satisfying. It is hard to tell, as there is no feedback between the feeling designer and you, the customer. It may be that a feeling is in fact nothing but an unavoidable gap that interferes between a mood designer, and the customer of a feeling.

Song makes satirical yet light-hearted portraits of all of us, showing us feeling happy or other types of feelings. She thus explores a way for us to break free from the urge to understand the reality of emotions. If a voice were to be added to Song’s works, one would imagine it as the familiar female voice we hear the AI apps. However, even if she uses this familiar voice, it is not used as a tool to elicit a specific mood. Instead, she asks the question what a mood is through her own voice as an artist, through the space between two screens that intervenes between her and the viewers.

Song’s mood project reminds me of Gamjeong-ui Mulseong [Properties of Emotion], a short story by Kim Cho-yup. It tells the story of an Emotional Such is the odd entity called feeling which is neither measured by perfect gratifications nor a serious hunger. Sadness is among the moods within Song’s experiential spectrum, but she does not visualize it in the tone of the commonly known unhappiness. The bulging cuteness and vibrant shades of colors in Serious Hunger ironically turn out to be conveyors of the other side of emotional shades the artist experienced in her exploration of feelings and their meanings. “Go mental” as they say. In order not to “lose one’s mental”, one needs to wait for a certain mood. But what if waiting for this certain mood, in order not to “lose it”, ends up making us to “go mental”? We don’t need to turn to Heidegger to understand that moods are the stuff of emotion as it was viewed throughout the history of modern philosophy. We feel an emotion because there is this thing called “feeling.” For example, for us to be able to feel sad there should be a mood that is the basis for this feeling. However, a mood is something subtle and elusive, not always easy to sense with clarity. This is the reason why when we are overwhelmed by an emotion, most of us tend to never suspect anything beyond the reality of the emotion itself. Song’s emoji with a text which reads, “But emojis always tell truth”, shows a woman who is taking a selfie while hiding her face with a hand. This emoji is juxtaposed with a smartphone screen capture which also shows a woman taking a selfie, but this time with her face fully exposed to view.
Solid stationary company, which markets a product line called Properties of Emotion. The products dubbed Properties of Emotion are soaps or ball-shaped objects that are intended to make the consumers experience their desired emotions. These products come in the full gamut of emotions from happiness to sadness. The narrator, who is an editor of a magazine, is puzzled by this phenomenon of Properties of Emotion. Why are people so obsessed about sadness solids? It’s incomprehensible, unless they buy them to avoid depression. People around him insist that he should have a sadness solid and that everyone needs one, which causes him to reflect on his feelings and moods. While the narrator initially thinks that people only need to buy emotions that make them feel happy, he later realizes that human emotions are not so simple and acknowledges the need and importance of darker emotions. Interestingly, a literary critic In Ah-yeong wrote a commentary on this short story and called it “charming.” This was not in reference to the lively tone in which the narrative unfolds, but more about how the author paradoxically uses a sweet and engaging manner to describe the essence of human emotions and the moods that ultimately create a depressive atmosphere. There is a common question raised by both women, Song in Serious Hunger and Kim in her Properties of Emotions, which, if spelled out in a hashtag form, would appear on my mind’s screen as, #DoesLookingIntoMoodsAndFeelingsMakeOneAlwaysDepressed?

**Destruction for Mood, Mood for Destruction**

If Song uses a screen to ask the question why humans desire a certain mood, what interests artist Chung Heemin is how certain moods, conveyed through a screen, can lead to a destructive mood. Her solo show, An Angel Whispers, is a case in point. Chung has been long intrigued by the booming market of online meditation videos such as brain massage or ASMR. According to the artist, the online meditation videos opened up a space of fantasy where the real and the illusory converge with each other, as we swipe the cold screen with our fingers. Her show featured canvases where the names were written...
in barely legible and composed of half-erased characters, but with sparkling textures and blurry landscapes, only some of the names were distinctly visible. Black-and-white portraits of people, and graphic tools or irregular curves drawn using thick pulp of crushed fruit were utilized. Why are we so fascinated by pixel-created moving images displayed on a mobile device? Why do these simple human gestures, aided by machines and the changes in the appearance by gestures, seem so uncanny to us, especially when this is combined with “visual sounds”? And can artist capture this eerie feeling we experience from online meditation videos and visualize it?

For Chung, online meditation videos are a medium (screen) of “destructiveness”. As paradoxical as this may sound, this destructiveness is not shown as such in her paintings. The results of destruction are purposefully omitted to show only the process and its essential aspects. Her works refuse to make a choice between the satisfaction and the displeasure a viewer may experience in the face of destructive images in an online meditation video. Her works causes the viewers ask, “What answers do her ‘painting as a screen’ offer? As Chung explores the images of destructive human activities, which ironically urges the viewers into a peaceful state of mind, she presents comfort and solace provided through a screen. It is then simultaneously delivered through graphic images of destruction and destructive gestures, also through the same screen, “the sound of illusion” appears on the screen – as if it is a response as “screen as the painting”.

Chung transposes the destructiveness and its eeriness, which accompanies the comforting mood pervading the screen, and onto her screen-paintings to show destructiveness in a new light. For example, take this painting composed of slices of video images in the shape of slices of a circle. Now reminiscent of a water surface, now reminiscent of cells, the images are however covered up with white paint. An optical illusion is created, as an image of water surface evoking a calm and soothing effect of an online meditation video, overlapping with images of cells, which is, in all evidence, a metaphor of human activities under such a calming influence. Meanwhile, white paint that covers up these images, as though an act of vandalism, is rather intriguing. What is the role of this white in relation to screen images imported on her canvas? Although the white paint thoroughly and meticulously covers up all images related to the online meditation videos, its purpose does not seem to to negate nor declare it worthless as the white interacts with the elements of the images in different ways. The thick build-up of white paint closely touches black lines drawn with graphic tools in some places and spreads out like stains in other places. It is a discrete reminder of the difference between a digital screen and the painting-screen, serving as a demarcation. The digital images, whose visibility is undercut by the “white terrorism,” appear like indistinct blackish shapes. These shadowy images echo the movement of dark masses in her video titled Song of Childhood. The narrator in this video reminisces on accompanying her mother to a grocery store as a child, evoking her memories of crushing tofu, cheese, and jelly with her hands. While this story of fragile and easy-to-crumb objects is thus told, the lumps we see on screen, which initially had distinct shapes and contours, are now squashed flat. Through the narrator’s voice, Chung shares her own experience of destructive impulses and how it affected her, thus linking the impulses with destructive images encountered in the online meditation videos. Hence, in addition to her painting-screen works, Chung utilizes the video-screen images to create moods to ask about the meaning of destructive modes of labor that unfold on digital screens.

On the Periphery of the Transformation Mode

If Chung’s works are an inquiry into the mode of human labor on digital screens which creates a certain mood through the destructive transformation, then Yoon Hyangro is an artist who is primarily interested in the ways in which “transformation” as a mode of labor is rendered on screen. Yoon’s works, which I have recently revisited, has given me the desire to explore in-depth the relationship between the screen as “a tool of revenge and fulfilling wish” and
gender. In animations, which frequently serve as motifs and materials in Yoon’s work, transformation is a mode that is process of aggression used by male protagonists, either to defend justice in the world or to take revenge on a rival who stole someone they love. How such a transformation is represented and viewed is different depending on the gender. As seen on popular media, unlike with male characters, there are elements of fetishism in the transformation of female characters. Magical transformation is also part of the process through which a heroine overcomes constraints imposed by her community and carves a path for herself in the broader world. Meanwhile, the male viewers watching the heroine in such a journey to discover a greater destiny for herself, often end up being avid consumers of the images of her body through their gaze. Large though the world may be compared to the heroine’s immediate community that stifles her, this world nevertheless seems like a claustrophobic visual field where the transformation of female characters is only consumed sexually by the male viewers.

In Yoon’s Screenshot series, what interests me are the possibilities they open up for the displaced images of transformation, which have been reduced to erotic objects of the male gaze. Transformation in her works is not representational. Yoon breaks out of the conventional mold of magical transformations insofar as hers are not linear nor rely on archetypes. Besides, these features have already been frequently pointed out as characteristics of her art as a whole. The question I ask of Yoon is whether she takes us to the extreme edge of the “transformation mode” and what role gender dynamics play in her experiments.

In Liquid Rescale or Surflatpictor, Yoon experiments heavily with screenshots and screen captures, and manipulates the images by changing resolutions and using various image editing software, which reminds me of the works of a writer Park Min-jung. Park is a storyteller who has long shown a keen interest in the blind spot limiting of the male oriented field of view. In her fictional writings, screen-related references such as CCTV, computers, and smartphones appear frequently. Women in Park’s stories are anxious as they come to realization that their bodies are besieged by the gaze of men through CCTV and spy-cams, and decide to speak up to denounce this. As a writer who majored in cultural studies, she has a keen awareness in the ramifications of screen technology and gender inequalities that persists in our society. Her writings ask an important question: what do we do, as a society, about the problem of men’s visual consumption of women’s bodies using media technology? In the Barbie’s Vibes, she tells a story of how a man’s private residence called the “Treasure Island” is gradually transformed into a space of lust and voyeurism. In Treasure Island, equipped with all sorts of media shown across dozens of screens, the main character-narrator comes to discover the obsessive voyeurism of the owner of the house, her cousin, who lives out his erotic fantasy by watching images of women.

If Park’s stories are biting criticisms of devices and systems that capture images of women’s bodies for male consumption, then Yoon counters the male gaze using visual tools that allow her to alter and modify the images through screen capture or manipulation of resolutions. By visualizing only certain scenes or “peripheral” sections of a scene from animations with teenage girls and magical transformation themes, Yoon practices methods that are similar to the visual dissection and selective focus that define the behavior of male viewers watching female characters’ transformation. At the same time, even as Yoon “mirrors” this male gaze—the selective focus that dissects images, her focus is on the transformative dynamic to a degree that the physicality of the female body is erased from her works. The result is a subversive work that shakes up the visual structure built for the consumption of the female body to its very core. This explosion of energy contained within Yoon’s two-dimensional space that she calls, ‘yusa-hoe-hwa (pseudo-painting)’, produces a uniquely powerful effect. Abstract though it is, Yoon’s representation of energy emanating from the screen, the images of female characters’ transformation and their emotional adventures, paradoxically comes across as a powerful and concrete message to society.
Screen: I will not live the way you want

If Yoon’s works are “attack of abstraction” on the field of view that is both symptom and enabler of gender inequality and inequity, artist Lee Eunsae’s sinister “painting-screens” are about prejudices that feed and distort such a view. One of Lee’s paintings that fascinates me particularly is Girls on a Viking Ride, which depicts a female idol group on a Viking ride at an amusement park. Yoon takes the work as a counteract as a witness to this situation: that a TV crew is there with their cameras zoomed in on the girls’ faces, waiting to capture them in unflattering moments.

There are eight women on the Viking ride, each with different shaped eyes. Both the camera’s eye looking at these women and the TV viewers who see them through the camera’s eye reside within this “painting-screen”, as its implicit part. The painting-screen, in its turn, is the camera and the TV viewers, as well as the showcase for the eight women who can only look back helplessly at the viewers. The women are depicted with a certain fixed expression, even as the amusement ride swings up and down, manifesting the “deleted image” of women that didn’t fit into the images of women in the popular culture. In other words, the voyeuristic expectation that they will scream in a cheer or in fear as they are jolted up and down as women are “supposed to be”, is in contrast with the immobility of expression with indignation, determination, as well as anxiety and fear. Some have pinched lips or lips twisted into a painful smirk. Others wear an exaggerated smile, perhaps in a desperate effort to maintain composure in spite of the hair-raising ride they are on. The immobility of expression in the women portrayed by Lee is in sum a mode of resisting stereotypes about women’s changing emotional dispositions or their bodily attributes that have become a staple trope of popular culture. It’s both a simple and expeditious way of dealing with the subject. But I hesitate to describe Lee’s works using these words. This is not because I am wary of Lee’s gaze as a woman, but because I am afraid to underestimate the dimensions in her works that go beyond just “crying out.” There is something that oozes out of her painting-screens and I cannot pinpoint what it is, but it intrigues me to no end. I am thinking of these women who cry out, but who at the same time try to deny the importance of the pain in their heart by telling themselves, “we all have our cross to bear.” Or others still who wake up to a society that makes them regret having cried out. What I am intrigued by is the various facets of emotions contained in this je ne sais quoi that oozes out of Lee’s painting-screens.

The most figures in Lee’s painting-screens seem to be screaming and it appears to be their main “mode.” Lee’s paintings cannot help but remind one of jeolgyu [Scream], an early short story by Yun Yi-hyung. Yoon’s stories deal with multiple facets of human relationships that are revealed online communities or group chats. Yun is a student of the anatomy of disparate human feelings. Yun’s Scream describes events that takes place in an online community whose front page shows Edvard Munch’s painting the Scream. The main characters are two women who provide “screaming services” for those who need to vent their bottled-up rage but cannot scream themselves. The screaming service website, “Scream”, is of two women who think that their lives, frustrating and painful though they may be, are just an average and who, for this reason, have always felt that they have no right to give voice to their despair. In reality, both women who provide screaming services and their clients are constantly apprehensive about the possibility that the pain they are feeling is actually no worse than what most people experience in their lives.

To return to Lee’s paintings, nothing is easier for an artist, especially a female artist, to take on the theme of women’s resentment and rage, to speak up and cry out, presenting it as they become subjects of their own rights. It’s both a simple and expeditious way of dealing with the subject. But I hesitate to describe Lee’s works using these words. This is not because I am wary of Lee’s gaze as a woman, but because I am afraid to underestimate the dimensions in her works that go beyond just “crying out.” There is something that oozes out of her painting-screens and I cannot pinpoint what it is, but it intrigues me to no end. I am thinking of these women who cry out, but who at the same time try to deny the importance of the pain in their heart by telling themselves, “we all have our cross to bear.” Or others still who wake up to a society that makes them regret having cried out. What I am intrigued by is the various facets of emotions contained in this je ne sais quoi that oozes out of Lee’s painting-screens.
Back to the end of the season 1 of *Hell Girl*. The person that helps Enma take revenge on her nemesis turns out to be a man. The man explains what made Enma become a vengeful spirit and tries to comfort her soul. This reminds one of 1970s Japanese films in which the indomitable spirit of a vengeful woman is pacified in the end so that women can remain mysterious beings. This mode at the end of *Hell Girl*, I feel, has no place in Lee’s painting-screens. My hunch is that Lee and her women won’t live according to your mode.

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Kim Shin Sik studied communications at Sungkonghoe University and researched visual culture at the Yonsei University Graduate School of Communication & Arts. He encountered affective sociology while studying the passion of people watching movies on video in 1990s. Since then, he has written criticism and lectured on visual culture and affective culture in South Korean society. He has also been editorial board member for the humanities criticism journal *Word & Bow*, the literary journal *Moonsee*, and the photography journal *VOSTOK*. For the 50th anniversary of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, he planned the fiction collection *The Square* (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea: Workroom Press, 2019). He has also written the book *Rather Difficult Feelings* (Psyche Forest, 2020).
The Speed of "Flatness" and Digitariat "in-Itself" ²

(...) In what follows, I will discuss the selected works by Korean artists of the recent decade. Let us begin by presenting two concepts that were frequently summoned in the Korean contemporary art scene from the mid-to-late 2010’s: "layer" and "flatness." Here, the implication of layer distances itself from the definition which generally refers to a certain thickness or of a folded state over another. Rather, the layer in this context indicates a concept frequently employed to describe the works of selected Korean artists, which explore how the digital media and imaging software influence the viewer’s visual and cognitive senses and as a result, the ways in which it alters classification between reality and the ‘experienced world’. Akin example to this can be the pop-up windows on a computer interface that are overlaid on top of another. In other words, it is a layer devoid of real-world properties like texture or volume, and, for this reason, is able to produce smooth and ethereal images, as well as realistic images with an aid of technical elements: a concept closely linked with the functional characteristic of the Photoshop.

Keeping this in mind, let us now take a close look at Home (2017), a media work by Kim Heecheon. Home has indeed often been discussed in terms of its "layers." The narrative plot of the work takes the city of Seoul as a backdrop, a Japanese speaking narrator pursues the trail of a character named Erica, a young female detective from Japanese anime. Meanwhile, Erica, is searching for her grandfather who has gone missing. Seoul is rendered in an anime style seen from Erica’s point of view, whereas the narrator’s search unfolds in Seoul as seen through the eye of a camera. The two cityscapes form two overlapping

¹) This article is Section 4 of a longer article that originally appeared in the December 2019 issue of Critic-al titled "Production Mode as an Enduring Signifier: On the Conditions of Contemporary Art Trends." In the latter, I argue how the collapse of the Bretton Woods system coincided precisely with the fall of modernism by explaining this phenomenon by the transition of the world monetary system, from a gold standard and fixed exchange rates to a fiat currency and floating exchange rates. Here only the section discussing the works of individual artists is provided due to space constraints.

²) This term coined in Poland has been sometimes used to refer to the elite class of an ‘information society’ that controls the collection of information and data. In this article, however, I propose to use the word ‘digitariat’ to designate the masses (or the collective body) that have become an object of rule and exploitation through the collection of digital data by corporations and the State and have been thus brought into an irremediable state of conflict with them. For detail, see Notes 16 and 17 below.
layers, which at times intersect and at other times abruptly separate from one another, until finally, they bleed into each other. Thus, while the viewer follows the narrator around the city, the narrator pursues the trail of Erica, who in her turn pursues the trail of her grandfather. But in the end, they never succeed in locating their respective objects of search. What happened to Erica’s grandfather? Was she able to get any closer to the truth of her grandfather’s disappearance? Where does the narrator’s “pilgrimage” end? Did the viewers see it from the narrator’s or Erica’s point of view? All these questions are left unanswered or, at least, are not answered clearly until the closing scene. In the world of *Home*, presented as a composition of multiple layers of realities, the viewer has been warned from the outset that there can be no single coherent reality. The narrative frame makes it very clear from the beginning that these separate worlds cannot converge into a single one. Further, *Home* thus could be read as a representation of a system of floating signifiers in which the signifiers can never firmly land on a signified, since the referential relationship between them has broken down.

In this sense, *Home* is reminiscent of Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, famously considered a prototype of postmodern novel. The ways in which New York City is portrayed overlaps with Kim’s depiction of Seoul: both cities are represented as a space where all meaning is lost and the sense of reality suspended. Further, like the private investigator in Auster’s novel series, Kim’s characters are engaged in a desperate search for one another. As the search continues, the real and the fictional world become entangled together and the perplexing image-ries begin to appear, as the discrepancy widens between the representation and the object of representation. Not only the characters in the story but the viewers lose their ways within the narrative as well. The roles played by the “detective” in Auster’s and Kim’s works are also quite similar, as they attempt to assemble some sense of meaning in chaos in order to grasp a “whole” picture, but they fail in the end, only to face the abyss of nothingness awaiting them.

In *Home*, Erica ends up taking her own life: an event which can be inter-
interpreted as a gesture that admits that the subject (detective) to comprehend any meaning has become impossible. In a world where there is nothing to investigate, there is no place for a detective. Considering that Kim’s and Auster’s invented world bears similarities, which may seem surprising at first, but is separated by three decades of spatiotemporal gap and two very different geographical spaces. But in today’s global value chain, the spaces of New York and Seoul are integrated into homogeneity which far exceeds physical distance and any cultural differences, in addition to having both cities to be fundamentally shaped by postmodernity and under its long lasting manifestation since the 60s-70s. At first glance, Kim’s work seem to start with statements on digital communication media and representational devices, and ends within the same arena of focus: however, it is a direct meditation of the condition and the ‘time-space compression’ as the Marxist scholar and economic geographer David Harvey pointed out earlier. What stands out here is a certain sense of compressed time and space. In a world that is compressed in several layers, the time and space in which it is located cannot be known: and, the very viewpoint of the subject and the ground on which he/she stands begins to drift. This is precisely where a signifier in his work corresponds with the transition into an autonomous sign system that leads into an infinite expansion of surfaces. In this sense, the “layer” is not being a layer in as digital representational sense. His layers are the layers of compressed “surface” of reality, which can never become a reality in its entirety, no matter how many layers are superimposed.

Analyzing the concept of ‘flatness’ will reveal this point more poignantly. Broadly, flatness tends to be assumed, rather narrowly, in terms of technology and media, such as ‘the imagery of a subject’ who perceives the world through (flat) digital screens such as smartphones and PCs. However, behind this understanding lies a premise that the disappearance of underlying hermeneutic dimensions and the “flatness”, indicates the quality of the new imaginary space created by new transportation and communications technology in order to gain the increased circulation of the capital. Furthermore, this term refers to the phenomenon of the ‘extinction of space’ caused by time (which also means the extinction of time itself). “Flatness” is, in short, another way of saying the compression of time and space. It is an allegory that marks the loss of reality as the world that is comprehensible to us, not a loss of reality in a sense that contrasts with the virtual. Importantly, the driving force of flatness is nothing but the accelerated turn-around time of product production, along with the accelerated financial and globalization from image productions, services to consumer goods, financial market, and experience economy. The background to this sense of compression can be summarized as follows:

"Accelerating the turnover time in products entails paralleled acceleration in exchange with consumption. Improved systems of communications and information flow, coupled with the rationalization in techniques of distribution (packaging, inventory management, containerization, market feedback), makes it possible to circulate commodities through the market system with greater speed. Electronic banking and plastic money were some of the innovations that improved the speed of the inverse flow of money. Financial services and markets (aided by computerized trading) likewise sped up. As the saying goes, ‘twenty-four hours a very long time’ in global stock markets.”

Meanwhile, as was correctly pointed out by an art critic Ahn Jin-guk,
technology is not just flat. What lies beneath the superficial flatness of digital technology and media is not only image editing technologies, transmission devices or virtual reality, but the complex practices and structures related to financial market as well as the computer engineering. Digitalization and complex mathematical formulas are the keys to the financialization of society and advances in these fields have occurred hand-in-hand with financial innovation.

It is not an accident that over the past 20 - 30 years, there was a parallel growth in the United States finance, insurance, digital software and computer system design. Together, they have replaced manufacturing as the key driver of growth in the US economy, creating enough new jobs to compensate for the losses in manufacturing jobs. The baffling speed at which digital devices circulate information and images thanks to the latest computer programming technology, is the exact mirror image of the speed at which the financial system, closely involved in production at every stage, circulates currency. Qualities that make the cycle of digital media production ultimately return to its point of origin, such as liquidity, non-permanence, non-repeatability, temporariness and instantaneousness, are unthinkable without the remarkable acceleration in the turnover of capital, brought about by financial globalization. The inconceivable speed at which images, news and other information are updated are also a mirror image of the speed of changes in real life. Employees are laid off almost as fast as they are hired, people frequently change jobs and file bankruptcy, while companies

7) Ahn Jin-guk, "Flattened Contemporary Art Floating in Heterotopia Everywhere: Flat, Digital-Internet, Ubiquity, Evil and Abject Machines, Oppressive Will," MisulSegye, Aug. 2019: 141. Ahn seems to equate the negative aspects of technology, imagined and embodied as an abject machine, with technological abyss/structure. However, the real problem is rather the relative position of technology in a broader socioeconomic context. Technology should be seen from a dialectic point of view by paying attention to how it functions in relation to other causative agents in society and the context in which it arises. In other words, digital devices, the internet and software programs can be just as much tools for revolution as abject machines.

8) As has been pointed out by Harvey, today we "experience a rush of images from different spaces almost simultaneously, collapsing the world’s spaces into a series of images,” which is a phenomenon that is essentially the same as how a supranational corporation “operates plants with simultaneous decision-making with respect to financial markets, input costs, quality control and labour process conditions in more than fifty different locations across the globe”: Harvey, op. cit.: 199.

9) Harvey expresses his view that the global circulation of images is embedded in the same reality as the global system of goods circulation in the following words: “The whole world’s cuisine is now assembled in one place, in almost exactly the same way the world’s geographical complexity is neatly reduced to a series of images on a static television screen”: Ibid: 211.
routinely engage in M&A, while the neighborhoods are transformed through mass gentrification. In conclusion, the acceleration of the speed of production, mediated by the financialization of the world economy, is the very condition and context of “flatness.”

In the work of media artist Kang Jungsuck’s GAME I: Speedrun Any % PB (2016), such flatness does not manifest itself as images of flatness, but rather as symptoms. This work is a collage of video clips from first-person shooter games that are streamed through a private live streaming platform like, ‘afreecaTV’, and various other game clips the artist has recorded from lesser known sources. The narrator initially shares his “user experiences” of several games with the viewers. But he quickly changes the tone, speaking directly to the viewers as a private broadcaster addressing his audience. What appears here is the constant flow of feedback between it and its anonymous viewers. The instant feedback between the ‘viewers/audience’ and ‘games/video art’ resembles the dynamics and instantaneous process of stock and foreign exchange rate charts that are updated every Nano-second, and how transactional data are transmitted across the world in real time for instant electronic payment, which are then fed back to the market. In other words, revealing this immediacy of interaction is what the work heavily aims for. Moreover, the ‘speed run’ chosen by Kang which takes place in a game, hints at the fact that one of the most salient aspects of our experiences today is the speed at which any and all things circulate through a system.10

Here the characters race toward their destination in the shortest amount of time, at the expense of narratives to experience. The ‘speed run’ is therefore, devoid of any narrative and is composed of a naked plot in which a character rushes toward an arbitrary goal. In such a format, what matters is the “present” in which the character keeps on running, and as a result, what we witness is a floating senses of “celebration” and of meaninglessness. It is here that Kang’s work paradoxically rejoins what Gilles Deleuze calls “intensity” (intensité), that shows a plain of as a field without any priori meaning and value. For Kang, the divide between the subject and the object, or between the representation and the referent, appears to have long been eliminated by the games and its technology. There is a striking absence of any attempt to form understanding about the world, with only a sense of the present speed: the intensity filling this void.

The only theory that can be afforded to a ‘flat being’ is presentism. It is impossible for him to distinguish between the front and the back of the present time, and his spatial movement is not counted as anything more than a certain intensity of speed. Given this vision, it is interesting to consider how he identifies himself as a “dongsedae” artist. Here “dongsedae” indicates the “contemporary generation,” intended as a pun on “dongsidae” (contemporary). As pointed out by the sociologist and art critic Suh Dong-jin, the contemporary is a discursive temporality in which there is no other sense of time except the present.12 Contemporary is a time that floats in uncertainty without history or foundations: it is a temporality in which both the past and the future have vanished. In such a sense of time, there is no collective identity that is shared by individual subjects other than the similarity of their phenomenological experiences. In this condition, “generation” would be indeed the only conceivable type of shared identity. However, such an identity is fictional and does not possess any real substance or space of its own.

These aspects offer essential clues to the layer at which his work is located, which arise from a perceptible world that is “supersqueezed.”13 The flatness of this world surpasses that of Murakami Takashi’s world of “Superflat”, in which he leveled the high and low cultures by erasing the hierarchies, a term describing the contemporary culture’s depthlessness. However, Kang’s statement that the world manifests itself as effects of images mediated by games and digital de-

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10 There is a certain parallel between GAME I: Speedrun Any % PB and Kim Heecheon’s Skiing Hole Chill (2016), a work focused on the sensation of speed created by the rapid succession of images.


13 If “superflat” is a concept that recognizes how products of a consumer society causes all cultural goods to become flat and have the same shallow depth, “supersqueezed” may be understood as the next level reached in this process of flattening, as “superflat” makes further progress.
and this transfer must take place on a contractual basis. In reality however, our information is routinely stolen from us, unbeknownst to us. At the same time, the digital network is also a communal space it not only controls the movement of all goods, but is also a fundamental condition of life, as it mediates and organizes all our actions, experiences and emotions. The digital network is an open space which can be a place of class struggle as well as a space of intervention. However, Kang’s digital space appears to be mostly a self-serving space, and his avatar, absorbed in the thrill of speed, unfortunately seems completely oblivious of its human and social potential.179

(2) The Points of Divergence

On the other hand, the multimedia artist Ham Yang-ah’s Undefined Panorama 2.0 (2019) reveals a kind of contemporary cultural landscape, comprised of images collected on the web and figures shot against a green screen. The characters in the work perform a sequential act in micromovements of the development process, which ultimately brought about today’s economic system. Skyscrapers are erected to form a financial district and the automated modes of production emerges, while human beings appear between the systems wandering aimlessly. The viewer can assume that the scene is depicted as an allegory of a “system”. What is interesting in Undefined Panorama 2.0 is not so much the relationship between the characters, but the aspects of the accidental composition, which was not under her control. In short, it can be said that Ham’s work embodies a shift in the methodology of collage work. Where the Undefined


17) Here it could be useful to evoke some examples of works that portray the digitariat as a digitariat “for itself.” Killing in Umm al-Hiran (2018) by Forensic Architecture deals with a raid on a Bedouin village by the Israeli police and the conflicts that ensued between the Israeli state and local residents of Umm-Hiran. Using digital reconstruction devices and 3D modeling systems, Forensic Architecture documents the reality of this event, which is completely different from what was reported through the official announcement by the Israeli government, in the process, presenting a new model for digital class struggle. Meanwhile, Zach Blas protests against biometrical face recognition through his Face Weaponization Suite (2011–2014). This project creates an anonymous face that is impossible to scan by exploiting weaknesses in face recognition technology, such as the tendency to misidentify people with dark skin or women and using techniques that can counter the recognition technology based on alleged physiological features specific to homosexual men and women. These artists reclaim digital spaces, which are so static as to be called the “third nature,” as political spaces.
Panorama 2.0 differs from a collage work, *Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) by Richard Hamilton, is that it does not methodically follow the rules of perspective to ensure visual balance, or arrange element in such a way as to achieve compositional unity. Furthermore, the scattered elements are not necessarily integrated into the whole to create a sculptural form, as shown in the works of Shin Hak-chul’s *Modern History of Korea: Suspended Castle* (1983). In Ham’s work, the incongruent elements are scattered around randomly, completely deviated from a single point of view, as they are projected in different perspectives. In other words, rather than aiming to generate a single image, the work foregrounds the ‘divergence of perspective’ as its motif. And this complete division and disintegration from a single perspective makes itself a basis for the condition in which materialization of currency and signs can take place in depth.

The materialization of “parts” is not a phenomenon just found in Ham’s work as it can be observed in contemporary paintings as well. For example, the loss of a single coherent perspective has become a main motif of Kim Dongjin’s experiments in 2016: the objects in his paintings are seen from diverse perspectives, while the other works of his illustrate only one object. The beheaded body in his *Meaning Is Lost* (2016) stands on the foreground, appearing as though completely separated from the background and having no significant relationship with the rest of the painting. In *Passive Destruction* (2018), human figures, trash and animals are heaped together. Each of these figures and objects are seen from a different perspective and is completely separated from one another, even though they are placed together to share the same space. The landscape is packed with objects seen from multiple-point perspectives, each with a different vanishing point that ultimately fails to form a cohesive unity. The effects of such an unstable composition without the gaze of a single coherent subject is ominous. In Kim’s paintings, beings are revealed as fragmented and partial and existing in a non-interconnected worlds. Therefore, his work not only materializes the vision of today which does not understand how a subject...
can relate to the whole, but also articulates the state of cognitive hysteria the subject is under.\(^{18}\)

(3) Materialized Machines

From the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and Keynesianism to financial globalization and the materialization of signs which led a dizzying sense of acceleration, “Flatness” is an allegory of time and space compression. In this world where all things change and fluctuate at a vertiginous speed, the compression of time and space entails the loss of bases for any critical analysis and the sense of depth, erasing also the distinction between the subject and the object. The boundary between the real world and images also collapses, with the two increasingly resembling each other. The same thing happens to the boundary between humans and machines. Machines become more like humans as machines are increasingly being materialized. Machines are now autonomous agents capable of explaining human life and are considered organic-like beings or even elevated to the status of humans. The popular discourse around “posthumanism” is a refined expression of this phenomenon. It is also no coincidence that discussions on posthuman subject have been most active in the first world. This phenomenon presuppose the production process sufficiently mechanized for machines to be considered an existential part of humans, and to seem quasi-autonomous. Modernism, for instance, emerged in an era where there was still a clear divide between humans and machines, as well as a clear difference in their status (the distinction between signs and their referent was similarly clear then). Therefore, in this era, machines were eminently controllable tools as well as promises of comfort and convenience. Today, however, machines are enigmatic “beings” like the humanoid performing a bizarre dance in Ji Hye Yeom’s Future Fever (2018).\(^{19}\)

\(^{18}\) The analysis of the works of Kim Dong-in, provided here, is an adaptation of sections of a previously published article of mine: “Is a Catastrophe the Promise of New Possibilities?”, Public Art, April, 2019.

\(^{19}\) The fear of the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ and automation is a case in point, illustrative of our changed relationship to machines.

Artist and choreographer Geum Hyung Jeong’s work stems from such a posthuman context. Her performances called the ‘puppet play’\(^{20}\) are often evocative of sexual act in which machines are heavily anthropomorphized. Her works are not so much operated as they are ‘touched.’ this is the case with the performance with a vacuum cleaner in Vacuum Cleaner (2007), and fitness machines like treadmill and belt massager in Fitness Guide (2011), as well as the performance with a heart-rate monitor and a mannequin in CPR Practice (2016). Jeong’s machines are the concretizations of an anti-essentialist view of the “theory of the body” and a decentralized subjectivity. At the same time, her works are also a striking reminder of the increasing human reliance on machines and technology. Just as the media theorist and philosopher Marshall McLuhan thought, machines were becoming physical extensions of our bodily parts. However, machines increasingly resemble humans not so much because this is the natural course of technological evolution, but because of the mode of production that the society demands it. After all, the autonomy of machines is a result achieved through meticulous human planning and engineering efforts, the same way as the learning ability of artificial intelligence is entirely dependent on human-engineered software based on complex digital algorithms. The autonomy of machines are a necessary part of automation, driven by the goal of generating higher profits over a short term by reducing the share of variable capital, which is, simply put, wages, and thereby optimizing capital. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of humans becoming more like machines through the use of prosthetics or machines is likely to be limited or occur in a socio-economic class-dependent manner. For example, a temp worker who has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis disease would not be able to afford the equipment Stephen Hawking used. But, for both of them, the change in the mode of production is real and a practical impact on their lives. Once one looks at technology beyond its phenomenological condition, one realizes soon enough that machines becoming part of humans or alternate forms of humans is a mere impression, and

that the boundary between the two are, in reality, clearly maintained. When we say that the boundary is blurred in between, we are, in fact, talking about the effect of the social (or historical) reality. This effect is indeed alarming and we will not be able to just merrily dance with a machine.

Similar to Jeong’s works, artist Ayoung Kim’s unconsciousness is portrayed in her works as an aesthetic response to the current overflow of the ‘internet-of-things’ - technological objects carrying out performative actions via a network of internet - which is embedded in the ‘first world experience’ through the advanced industrial technologies. Her Porosity Valley, Portable Holes (2017) depicts a world in which all inorganic objects are acting as autonomous instrumental agents. Here, a sculpture of a database is treated as a ‘being.’ The database is personified and is given a prominent role in the narrative as an ‘agent of action.’ Porosity Valley, Portable Holes unfold in an animistic landscape in which the distinction between the subject and the object has been completely erased. Such a view reminds one of Bruno Latour and his Ontological Dissolution, in which he sees the division between the subject and the object as something entirely illusory and stresses the urgency of abandoning human-centered thinking. For Kim, what we perceive as an object is not an object, but a ‘thing.’ The fact that Porosity Valley, Portable Holes is a narrative about the immigration of a ‘subject of data’ named Petra across different times and spaces confirms this view. The problem, however, is that the distinction between the subject and the object is not just an abstract construct which only resides inside human brains. This division is the internalization or reflection of divides that actually exist in the real world, such as that between humans and nature, between individuals and society, between citizens and the State or between labor and capital. It is not something that can be simply abolished through a thought conceptual process. As made evident by Chinese surveillance monitors with built-in face scanners or the avid collection of data by Google and Facebook, even a single piece of data, merely worth one kilobyte, is already mediated by our society and far surpasses its material cause. We call these things that are mediated by social reality “objects.”

In this sense, a thing that perfectly resides outside of the subject-object dialectic simply does not exist. It would be obscene to suggest, for instance, that the napalm bombs dropped in Gaza Strip should be looked at in the thingness or agency of objects. To put it differently, if the ‘thing-narrator’ in Kim’s work were replaced by a military drone, it would be difficult to sustain its proposition. Porosity Valley, Portable Holes holds together only on condition that the viewer somehow accepts to forget the fact that objects don’t move by themselves, and both of their arrangement and operation are determined by human agents and the relationships that organize and control human societies.21 Even though it is agreeable to perceive Kim’s work as an attempt to bring attention to the extreme objectification of human beings, the proposition that things are their own instrumental agents seems to be lacking in its conviction. Rather, society operates in ways to make things appear as such. Meanwhile, there is a parallel between the way in which non-human objects, including technology, are materialized and become regarded as subjects or have a subjecthood transferred to them, the way materialized signs are equated with an autonomous, self-enclosed universe or given the place/status of reality. In other words, the subjectification of objects as a phenomenon of materialization of social relationships follows a similar logical trajectory as the system of signs.

In midst of the current dominance of finance/currency structure and the regime of signs in semiotic system of today, the gap between representation and the referent, object and subject, man, machine, and technology are no longer a disputable issue. What matters is that representations, objects or machines have now taken on an independent life as their own agent, on a path to become the world itself. However, the political divide in the day-to-day reality that support the conflict between the subject and the object persist until today, assisting to

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21) The decision to construct the ‘speed bumper’ Bruno Latour talks about, often positively cited as a place where the leveling of all elements of an action, including materials like asphalt and paint and the will of public officials, occurs, is not taken by things themselves, but in government agencies.
Jeung Gangsan has written reexaminations of the relationship between politics and art, with an interest in critical theory, the Marxist tradition, and historical materialist art theory. He has translated feature articles for Solidarity for Another World and is an organizing committee member for the Marx Communale. His major publications include "Excess of Memory, Dearth of History: Adios, Proust" (Radical Review, 2019), "Sketching a Cognitive Map for Production or Reproduction" (Radical Review, 2019), and "What We Need to Know for Art Not to Be Shit: Commentary on Possibilities for an Artistic Avant-Garde" (Critic-Al, 2017).
In a previous essay, I discussed how time in photography is experienced as an ordinal event in ontological standpoint, and it is perceived as an accumulated sequence of time through the act of looking. Thus, the quality of time in this perspective takes an inherently different bearing from moments of time captured in a photographic image per se, or a flashback from one's memory. Further it will be important to note that the very characterisation of 'sequences' or 'accumulation' are terms that presuppose the plurality of time. Then, given that photography emerges from such a temporality, what kind of implication can be drawn from this?

In order to be able to answer this question, one must first consider meanings associated within photography itself. In general, we can relate to the universal understanding of the term, but to explore further, the universality of the meaning in itself, is rooted in the view that a Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued for: that the only object of linguistics is language in and for itself. For Saussure, language is a system of signs that are each constituted by a signifier and a signified and therefore, semiotics or semiology, in other words the study of signs, has an inseparable relationship with linguistics. As such, Saussure posits as follows: "But to me the language problem is mainly semiological, and all developments derive their significance from that important fact. If we are to discover the true nature of language, we must learn what it has in common with all other semiological systems…"  

Our cognitive understanding that photography is a visual language precisely stems from this notion, that language is a series of signs. In other words, we see photography as a language because we recognized the figures in the image as signs imbedded with meaning. The French structural linguist Emile Benveniste’s reading of Saussure’s conception of language is that "human languages considered in and of themselves are entirely devoid of historical dimensions and that they are synchronic structures that function only through their symbolic properties."  

Hence, for Benveniste, the most fundamental element of Saussure’s understanding of language is summed up in the chain of relationships between language, signs, structure and symbol.

Following the lead of Saussure, a structure may be understood as, “a whole constituted through the arrangement of its parts, and the agreement that exists between the parts that condition one another.” Here the engagements between the parts is only possible because it is arranged with, “characters that consist meaning.” Therefore, in this sense, the structure can be seen as a semantic system faithful to “the principle of closed system in semiotics: opposing the plurality in meanings.”

However, can such a closed system of meaning be applied in understanding the communication of photography? Here I propose to examine such a possibility through two images taken from a photography exhibition, which I have briefly discussed in a previous essay asking whether or not a sequential relationship between the two can be found. In this installation view of the photographer Jinhyun Cha’s exhibition (see the image below), we see a displayed image of a farmer against the backdrop of an industrial complex on a seashore from the Southern Coast. And beyond this image is located a projection screen, displaying a slide image of a former, “comfort woman.” These are actually two independent works, former work with a title South Coast Project and the latter called the 108 Portraits.

Although the two works are independent from each other, one may find a certain continuity between two subjects depicted here. In Saussurean view, these subjects can arguably be read as victims of loss: read with semiotic symbols that Saussure argues for.

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3) "Of course, Saussure does not use the word ‘structure’ but the word ‘system.’ The word ‘structure’ appeared only in 1928 at the first International Congress of Linguists at The Hague, in the form “structure of a system.” Paul Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations (Le Conflit des interprétations - Essais d’herméneutique), trans. Yang Myeong-su (Seoul: Hangilsa, 2012) p. 109.
4) Benveniste, op. cit.: p. 29.
5) Ibid., p. 28.

1. Jinhyun Cha, Gooseong from South Coast Project series, 2010, 120x80 cm
Let us now turn to plate 1, this image is a part of the *South Coast Project*. Between this and the image of the former comfort woman (plate 2), can there be a generative connection in the Saussurean sense? Based on these two works alone, most people wouldn’t find a linkage between the two. Nor would they find connection between plate 2 and the image of farmer in the *South Coast Project*. However, if we take all three together, the various signs in each photo, albeit different, may come together to arrange an entirely new whole. In another words, new elements suddenly emerge and seek our attention, such are possibly the connection between the farmer and the owner of the yacht who is unseen in the image, or the stark contrast between the fleeing association with the yacht and the grim memories of the former comfort woman. These elements converge with one another and may create a new layer of meaning.

Such a phenomenon can also be encountered in spoken or written language. Most of us have the experience of encountering spoken/written words (meaning) that make no sense in one way, yet contradictorily make sense in another way of spoken (communication)/written(language) words. According to French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, such a paradoxical phenomenon in which words without a tangible connection nevertheless come together to form a cohesive whole, points to the limitation of structuralist linguistics and semiology which are detracted in atemporal space of closed signs and unable move forward. Ricoeur further stated as follows:

"Structuralist linguistics proceeds through an epistemological decision. It proposes to work within a closed universe of signs. Because of such a decision, there is no outside to this system. It automatically becomes a body that is turned in on itself. Such a decision is, however, one that negates the experience of language. Therefore, we must recover what has been excluded from structuralist models. Language is an act of saying (dire) and to say something. That’s what we need to recover."\(^7\)

Ricoeur is highlighting the fact that structuralism dismisses empirical understanding of language and therefore, is atemporal and, "antithetical to the generative quality of language."\(^8\) While borrowing from Benveniste to stress the point, ’the measure of existence is in its action’, Ricoeur states that what is needed for the transition from the structure to the act of speaking is a plane where, “antinomy of structure and events”\(^9\) can co-exist\(^10\) (here what Ricoeur means by “events” is not events that are fixed in then and there with atemporal quality, but events that are constituted by the act of speaking here-and-now).

Such a place of co-existence can be identified in five characteristics: “act,” “decision,” “new arrangement,” “deixis” and “inter-subject”, which overcomes the limits of structuralism (system of signs) that excludes time (continuity).\(^11\) In other words, these five elements are crucial in unlocking a closed structure into an open structure in language. Subsequently, opening up the closed structure can be defined as the act of transition to discourse, which occurs through such action of a subject.

### Nonlinearity of Meaning

Indeed, bringing linguistics into the discussion of photography and its implications may sound obscure to some readers. For now, it will be crucial to note the following: decoding the structural implication of photography resides in the very fact that it runs parallel to the fact that it is the act of subject that leads opening of the preexisting structure. In another words, the space of co-existence Ricoeur argued, is precisely such a space of actions. In regards to understanding photography on the other hand, if there is one that might leave the reader unconvincing from what I have previously mentioned of the five essential elements for a space of coexistence, would be the realm of intersubjectivity. Indeed, photography in itself does not “speak” to us. Since it can neither speak to us nor can we in turn speak to it, the inter-subjectivity can seem like a concept particularly ill-suited.

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\(^{7}\) Ricoeur, op. cit.: p. 111.
\(^{8}\) Ricoeur, op. cit.: p. 111.
\(^{9}\) Ricoeur, op. cit.: p. 109
\(^{10}\) Ricoeur, op. cit.: p. 113
\(^{11}\) Ricoeur, op. cit.: p. 113-114.
Yet, here I invite readers to reconsider the frame of reference with such perception. As we have established earlier, if photography is a system of signs, in other words a language, then there should also be an enunciator who speaks this language. For example, the initial enunciator who speaks in this context would be the photographer. Self-evident this may sound, this can be the point of departure of questioning our frame of reference. Again, when one looks at a well-known photographic work, one generally tends to think about the moment and meaning in which the image has taken; and in turn, the photographer as a witness of the scene of a specific moment and place. However, the very act of looking at a photographic image is to enter into a fixed system of signs. And in this moment, the act of capturing the image (enunciating) is eliminated by the viewer, and only identified after the signs within the image has been established: the photographer is only an afterthought that occurs once the meanings of the signs are interpreted.

Let’s take another example to comprehend this phenomenon. Suppose someone says, “I love you” to another person. In such a situation, it would be impractical for a listener to consider only the meaning of the word “love” without considering the enunciator. What matters in this context will be who is speaking and the context in which it was spoken. Similarly, for instance, love of mother is not all the same thing as one’s romantic partner.

As such, in a space of coexistence, the inter-subject of a photographer may or may not be the viewer. For example, if we interpret the meaning of a photographic image the way someone considers the meaning of “love” as described above, the inter-subjectivity is invalid. For the viewer to become the inter-subject to the enunciator/photographer, he/she needs to respond by thinking and speaking of the signs that are offered through the image, just as one is expected to respond to someone who says they love us (in such case we can respond without necessarily speaking or respond through gestures). The viewer’s response is still vital even when the given signs in the image is clear. This is also because not all details in a photo are always intended by a photographer.

However, even if we are the inter-subject of the photographer, our in-
The inter-subject may not necessarily be the photographer. The inter-subject for us that we are addressing here, could be some anonymous figure in the image or even someone next to us. It can even be someone from our past. Suppose there is a lover and when he/she says, “I love you,” this could bring the memories of a past lover and we could inwardly say, “I loved you” to the specific person of the past (here I’d like to remind the “new arrangement”, from the five essential elements that define a space of coexistence. I would also like us to remember that within the space of coexistence of photography, ideas and thoughts perform as a function equivalent to that of speech acts).

What is the most important here, then, is the fact that we are carrying out an act of speech now, addressing our inter-subject through an image. It matters less whether it is verbal or not. The only thing that matters is the fact that in the context of photography, we are being an inter-subject in this space of coexistence.

Now let’s turn our attention to the plate 3, a black-and-white photo from Cha’s South Coast Project. Obviously, the photographer is telling us something about the South Coast. In other words, in this space of coexistence, Cha (I, the enunciator) is addressing you (singular or plural), the inter-subject. Now it’s your turn to speak, you, the inter-subject. What meets your eye? The answer could be the consequences of industrialization evoked through the image of a coastal landscape with an industrial complex and a female diver. But this answer comes across as too much of a readymade one molded by discourses. It seems also doubtful that Cha, the first enunciator, had such a clear-cut and conventional message in mind. Let us now return to plate 1 from the same project.

Personally, what catches my attention here are the swim fins. I am curious to know what the female diver was gazing towards in the distant sea, as though looking for something. In plate 4, we are shown a woman in the DMZ area looking into a telescope which is pointed to the North. I am interested in what she is looking through the telescope. For some reason, beyond the lens of telescope I envision the image of former comfort woman from the plate 2. I imagine what the comfort woman’s corporeal experience of being drowned in the darkness
of her memory, may not be too far from what the female diver in plate 3 experiences. And with this reference through this collective association of images, I experience a transference. To develop this further, I wrote in the introduction of the exhibit, *Encounter V: The Nonplace, a Demilitarized Zone in Everyday Life*:

"...108 Portraits is a series of portraits of former comfort women who were governed by the (imperialist) biopower which employed the eugenic slogan of preserving "the racial purity" and who were shipped to the "zone of death". These works bring a glimpse into the interiority of their experienced time, depicted in pitch dark that surrounds the bodies of women in these images. Meanwhile, South Coast Project consists of photos of the shorelines of the South Coast crowded with industrial complexes today. Post Border Line, a vignette of everyday life in the border area near the DMZ which has now transformed into a tourist area, reminds the viewer of the pervasive grasp of capitalism. Through these works captured of life on the South Coast to the DMZ area, Cha shows how the mechanism of biopower, which in the past has gained a control over the society through an oppressive bureaucracy and top-down system, is today further tightening its grip on our lives in the name of individuals’ right to pursue happiness and collective prosperity."

As I, the inter-subject of Cha, becomes an enunciator in turn, the space of exhibition becomes another space of coexistence. Now is your turn. The visitors of the exhibition have already spoken. They have said something, either audibly or silently. Benveniste states on ‘the act of enunciation and the subject of enunciation’ as follows:

"The speaker always uses the same deictic referent 'je' (I) to designate himself or herself. While the speech act that enunciates 'je' seems the same to the listener, every time this act is reproduced, for the enunciator however, is a new speech act each time, no matter how many thousand times the 'je' is enunciated."

Benveniste states that enunciation is the fulfillment of a linguistic act as..."
imagistic elements. In other words, this is a work whose meaning is up to the viewer to find, and therefore invites the viewer's action to assign a meaning. This is also the case with Small Cracks in Time (plates 6 and 7). In these blurry images showing the lipstick-covered mouth of a long-haired woman or her fingers lightly touching the surface of the liquid in the glass, the viewer is unable to detect a specific code from a system of signs.

Nevertheless, these images strike as strange yet familiar. "The impression of déjà vu comes from the fact that they form a visual parallel with familiar scenes and things that we encounter in our everyday. This impression is further encouraged by, "the text written by the typewriter describing what the artist is feeling" as shown in plate 8. [Kim calls these small photos, “photo diaries.” These dairies are often exhibited in large groups, arranged and exhibited in various ways. Text is a recurring element in her photos, including Small Cracks in Time and Feathers of Absence from the above. Plate 5 shows a line of text that runs along the bottom, which reads, “I am afraid I might lose them if I keep them buried in my heart.” In Pond of Silence (plate 9) featuring a series of photo diaries displayed as though they are floating in the air with the text, "some lights are homeless" is written on the floor, with the shadows of the diaries casting over it. As her work follows no particular grammar of visual language, these texts don’t seem constrained by a specific meaning or signs. The viewers are provided with no clue as to what they are supposed to take away from them, or how to interpret the "homeless lights" that emerge from nowhere. Yet, for viewers, the photos stir up an eerie, indescribable feeling of déjà vu. As this feeling grows, the viewers try to pinpoint what exactly these images or memories evoke, but they seem too vague and elusive. How do these images trigger such a response?

Here I again propose to think with this association through the enunciation. As absurd as this might sound, suppose that Kim, the initial enunciator, is in fact speaking to us, but mumbling inaudibly like a child. Imagine that she is

Structure outside Structure

Therefore in the space of coexistence of photography, the reciprocal interaction forms ‘you’ and ‘I’ from the system of signs: and brings us to the state of ‘becoming’. In this sense, a space of coexistence becomes a plan of action that creates actual acts of discourse, through presupposing a specific interlocutor (even if he/she is imminent yet) via representational paradigm of photography. Further, as these acts of discourse assume a multiple temporality between inter-subjects, interaction in this context is subject to change and therefore, diachronic in nature. Benveniste calls such an interaction the, “only way of experiencing the now and making it ‘present’.” In other words, this is the only way to escape from the atemporal or non-temporal state of the structure of language or system of signs.

Let us return to the images, now onto two photographic works of Jung A Kim that I’ve discussed in the previous essay. Her Feathers of Absence (plate 5) provides a few, if any, codes to decipher its meaning, which is to say it remains off the system of signs. Captured by slowly releasing the shutter speed, it reveals a flock of birds flying toward the sky. But the image offers no indication to allow the viewer to comprehend the “then-and there”, or for the purpose of the event that took place in the image. The Feathers of Absence is a work consists of such
trying to express images—memories from her past: expressing through incomprehensible words and gestures, and these photos are precisely such gestures and the displayed text is the mumbles.

When we encounter such an act of child, we often end up guessing eventually what the child is trying to communicate. This is because, though the gestures and mumbled are incomprehensible in the beginning, they begin to evoke certain situations we have already experienced in the past: in another words, recollected sense of déjà vu. It can be said that the same collected déjà vu is at work when we look at Kim’s works. Like the way the child’s words and gestures evoke something in us, the sense of déjà vu generated by the images, which triggers us to draw an image from our own past. These indistinctive images and memories drawn from our own gradually accumulates on these images. This phenomenon is not so much about the meaning of an image as much as the “interiority of time” that the image is guiding us. In other words, our interaction with photography takes place entirely within our own temporality, accordance with the varying degree of rhythms of this inherent temporality.

Such an interaction allows us to move from a synchronic structure, (in the case of a photography, closed signs inside the image) to a diachronic structure that embraces openness. In other words, the viewer transitions from the instant captured in the photo to its inner temporality, which takes time as a continuity. Here Duane Michals wrote about the connection between the space of co-existence which opens up by the act of inter-subjects, and temporality, as follows in the leaflet for his 1974 solo show at Light Gallery, New York:

“We live in our memories most of the time…this conversation is alternately about what we ‘wanted to do’ and what we really ‘did.’ You combine the two and we continue our conversation:…moments in the real world, as we know them, do not exist for a long time since you cannot stop these moments. And to stop means falling into the abyss outside time.”

With my limitation in providing examples of images, I wonder there might still be uncompleted responses from our initial departure of this essay. Here I’d like to relocate the space of coexistence back to the exhibition space. In Jung A Kim’s exhibit, I am acting as the inter-subject of her work through encountering the unfamiliar temporality that opens up a response, which is, “a phenomenon in which time gains new buoyancy—by constantly splitting and diverging from the time situated in the body—gets set in motion.” Such a temporality overlaps with the contemporaneity (temporality) of the present evoked by the works of Cha. As such, “from this continuous present,” generated by our perception and thinking, that “the sense of continuity we call time, emerges into our perception.”

It is now your turn to act. As I am unable to physically invite you to the exhibition space, I will instead end this discussion with another question. One is, to the initial enunciators (the two photographers) I’ve previously discussed, I’ve made a comparison of the “new arrangement” of “the mumbled words and gestures” as “the nonplace, a Demilitarized Zone,” that they are indeed indistinctly designated. In fact, this phrase, “the nonplace, a Demilitarized Zone” in itself is absurd since indicting a “zone” as non-existing place is itself a contradiction which employs a non-linguistic structure; and as we’ve discussed that the non-linguistic system is beyond the point. My question is: what does “the nonplace, a Demilitarized Zone” evoke in you? Perhaps “you,” yourself as the other: another interlocutor who is yet imminent, is waiting for another (inter) action with you.

Jung Hoon is a photography critic who currently works as a professor of photography and related media at Keimyung University. He has written the book The Landscape of Photography after Postmodernism (Noonbit, 2020) and published writings such as “The Ordinal Time of Photograph” (Photo Art, 2018) and “The Immanency and Disruptive Narrative of the Photographic Image” (Photo Art, 2019). He has served as a thematic exhibition curator for the Seoul Photo Triennale (Seoul, 2005), exhibition director for the 2013 Jeonju Photo Festival, artistic director for Art:Gwangju:14, and curator for the 2018 Daegu Photography Biennale. He has also been honored for outstanding writing by the Society of Modern Photography & Video.

20) Jeong Hoon, op. cit.
21) Benveniste, Emile, op. cit., p.147.
Looking Back on the 21st Century from the 21st Century: Criticism as a Witness of the 21st Century

Mun Hye Jin
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My first response to the feature articles from 20–some years ago that I reread before writing this piece was a sense of déjà vu. "[The art world's] only concern is 'who is on the rise' and no one drops any names when it comes to whose work really matters or who is underrated, even if it's just an opinion."1) "There is no way these reviews can escape sloppiness seeing the process through which they're produced. . . . If you ask the artist, [he or she] is bound to recommend someone well-disposed, in which case it's hard to expect an honest review."2) These statements still apply to the present-day art scene, so why are the symptoms that have been diagnosed 20 years ago still presenting themselves today? How have these circumstances changed and how is the art scene different now?

The biggest event in the 1990s criticism scene was the advent of curator-critics and the collapse of discursive authority. Beginning in the mid-1990s, a new group of college graduates with degrees in art theory poured out from major art schools such as the Department of Art Studies at Hongik University. Curators saw their heyday as opportunities for overseas exhibition increased with the dawn of the age of biennales and private art museums and galleries proliferated. These curator-critics began claiming exhibition forewords and reviews previously exclusively commissioned to critics and eventually shifted the critical paradigm from a literature, aesthetics, or ideology-based critique to a more scene–centered one. Critiques around this time seemed to have practically written by three large groups: old-school critics, art-historian-critics, and curator-critics.3) Hence the "crisis of criticism," a relatively serious and frequent topic of discussion in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, paradoxically renders

2) Kim Hak Ryang, "Criticism is the point of departure in socializing the controversial value of the exhibition", Monthly Art Magazine, 2003, February. p 86
3) From the survey for selecting the leading critics of the 1990s, the 53 respondents mentioned Seo Sung-rok, Kim Hong-hee, Oh Kwang-soo, Lee Yong-woo, Choi Tae-man, Park Young-taek, Kang Tae-hee, Shim Gwang-hyoun, and Jeong Heon-yi. Among them, Seo Sung-rok, Oh Kwang-soo, Lee Yong-woo, and Shim Kwang-hyun have a background in Art critic, and Kang Tae-hee and Jeong Heon-yi are art historians. Kim Hong Hee, Choi Tae-man and Park Young-taek are curator-critics. Editorial Department, "Critic & Criticism: An Analysis of the Survey of 74 Art Critics/Theorists", Monthly Art Magazine, April, 1997, p.58.
the period to be a high point in criticism in that it attests to the weight and expectation placed on criticism. The 1997 Monthly Art Magazine feature article that surveyed 100 critics—on the years of their debut, the total number of exhibition forewords they’d written, the number of longer critical essays they’d published, their income, the books they wanted to write, the subjects of their critical interests, their evaluation of other critics’ works, and more—was an ambitious attempt to analyze the status of Korean criticism and estimate its future, which is to say that conversely, even amid the talks of “absence of ideology” and “loss of core value,” there were still dignity and hope remaining for criticism at the time.

Similarly, the online forum culture that bloomed and then withered between the late 1990s and the early 2000s was a symptomatic of a prosperous period considering that artistic discussion at this time was unprecedentedly vibrant. Thanks to platforms such as Forum A, Mudaeppo, Misurin Hoeui, and Misulgwa Damnon, the viewers began to expand from their verbal communications to online and exchanging their thoughts with those outside of their acquaintance, participating in debates hitherto reserved for critics and artists. Forum A, which began as a discussion site mainly for artists, became a leading platform that hosted the most acute debates, giving birth to major discourses. In this sense, the online forum culture is quite different from today’s social media culture through which people tweet opinions and DM compliments between inner circle members. Primarily, the scale of the online forum community was incomparably small—small enough for most of the members to have seen the same exhibitions—and this kind of interaction was only possible because people had familiarized themselves with the idea of debate thanks to the ideological dispute of the 1980s and the online forum debate culture of the 1990s based on PC communications over the telephone network.

Criticism in the first decade of the 21st century can be summarized as a troika system led by Ban Ejung, Kang Sumi, and Michael Lim, who debuted around 2002 and 2003. During this time, the route to debut as a critic shifted from annual literary contests held by newspapers to magazines. More and more people become critics after winning magazine-organized awards for a critique (as in the case of Ban Ejung) or by writing contributions for magazines (as in the cases of Kang Sumi and Michael Lim). The New Vision Criticism Award established by Art In Culture in 2002 and the Platform Cultural Criticism Award established by the Incheon Foundation for Arts & Culture in 2008 emerged as authoritative awards, opening doors for young critics over the next 10 years. Reviews by these critics were well-received for being more sound in terms of theoretical footing and analytical, original, and scientific than their previous-generation’s ideal critiques. In the 2000s as in the 1990s, almost every aspect of the art scene—the institution, artists, and exhibitions—grew rapidly, which resulted in high demand for pertinent text. With the rise of alternative spaces, residencies, and state-run funds, these rising critics and other curator-critics (prime examples being Kim Jang Un and Kim Hyunjin) immediately settled in the art scene by satisfying the increasing demand for text. These critics, as Korea’s first-generation beneficiaries of Western art theories, played a key role in heralding the age of theoretical criticism but fell shy of rectifying the illogical and wretched structure of the scene that put personal relationships and interests before scientific review.

From after the crash of the art market in 2008 up to 2013 or even 2015 when new-generation critics and exhibition spaces began to emerge, criticism sustained a state of long-term recession marked by absence of issues. Surely, there was an inflow of fresh critical minds like Ahn Soyeon and Gu Nayeon through institutions like criticism awards, and critical journals such as the Contemporary Art Journal (first issued in 2010) and the Article (first issued in 2011) continued to be published, but it seems as though there wasn’t a big-enough movement to turn the course of the receding flow. Webzines like Critic-al (2013), Jipdanochan (2013), Two Page, and Meetingroom (2013) appeared later, featuring young critics like Hong Taerim and Kwon Siwoo. And post-2015, Yoon Wonhwa, Ahn Jinkook, Yoon Juli, Yu Jiwon, Lee Yangheon, and Lee Han-

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burn began to stand out. The biggest event in criticism around this time was
the SeMA-HANA Criticism Award newly established in 2015. With a sizeable
grant and the mantle of a municipal museum on its back, this biennial award
immediately became the gateway to debut, giving rise to notable young critics
such as Kwak Young Bin, Kim Junghyun, Nam Woong, Moon Jung Hyun, Lee
Jinsil, and Chang Jihan.

So, has the criticism scene changed since the advent of the new-generation critics in 2015? Sure, new blood was transfused and the air refreshed, but the production structure of magazines, the primary platform for criticism, hasn’t changed much. Writing fees and the method of manuscript commission remain more or less the same, and magazines still depend on advertisement in terms of revenue. In fact, financial constraints only bolstered their tendency to reduce outsourcing and feature articles. Magazines are now more inclined to reduce text and increase pictorial pages, replace outsourced text with internally written text, and create content through surveys, recommendations, or excavation of materials from the past. There are fewer and fewer ambitious large-scale projects that attempt to take on the times or analyze the current tendencies and more of mediocre introductions to already famous seasonal events and exhibitions. Webzines continue to be launched, but due to an explosive increase in the number of exhibitions, their articles are buried in the sea of online information, forming no significant coherence. As a result, I would have to say that criticism as of 2019 can be reduced to “artist studies,” for which there is the largest market after the quantitative growth of the art scene. Amidst the mumbo-jumbo created by the fatigue from chasing hot issues, the intertwined relations and interests in the scene, the undefinably expansive and diverse realm of contemporary art, and the fast pace of the Korean art scene that allows no time to think or delve into new things, criticism has failed to provide level-headed insight into the times or cover any common ground. It has predominantly been busy riding on the backs of trends and avoiding big questions only to settle for status quo. The Korea Arts Management Service recently launched the Art Critic Support Program in attempt to re-appropriate writing fees and vitalize discourse, but I worry that this may, too, end at a one-time support.

Instead of ending with a hackneyed proposal prompting self-reflection or stressing the need for discourses, I think I’ll end by addressing actual structural problems in today’s criticism that threaten even the most minimal decency that is writing of proper artist studies. First is that, with market logic infiltrating into such fields as production, exhibition, and distribution, too much energy is being poured into supportive programs (artist talks, workshops, and conferences) instead of into producing art works and exhibitions. According to Hito Steyerl, the concept of the “economy of presence” rests on the fact that it’s easier and more economic in terms of publicity and discursive authority to invite a recognizable name than to enhance the caliber of the work or texts. The problem with this structure is that it inhibits production and encourages events, eventually resulting in qualitative poverty even during times of quantitative abundance. Everybody is so busy showing up that nobody is mentioning quality. The second is the ubiquitous custom of publishing an exhibition catalogue in time for the opening of the exhibition. This so-called “pre-cataloging” ritual is almost entirely for the purpose of administrative expediency. Receiving written texts from writers in advance allows for the galleries to use it as press or promotional material, print it as part of a catalogue that they hand out to guests at the opening to skip the mailing ordeal and save postage all while saving the director’s face, and maximize profit through sales during the exhibition. The problem is that this procedure helps no one involved in the creative process: contributing writers carry the risk and the burdens of writing reviews without a single glance at the actual installation; curators carry twice the workload at the busiest times—just before the opening of an exhibition; and artists are deprived of the chance and time to include a photo of their installed works and confirm the information in the catalog. These circumstances inevitably degrade the quality of the output.
Problems as these experiences in the scene ultimately reaffirm the fact that in today’s new “society of the spectacle”, texts, which has less to show for than the effort poured into it, is being edged out by the logic of the market and has nowhere left to go. To stop repeatedly leaving young critics with “no choice but to become standardized—absorbed by existing customs—while filling in the ever-drying pool of knowledge with quick wit or to suffer from self-doubt and eventually bail out of the scene and slowly wane,” we need to build a structure in which quality production is possible.

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