

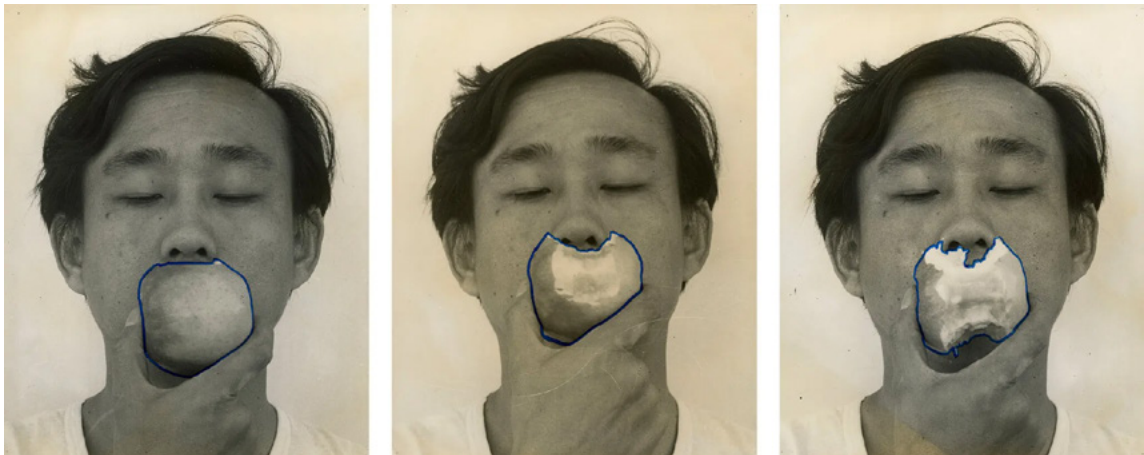
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Ephemeral but Unforgettable: Korean Experimental Art Is Having a Star Turn

A Guggenheim exhibition shines a light on a remarkable but lesser-known art scene in South Korea that thrived in the tumult of the 1960s and 1970s

By Andrew Russeth
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LOCKSGALLERY



Sung Neung Kyung's "Apple," 1976 (detail), in which the artist photographed himself eating the fruit and traced its changing shape with a marker pen. It is part of the exhibition "Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s-1970s" at the Guggenheim Museum. Credit via Sung Neung Kyung and Daejeon Museum of Art, photo Jang Junho

The 1960s and 1970s were tumultuous in South Korea, with a military dictatorship pushing breakneck economic growth and suppressing civil rights. In the midst of this upheaval, young artists pursued radical projects.

Rejecting the expressive abstract painting in vogue in the 1950s, they embraced performance, video and photography, and favored unusual materials (neon, barbed

wire, cigarettes). They had been born during the Japanese occupation and lived through the Korean War; some looked to the past, taking inspiration from Korean folk forms. They forged collectives, holding shows, translating art texts from abroad (travel was restricted) and staging performances along rivers and in theaters. Kim Kulim recorded snippets of daily life in a fast-changing Seoul in his frenetic film “The Meaning of 1/24 Second” (1969). Their genre-defying efforts have come to be categorized as “silheom misul,” experimental art.

“It was a period of, I would say, true transformation,” Kyung An, an associate curator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, said in an interview, and “artists were trying to negotiate their place within that world.” Her exhibition “Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s-1970s,” opening at the Guggenheim on Friday, shows the potent



Highways, skyscrapers and jam-packed streets: Kim Kulim's thrilling short film “The Meaning of 1/24 Second” (1969) captures Seoul in the midst of rapid change. Credit via Kim Kulim, photo: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

responses that more than 40 made during a fraught time. (Organized with Kang Soojung, a senior curator at Seoul’s National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, or MMCA, the show travels to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles on Feb. 11.)

“There was really no market,” An said, “and that’s why a lot of the works did not survive.” Some were later remade. Others endure only in photographs or as memories. A black-and-white image shows the trailblazing Jung Kangja, clad in underwear in a music hall in 1968, as people attached transparent balloons to her body, then popped them. Jung, who died in 2017, was one of the few women prominent in the scene. “I

think the still-conservative values and expectations placed on women's role in society must have made it difficult for many," An said.

As the 1970s progressed, the atmosphere became more tense. Martial law was imposed. The length of skirts was regulated. Artists were surveilled, detained and beaten. They kept going. Some are making art to this day, and were able to attend when "Only the Young" ran at the MMCA earlier this year. This summer, I met four of the artists, with interpreters, to discuss their lives and the show.



Lee Kun-Yong's art charts the possibilities of the body — and the forces that constrain it. In "Logic of Hand" (1975/2018), he cycles his fingers through various configurations, showing how much can be done with only what is near at hand. Credit via Lee Kun-Yong

Lee Kun-Yong

As the government clamped down on avant-garde art in the mid-1970s, Lee Kun-Yong received a notice stating that the National Museum of Modern Art (now the MMCA) could no longer show his performance-based art. Furious, he lit it on fire before his fellow artists. "It was a mistake burning that letter," Lee said, sitting in his studio within a warehouse complex just outside Seoul. Today, it would be an important artifact.

The day before our meeting, Lee had been at the MMCA to enact one of his trademark pieces, the deliciously titled "Snail's Gallop," which he first performed in 1979. In a sitting squat, he glided white chalk back and forth across rubber as he ambled forward, his bare feet erasing parts of his marks. It was an astonishing display of dexterity for

anyone, but especially for an 81-year-old.

Born in North Korea, Lee came to Seoul with his family in 1945. A teenager after the Korean War, he attended lectures at foreign cultural centers. Ludwig Wittgenstein entranced him, and he painted a portrait of the philosopher, hanging it in his room. (“Jesus looks a bit different,” he recalls his mother saying.) In his late 20s, Lee co-founded a group called Space and Time (ST). In one memorable work, in 1971, he displayed a whole tree, uprooted during a highway-construction program, at a museum. Performing at an art festival in the city of Daegu in 1979, he placed his personal possessions and clothes on the ground, and laid face down — “a self-inflicted strip search,” as the art historian Joan Kee put it.



LOCK S GALLERY



Lee Kun-Yong at his studio in Goyang, just outside Seoul. His art is “about communicating with things that are close to us,” he said. Credit: Jean Chung for The New York Times

Lee has spent his life charting the possibilities and limitations of the body, often making drawings and paintings via simple actions. Standing with his back or side to a canvas or piece of wood, he reaches as far as he can with a brush and makes marks. Canvases with traces of his movements fill his studio. They are vibrant and alive, yet he is modest about his practice. “My art is not special,” he said. “It’s not unique. It’s about communicating with things that are close to us. So, if the audience looks into it deeply, we’ll be able to find things that relate to us both.”



Sung Neung Kyung at his home in Seoul, surrounded by photos of himself in various guises. An indefatigable experimenter, he has addressed in his art press censorship and societal conventions of all kinds. Credit: Jean Chung for The New York Times

Sung Neung Kyung

In the mid-1970s, “my slogan for myself — my motto, if you will — was to be truthful and honest in the face of history,” Sung Neung Kyung said at the Lehmann Maupin gallery in Seoul. After finishing his mandatory military service in 1973, he joined the ST group, and the following year enacted one of the era’s defining artworks.

For a week, Sung hung each day’s Dong-a Ilbo newspaper on a gallery wall, removed the articles with a razor blade, and placed them in a box. He left only the ads. “The question that I wanted to ask was: What is the underlying hidden meaning found in these clippings, in these newspapers, that are subject to so much editorial pressure and editorial censorship?” he said. Months later, in a bizarre case of life imitating art, President Park Chung Hee’s administration pressured companies to pull their ads from that paper, which printed blank spaces in protest, with messages of support from the public.

Sung, 79, exudes mischief and equanimity, but he admitted to being frightened while making this piece. Entering the venue with his razor blade, he recalled, “I would look around to see if there were any strange men wearing sunglasses nearby.” One day, a journalist showed up and asked for an interview, which he declined, hoping to avoid notoriety.

That was successful. Sung has often operated under the radar, always experimenting, poking at power and convention. “Art is easy and life is hard,” he once wrote. His diverse endeavors have included making notations atop news photos to highlight how they shape the truth, and performing while dressed in outrageous outfits, like a bathing suit and shower cap. “I’ve always kind of kept off the main track,” he said. No longer.





Traditional crafts transform into avant-garde art in Seung-taek Lee's practice. His "Untitled (Sprout)" (1963/2018) piece — shown here at the Guggenheim exhibition — consists of six unusually shaped onggi, earthenware used for fermentation. Credit via Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; photo by Ariel Ione Williams

Seung-taek Lee

Beguiling artworks and objects fill every inch of Seung-taek Lee's home near Hongik University in Seoul, where he studied in the 1950s. There are hourglass-shaped stones tied with rope, tree branches, impish self-portraits and clumps of hair. "Around this area, there was a wig factory," Lee said, "and one day they threw out all this hair."

Lee, 91, has spent his life creating art from unexpected and discarded materials. Starting out, he thought, "I have to do something that no one else has done," he said. "Maybe I can find a form in our own cultural heritage." He stacked earthenware used for fermentation into sculptures and, taking inspiration from Godret stones (weights used in weaving), he chiseled crevices in stones, wrapping them with rope to create the illusion that the rocks are being squeezed. He worked outdoors, letting the wind move through long streams of fabric, and in one of his well-known projects, set his canvases ablaze on the Han River — "serious illegal behavior," he said.

These were not lucrative ventures. Growing up in the Communist North, however, Lee had learned to make large-scale sculptures (of Kim Il-sung and Joseph Stalin), and after the Korean War, he fulfilled commissions in the South for very different subjects, including Gen. Douglas MacArthur. He also made portraits for soldiers, and in 1967 found himself on a military base near the DMZ, where he spotted an enormous mass of human hair, shorn from new recruits. With permission from the authorities, he rearranged that hair into an astonishing installation, placing it in bags or in rows — an abstract, anonymous group portrait.

Lee himself had been a soldier with the South, having fled the North after fighting began. During our interview, he showed where he had been shot in the knee, at age 20. “I hope that I opened new windows for generations to come — not only my own generation,” he said. His goal has been to show “that art can be something very different.”



Lee Kang-So last weekend in one of his studio buildings in Anseong, South Korea, with a taxidermy chicken. Passing a market in the 1970s, seeing deer bones and hens, he wondered, “Can this be art?”
Credit via Jean Chung for The New York Times



Lee Kang-So

At 80, Lee Kang-So lives in an expansive compound in Anseong, about 90 minutes south of Seoul, where he has various studios devoted to sculptures, installations and the minimal paintings that have made him a giant. But 50 years ago, he was still finding his way as he sat in a tavern in Daegu, his hometown, drinking makgeolli (a rice wine) with a friend. It was afternoon, the room was empty, but as he looked at the burns and scuffs left on the tables by cigarettes and pots, he felt he could hear the people who had been there. He pondered the transient nature of life and how he and his friend were experiencing the same room differently. “It was really a special moment,” he said.

Lee bought the chairs and tables from the restaurant, and when he was offered a show at the Myongdong Gallery in Seoul in 1973, he hauled the furniture into the venue and served makgeolli for six days. His idea was that, rather than expressing something, he could give people “a forum to experience something together.” Friends and local residents came by for this fleeting participatory project, which had a political valence during martial law, when large gatherings were suspect. “After a week, the white-cube space smelled like a bar,” he said, “so

they had to do a huge cleaning job.” He titled the piece “Disappearance — Bar in the Gallery.” Sadly (but, in some sense, fittingly), a caretaker later burned the furniture, mistaking it for junk.

Other elements of daily life seeped into his art. Passing through a market one day in the mid-1970s, Lee saw “an old lady selling deer bone,” used in traditional medicine, “and then, right behind her, they were slaughtering hens,” he said. “I was thinking, Can this be art?” He incorporated deer bones into an installation and made a kind of random drawing by placing a chicken near a floor covered with white chalk, which left footprints as it strolled about.

It was a heady time, but after experimenting with outré mediums, Lee would turn to age-old materials, like paint and canvas, as he moved forward. These pictures are airy, loose and spectral, often just a few black calligraphic marks floating across white fields. They suggest ideas or images in transitional states — here and not here, coming into being just as they fade away.



For six days in 1973, Lee Kang-So offered Korean rice wine and snacks to all comers at Myongdong Gallery in Seoul, a fleeting work that he titled “Disappearance — Bar in the Gallery.” Credit via National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea