ARTnews

Under-Recognized South Korean Artists Come into Focus at the Guggenheim Museum

By Angelica Villa
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Kim Kulim, *The Meaning of 1/24 Second*, 1969. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

During the 1960s, a group of young artists working in South Korea emerged from a dark time. The Korean War had taken place less than a decade earlier, and the resulting unrest paved the way for a military coup in 1961 that brought dictator Park Chung Hee to power. Two years later, Park became president. By 1972, the state was monitoring speech and the media with a sweeping policy aimed at keeping the dictatorship intact.

These artists were making a living in a young republic fraught with tension between North Korea and Japan, the country's former colonizer.

Reckoning with widespread upheaval, the artists set out to challenge the conservative status quo. They gravitated to video, performance, and installation. Some of these works have gone long unseen because they have been lost, despite efforts to conserve them; others have only recently gained an audience in the West amid a new interest in Korean art and its edgier periods.

A new exhibition devoted to these avant-garde South Koreans, "Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s-1970s," just opened at the Guggenheim Museum in New York following a run at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul. Its 80 works attest to the tumult the artists faced and the ways their practices mirrored it, and it will appear next at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

"Their lives were responding to this period of exceptional change," said Kyung An, an associate curator at the Guggenheim who organized the show's current iteration. "They were their art."

ARTnews spoke to Kyung to learn more about the show.

ARTnews: What was the historical context for these works?

Kyung An: It's a very recent history of trauma, and there's also an engagement with a very unpopular military involvement in Vietnam. At the same time, it's a period of rapid urbanization and modernization. You have beginnings of what you call a rise of a middle class. That all collided with a nationalist ideology and increasingly repressive censorship propagated by the state. Park Chung Hee tightened his grip on power. It's a dark period—I think a lot of people would agree [that it lasted] until his assassination in 1979.

What was going on in the art world in South Korea at the time?

Gestural abstraction had really swept across the Korean art scene in the 1950s, and they were rebelling against that. They saw it as this conservative kind of art-making. They were searching for a new beginning that could reflect the sense of radicality that they had been sensing around themselves.

So, they were breaking away from the art infrastructure already established there, reacting to the abstract painting movement that was baked into their formal education.

If you look at experimental artists, they create their own platforms for exhibitions and create their own circulation of printed materials and journals. They organized their own seminars to discuss the findings of what they were reading about: what was happening contemporaneously outside in Europe, Japan, and America.

This was not organized in conjunction with, but away from, the centralizing force of the academies. The biggest centralizing force, I would say, was the Kukchön,anational annual juried exhibition. If you look at their published conversations, the artists' writing, and even that of critics and historians at the time, was very critical of the kind of art that's embraced by the national art exhibition. They were kind of moving away from it.

Why did you focus on young artists?

The radical thing was, when abstraction entered the academic discourse in the 1960s, it was the mainstream. But abstraction was no longer reflective of both the novelty and the newness that these artists were craving. So, this next generation of experimental artists and authors was fighting against that. For me, it took a long time to settle on an exhibition title. A lot of exhibitions in Korea that dealt with experimental art, really, and focused on the quality of rebellion. I kind of wanted to move away from that. A lot of artists and different art movements reflect that. I wanted to really set them apart.

You also wanted to show how the artists were coming of age.

They were in their 20s, and some were in their early 30s. Just to have that courage and acumen and belief in oneself to create something new, to desire something so strongly—I really admired that.

All the documentation of the performances from the 1960s and '70s is in black-and-white, and a lot of the works are lost. There is a kind of nostalgia that comes, but I wanted these artworks to feel as contemporary as if they were made today, which *is* how they feel.

There were threats and other material restrictions to them even producing work and finding space to convene. Some artists were the target of censorship.

I think the material restrictions and challenges were real. Remember, it's a country that's coming out of war. A lot of the artists had their own businesses. The later generation tried to see them as this kind of elitist, bourgeois conceptual artists. But they were very connected with what was going on because they were working in the field.

The lack of infrastructure becomes part of the practice. Kim Kulim made important works in the face of these structural challenges.

He was very active as part of the Fourth Group. It was a very interdisciplinary group formed by not only artists, but also people in theater, fashion design, and film. They were only formally active for a very short time. They held a series of performances and public arenas that were often stopped by the police. Kim himself had professed to being interrogated with his family in Daegu, where he was harassed and trailed. These were real challenges that they faced, even within the art world. There's a very famous performance that he did, *Phenomenon to Traces* (1970). He wanted to tie up the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Korea with fabric and bury the ends of it in the ground, almost like a tomb. After he did it, he was told to take it down after a day. It was not considered art. What he was saying was: this the death of the old museum. Museum authorities said to dismantle it.

He wasn't the not the only one. Jung Kangja, another artist whose work is featured here, faced pushback from the press and state authorities.

She was one of the few women artists whose works have survived and are in the show. She had a solo exhibition in 1970 that was promptly shut down. Its venue, the national

public information office, where a lot of artists held exhibitions, felt it had lent the space under the misassumption that it would host an exhibition of sculpture. She ended up doing a performance that it didn't agree with.

She remains a very prominent and interesting figure. A lot of her work deals with this contradiction that I think women faced that at the time. We tend to focus more on her performances, but we should remember that she made a lot of installations and sculptures as well. It's just that they didn't survive.

In *Kiss Me* (1967), a gigantic brightly painted pair of lips, entrapped within these blocky rows of teeth is woman's severed head and a rubber glove that you use for washing dishes. Women at the time were still forced to adhere to certain Confucian ideals of womanhood: be a good mother, a good wife, a good daughter, and be loyal to your family.

Kim Kulim's 1969 experimental film *The meaning of the 1/24 second* figures prominently in the show. It features glimpses of Seoul, which was also a protagonist of sorts for these artists. What was it like to rewatch this film in preparation for this show?

He worked with a few other artists in the actual making of the of the film. For me, it's like energy and life of Seoul at the time. It's composed 224 frames individually spliced frames per second. It's a real montage of the capital city in a state of flux. It juxtaposes images of progress—the newly built expressway, for example—with images of people living their daily lives. You see electrical towers; you see construction workers. What's interesting about this film is that you can see that Seoul as a city caught between the past and the present. These shots are interspersed with displaced figures sleeping on the street, a very old gate fallen into ruin, an elderly woman selling flowers on the streets. The camera never stops, except for when you sometimes see some of the artists who helped make the work. A repeated figure that appears is a child, dressed in a suit. He interrupts the flow, staring straight into the camera.

Lee Kang-So's 1973 performance "Disappearance – Bar in the Gallery." Courtesy Guggenheim Museum.

It's almost like an interjection into the overstimulation of the city.

The film was supposed to premiere in July 1969. But due to technical difficulties, it was canceled. Kim ended up projected slides of images from it onto his own body.

What happened to the artworks that no longer exist?

A lot of the works don't exist anymore because when artists moved, they tended to get rid of them. We found a lot of the work from the '60s really difficult to locate. Thankfully, we had images of them archival materials that indicated what they look like. A general curatorial rule was that we would not fabricate a work for the exhibition.

Lee Kun-Yong, who is now in his early 80s, is another big figure in the show. *Logic of Hands*, from 1975, shows Lee in four separate black-and-white frames, posing with his hands in different gestures. What made him so critical?

His practice was very diverse. He developed performance-based works that use the body as a way to understand one's relationship with the surrounding world. In the show, we wanted to really focus on what he called "events-logical." This is kind of exemplary of his performance work, where the repetition of everyday gestures such mark-making, counting, walking, and standing are made within a particular logical parameter. He removes them from their social conventions.

I think what's interesting is that this work was created at the height of an authoritarian regime where the state not only affected one's ideological routes, but also the physical realm, too. Men were no longer allowed to have long hair. Women were not allowed to be ministers. So, these kinds of restrictions just became part of your daily life. Lee was never overtly political, but it's interesting to see these works within that context.

You said that performance doesn't enter the discourse until the late 1970s to the early 80s. It starts off with happenings. *Disappearance*, staged in 1973 by Lee Kang-So at Myeongdong Gallery in Seoul, was one of them.

Lee took tables from a local bar he frequented, with cigarette marks or rings left from drinking glasses. The furniture itself embodied all of what was left behind. He loved that the surfaces of the furniture seemed to emit the life of the other people who touched and interacted with those objects. But then they were subsequently lost. I would say he did not know what was happening internationally at the time, with other happenings in New York. If you look at photos, it's all friends, some strangers, some family members. This is a real reflection on like the fleeting experience of everyday life.

You mean that it came out of his experience, that he wasn't necessarily reacting to what was happening with art collectives abroad? It wasn't until 1975 that it was shown publicly.

This was the time of a dictatorship. In 1972, the Yushin Constitution, which banned large gatherings, had just been announced. It closed universities and [introduced] a period of censorship. *Disappearance* was meant to create a space where artists and thinkers could come together and converse freely. I think that was a very radical move.