

What Is Experimental about Experimental Korean Art?

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On a matted thicket of straw spread on the floor lie all the trimmings of a picnic: wicker baskets, a portable gas stove, paper plates, newspaper sheets, and a radio. Although positioned to give the impression of spontaneity, the assembly more convincingly resembles a still life than an occasion underway. The guitar leans against the wall just so, as if left behind by a picnicker gone for a quick break. A half-eaten sandwich lies precariously on a plate, a tempting invitation to unseen insect life that call the grass home. First enacted in 1975 by the Busan-based artist Kim Jungmyoung, *After Picnic on the Grass* takes its cues from Édouard Manet's renowned 1863 painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. The twist in Kim's work is that the picnic happens inside the supposedly neutral space of the gallery in the Rotary department store in Busan, which in 1975 was as glumly nondescript as it was when the work was re-created almost fifty years later in the clinical confines of the Busan Museum of Art (figs. 19, 20). Whereas the ground in Manet's work frames the scandalous trio tenanting the painting's center, in Kim's work, the ground figures as a vacancy awaiting human occupation. The bright orange picnic blanket affirms that occupation, its bold hue calling us to envision the bodies it supports.

That the informality of *After Picnic on the Grass* radiated an air of defiance keys us into how artists and audiences in Korea might still flourish in an age that was itself no picnic. Kim's work happened in the very year that marked an unprecedented nadir for civil liberties in South Korea and, more broadly, an age of exception, when multiparty democracy hit new lows as more than three-quarters of the world's population fell under some form of undemocratic rule.¹ "Exception" recalls Carl Schmitt's infamous notion of exception, introduced in response to the crisis of Weimar Germany in the 1920s. Holding that a leader could disregard the rule of law for the perceived sake of the public good, Schmitt's idea quickly spiraled into a blanket justification for authoritarianism of all stripes, including that of Nazi Germany and Yushin Korea.²

Running the gamut of mixed-media appellations, from installation to performance, Experimental art in Korea denotes a critical mass of intentional efforts to carve spaces of respite, apostasy, and even levity for its makers, audiences, and constituent works, wedged between the relentless pursuit of economic development and national self-improvement on the one hand, and intensifying state control of its citizens on the other. That Kim's picnic is irresistibly ludicrous—delightfully so—attests to how well it clears space for the possibility of casual socialization as a political form, one that evades both the polemics of mass protest and the corruptibility of solidarity rhetoric.

What made Experimental artworks in Korea experimental was how they acted as metaphorical trials of some of the most fraught ideas underwriting the state, everyday life, and culture in postwar Korea from the perspective of a middle class skeptical of aspirational modernity and sensible to the dangers of excessive rationalism. Initially a wholesale abstraction used to refer mainly to small-business owners, intellectuals, and white-collar workers, the ranks of the Korean middle class (*jungsancheung*) exploded between 1960 and 1980.³ Yet Experimental artists who otherwise fit squarely into the middle-class category expressed deep skepticism of beliefs embraced by its supposed cultural vanguards. Artists like Moon Bokcheol had already tried and found wanting liberalism of the kind propelling gestural abstraction modeled after French Informel painting and U.S. Abstract Expressionism in the immediate wake of the Korean War. By the early 1960s, when the first Experimental artists were attending university, such painting and its pretenses to individual expression in the name of an avant-garde all but dominated curricular instruction. The gaily painted gourds studding the dark, rectilinear monochrome painting that Moon Bokcheol called a "situation" (*sanghwang*) read as a resounding rejection of both the idea of modernist autonomy and the tendency to regard abstraction as existential traces of a unique self (pl. 16).

One of the most faithful chroniclers of Experimental art in Korea, the culture reporter Chang Yunhwan, claimed that experimentation required the "denial and [even the] destruction of the self."⁴ I suspect he meant that artists and audiences had to be willing to countenance failure—that there are no guarantees of success is a crucial element of what makes an experiment an experiment. The critic Park Youngsook went one step further, claiming that an artist was one

Figs. 19, 20 Installation views of Kim Jungmyoung's *After Picnic on the Grass* (1975), as it appeared originally (left) and as re-created in 2020 at the Busan Museum of Art (right)



"who does not depict anything."⁵ Speaking of happenings, by which he was referring largely to staged events held indoors or outdoors, Park argued that creation mattered less than being "involved." More than mere participation, such involvement entailed having to consider what being present could mean outside profit seeking or results-oriented achievement, which by the early 1970s had been reduced to a zero-sum game in which failure was increasingly entangled with conceptions of death.

The turn to basic physical actions such as eating, sitting, jumping, and stretching disrupted the elitism underpinning artistic production in Korea, including the considerable influence wielded by the tiny fraction of artists privileged enough to have traveled to Paris soon after the provisional end of the Korean War.⁶ In his series of performed drawings titled *Body Drawing* (pl. 59), Lee Kun-Yong models how physical limitation can be a source of possibility. A close-up shows him bent over a flat piece of paper, trying to draw straight lines and increasingly unable to do so (fig. 21). Our eyes are drawn to the far sides of his compositions, where the lines are convex, looking much like jail bars that have been forced open. The longer our eyes linger, the easier it is to imagine the exertion involved in leaning over a sheet of paper. Blood rushes to the head, sweat beads on the forehead, and our hands tremble as we vainly eke out a poor echo of the confident lines depicted at center.

So consistently did Korean Experimental artists focus on the limitations of human capacity that their art reads as a project whose politics depends on recognizing fallibility as the condition for building a commons open to all contributions. This may be what critic Yoo June-sang was alluding to when he exhorted the graduating class of Hongik University in 1966 to question who is "we" (*uri*),

Fig. 21 Lee Kun-Yong creating his *Body Drawing 76-05*, 1976



a term embedded in "our country" (*uri nara*), the phrase most commonly used by Koreans to refer to Korea.⁷ Yoo argued that "society" (*sahoe*) did not necessarily mean uniformity but was instead a negotiable situation diffused across multiple fronts, indicated by the simultaneous circulation of terms such as "assembly" (*jiphoe*), "collective" (*jipdan*), and "organization" (*jojik*).⁸ A case in point was the *Union Exhibition of Young Korean Artists* of 1967, held at the National Public Information Office in downtown Seoul. Often heralded as a key point of emergence for Korean Experimental art, the exhibition featured three groups, Zero (Mu), Origin, and Sinjeon, whose works were often installed without making much of a distinction between group affiliation.

Groups frequently issued statements of intent and even manifesto-like declarations but never intended to be professional organizations such as the Korean Fine Arts Association. In Busan, the Post Artist Association, so named to reflect member interest in art beyond abstract painting, declared its mission as "attempting to locate where we are through forms worthy of 'today,' 'Korea,' and the 'world.'"⁹ In Seoul, the Korean Avant Garde Association (AG) had its own quasi-constitution of principles as well as a collectively produced journal. Known for its deep interests in Conceptualism and proto-installation, the ST (Space and Time) Group, established in 1971, organized its own communal seminars and reading groups that reflected a commitment to reasoned dialogue.¹⁰ Other groups, such as Zero Group, cut across academic rivalries to pledge allegiance to non-identitarian commonality and unscalable collectivity alike. Forgoing the usual hierarchies of gender and seniority that structured most Korean institutions, such artists' groups filled a deep need for spaces of inclusion, particularly as Korean art had for so many years been defined by the politics of exclusion,

Fig. 22 Lee Jonghyup (left) and Jung Jang-Jig (right) participating in an untitled performance of the 19751225 Group, Daejeon Station, Seoul, 1975



whether expressed through the partisan selections of the Gukjeon (National Art Exhibition) or the delegations tapped to represent Korea abroad that consisted almost entirely of Seoul-based alumni of two universities (Hongik and Seoul National).

Certainly, group activity seemed to embolden relatively powerless, vulnerable students into producing work indistinguishable from the kind of assembly the state tried so hard to quell.¹¹ Many Experimental works were facilitated by Ejeotto, the theater group spearheaded by Bang Taesu that originally took root as a pantomime group. Formed in 1969, it folded performance into its programming, including works by Lee Kun-Yong, Kim Kulim, and Chung Chang-sup.¹² Turn also to the inaugural performance by the Daejeon-based artists' group 19751225 (fig. 22). At noon on Christmas day, 1975, three young men (Lee Jonghyup, Jung Jang-Jig, and Jung Gil Ho) sat quietly on the pavement just outside the train station in Daejeon, about 140 kilometers south of Seoul. Flat, two-dimensional works of their own creation sat with them, as if sharing in what looked to be a group meditation session. "What the hell are you doing?" asked a local policeman.¹³ "We are doing art," said the artists. With what was likely a combination of impatience and incredulity, the policeman dismissively replied, "What kind of art is this? It's dangerous to gather like this, just hurry up and go." Recalled by Lee Jonghyup, the brief dialogue attests to how civilian action could unsettle state agents limited by their ability to think only in terms of certainties. A hint of a smirk crossed Jung's face—a trace, perhaps, of having converted the occupation of space into something poetic, yet also inescapably tinged with a rebelliousness that was not quite civil disobedience but was certainly far from apolitical.

The members of 19751225 did leave the station plaza, but not before hastily asking a photographer from a nearby photo studio to take some pictures of them sitting in action. By the mid-1960s, photography in Korea had assumed a new political function of legitimation as a means of giving voice to the disenfranchised. The dependence of performance on photography and its presumptive capacity for documentation leveraged this function, prodding us to ask how and when artists and artworks become political actors. Photography emphasized how performances, from *Murder by the Han Riverside* (1968; pl. 19) to the 1976 performance *Practicing Death* by Kwon Chol-in, which involved the artist being stripped and laid in a shut coffin, rendered especially taut the boundary between liveness and expiration. The frequency of the funeral motif underlined how everyday life was fraught by the imminence of death, whether expressed as having to account for the dead in Korean War memorials or the militarization of civilian life, as indicated in the floor-based installation works of Lee Seung-taek consisting of hair shorn from new conscripts.¹⁴ Photography enabled Experimental art to create enough friction between the viewer's experience and the state's extensive efforts to propose the Korean nation as the regulating context for all social interactions, so as to preserve the speculative possibilities Experimental art hoped to impart.

With access to imported artistic materials, university educations, and, for the anointed few, foreign travel, Experimental artists in Korea were hardly of the populace; a considerable number of Experimental artworks were made while their creators were still attending university at a time when higher education encapsulated middle-class privilege.¹⁵ Yet neither did they belong to the ranks of the colonial and postcolonial elite as did Nam June Paik, whose father, Paik

Nak-seung, founded postwar Korea's first conglomerate using the vast fortune he made manufacturing and selling textiles with the blessing of the Imperial Japanese Army.¹⁶ Experimental artists neither sought to claim state power nor tried to assume leadership roles in civil society, and their attention to everyday activities read as concerted attempts to reject advanced technique and its connotations of inaccessibility. Singularly attuned to the pressures of exclusion as manifested through the notion of meritocracy, Experimental artists contributed to what the *Dong-a ilbo* newspaper in 1969 described as the university "in the process of transforming from a hall of learning into a laboratory," with "laboratory" a possible coded reference to the greater freedoms students had to act politically.¹⁷

But university entrance examinations helped define education as one of the central arenas of competition within which the idea of "we" was formed not through a shared language, a common history, or a single ethnicity but, rather, by the inevitable experience of rejection. This assumption by the meritocracy that the university entailed a kind of death threaded through another work by Kim Jomson, who orchestrated *Mr. Hong's Funeral* at the 1975 Hongik University graduation ceremony. With an eye for the dramatic honed through her participation in Kaidu, the first all-women filmmaking society in Korea, Kim converted what nominally would have been a celebration of past achievement and a transition into a supposedly hopeful future into an occasion for mourning.¹⁸ Having participated in *Mr. Hong's Funeral*, the artist Kim Yong-Ik succinctly described matters by quoting the poet and literary critic Kim Soo-young: "a society that does not acknowledge 'political freedom' does not acknowledge 'personal freedom,' either. A society that does not acknowledge 'content' does not acknowledge 'form,' either."¹⁹ For Kim Yong-Ik, the condemnation of *Mr. Hong's Funeral* as "outrageous" rendered it "content" actively disowned by a society unable to identify art as an imbrication of form with personal freedom.²⁰ Kim Yong-Ik's choice of citation further insinuates a refusal on his—and, most likely, his contemporaries'—part to accept conceptions of avant-garde practice as somehow transcending any difficulty introduced by the political, economic, and social circumstances of its production.

Yet anti-state resistance was never Experimental art's ultimate horizon.²¹ The critic Lim Geunjun insightfully observes the crucial role of generational divisions when conceptualizing postwar Korean art history. Those born in the early and mid-1940s were less shaped by the trauma of the Korean War than were their predecessors. In turn, those born in the 1950s were immersed in U.S. culture, from movies to the unabashedly anti-Communist liberal humanism peddled by magazines such as *Life*, an important source of information about overseas artistic developments.²² Experimental artists included members of both generations, joined by having no living memory of the Japanese colonial era or the class hierarchies it perpetuated through differential access to higher education. At the same time, they shared with their teachers an obligation to resituate concepts such as "nation," "progress," and "the people" as categories of analysis rather than as self-evident givens. It helps explain why mimicry emerged as an especially potent strategy in Kim Youngja's oversize wooden replica of a matchbox emblazoned with the silhouette of a proposed memorial to United Nations military participation in the Korean War (fig. 23), or in the performances of the Esprit Group. Willing their bodies to conform to those portrayed on Korean War

memorials, Esprit Group members drained official visual culture of whatever ideological gravity it hoped to convey (fig. 24). Their performances disclosed how the state trivialized virtues like love, sacrifice, and honor while also refusing to be translated into acts of individual resistance valorized by Western Enlightenment ideals; as self-sacrifice in the name of a collective as extolled by the paternalistic nation-state; or as allegorical gestures intended to speak on behalf of an entire silent mass. But there is something about the flaccid bodies that parody alone cannot explain. Prostate and prone, they are corpse-like in that the photographs make it difficult to imagine them standing. Such work hints at that which separates Experimental artists even from their own generation, defined by the events of April 19, 1960, which led to the ouster of President Syngman Rhee, and by Park Chung Hee's seizure of executive power almost exactly one year later. Experimental artists cleaved neither to the mirage of revolution nor to the false promises of reconstruction, which, under Park's rule, meant construction so accelerated that stillness assumed radical potential.

Perhaps the most resounding example of how bodies became sites of ethical inquiry is *Transparent Balloons and Nude* (1968; pl. 18). Wearing only underpants, Jung Kangja had transparent balloons attached to her body, which audience members burst as she walked onstage. On one level, the work firmly rejected what might be called a propriety regime that policed behavior even more assiduously than the state. *Transparent Balloons and Nude* likewise took aim at propriety as a hopelessly middle-class obsession unable to express itself outside the most predictable terms of moral condemnation ("decadent" and "disorderly" were special favorites). At the same time, the work underlined as spectacle the objectification of women's bodies by reworking the familiar

Fig. 23 Kim Youngja, *Match 111*, 1967. Mixed media, 35 3/8 x 51 1/8 x 51 1/8 in. (90 x 130 x 130 cm). No longer extant

Fig. 24 Untitled performance of the Esprit Group in front of the Monument to the Philippine Armed Forces in the Korean War, Goyang-si, 1974



art-historical trope of the nude female form as a vulnerable body. Jung's contemporary Cha Myung Hi recalled being pressured into performing *Sex on the Piano* in September 1969 with Chung Chanseung.²³ Jung, in contrast, was adamant as to what she would and would not do.²⁴ Central to Korean performance in an Experimental context was the question of female consent. On the one hand, Experimental art sometimes offered more space in which to exercise female agency than was possible in other sectors of Korea's intensely patriarchal art world, which collapsed acquiescence into participation.²⁵ On the other, it could mirror how the state effaced distinctions between coercion and agreement.

From 1974 to 1979 the Daegu Contemporary Art Festival became the pre-eminent venue for Experimental art in Korea. For its fourth edition Kim Munja performed *The Sound of Laundry-08-78* (fig. 25). Wearing traditional Korean dress (*hanbok*), she laundered clothes by beating the wet fabric on a flat, hard surface, in Naengcheon, about a forty-five-minute drive south of Daegu. A daily activity prominently inscribed as a theme in a range of classic Korean musical genres, from *minyo* to *pansori*, the pounding beats were interpreted as expressions of Korean female *han*, a term very loosely interpreted as an admixture of suppressed rage, accumulated sorrow, enduring resentment, and inconsolable regret.²⁶ Artistic labor, Kim insists, not only is contiguous with menial labor but also cannot be fathomed without a consideration of its psychological toll.²⁷ Her work fragments "everyday life" into a multitude of unresolved and unrecognized struggles rather than treating it as an essentializing category of sameness. Even as Experimental artists sought to position the "everyday" (*ilsang*) as a common surround to which artists and audiences belonged equally, Kim Munja stressed the unequal distribution of its burdens across gender and class lines,

Fig. 25 Media coverage of Kim Munja's *The Sound of Laundry-08-78* (1978), as performed at the fourth Daegu Contemporary Art Festival, 1978



as well as across the widening disparity between urban and rural households.²⁸ Moreover, like other performance-based works dependent on what might be perceived as menial tasks or routine activity, *The Sound of Laundry* problematized the distinction between skilled and unskilled labor that in Korea undermined the rights of homemakers and others involved in the kind of unregulated work that so much Experimental art appeared to celebrate, including construction and manufacturing.²⁹

In 1973 Lee Kang-So initiated *Disappearance—Bar in the Gallery* (pl. 80). Held at the Myongdong Gallery near the busy rotary of Anguk-dong in central Seoul, it featured a set of crudely carved wooden tables and chairs taken directly from a restaurant in Daegu catering to a working-class clientele.³⁰ A giant vat of rice wine, *makgeolli*, stood at the gallery entrance, its contents free to anyone who entered. Effectively flouting existing laws against public assembly by gathering all manner of people, from students to elderly pensioners, in a single space, *Disappearance—Bar in the Gallery* modeled a politics rooted in brokering vital encounters between drastically different constituencies. It may not have amounted to a revolution, but the image of communal interaction not ordered into place by the state offered a start. There was nothing spectacular or even special to see there, but that was precisely the point. By foregrounding the pleasure of wasting time, *Disappearance—Bar in the Gallery* stole from the forward march of development while also attempting to recuperate a sense of social connection that had eroded in the wake of an enormous population boom that saw Seoul grow more rapidly than any city in the world from 1950 to 1975.³¹

Set up like an experiment in which ordinary Koreans served as a control group, *Disappearance—Bar in the Gallery* exemplifies how Experimental art ranked among the most salient lenses through which to conceptualize a Korean middle class beyond developmental metrics of per capita income and productivity rates. Keenly sensitive to new information as well as to the expanded availability of consumer goods throughout the 1960s, Experimental artists skillfully toggled between high-, middle-, and lowbrow cultural forms. Lee Seung-taek embraced "life in the world of cheap, frail, and fun synthetics," noting how artistic "freedom" perhaps inheres in being able to avail oneself of the materials that scientific advances make newly available for popular consumption.³² The *Union Exhibition of Young Korean Artists* was described similarly: "If Informel painting sought to locate the human through its opposition to mechanization, avant-garde art recognized machines (and the culture of mechanization) and attempted to find the human by entering into it."³³ Fashioned from thin neon tubes emitting a rainbow spectrum of light, from red to blue, *Visual Sense I, II* (1968; pl. 9) by Kang Kukjin imparts an unexpected intimacy for viewers who might imagine their bodies slotting neatly into the spaces created by the work. Hardly inert stuff awaiting human manipulation, objects exerted over their human collaborators a fascination previously unknown in Korean art. That personhood is mediated through objects seems to be the point, for example, of the sublime skirt Jung Kangja pieced together from blank military dog tags—Twiggy by way of the DMZ (fig. 26).³⁴ The radical openness that Experimental artists showed toward bringing different materials together paved the way for other kinds of inclusion, especially a new receptivity to what might ordinarily be regarded as craft. Writing on the abstract tapestries of Kim Youngja, Seok Ranhui, and Lee Myungsu, the critic Oh Kwang-su claimed them as "attempts to

recuperate contemporary art alienated from the public."³⁵ Pleasure was always an ally, as Jung Kangja asserted in considering herself and her colleagues "friends with all materials."³⁶

A leading question for Experimental art in Korea turned on what exactly constituted the proper relationship between art and everyday life. "Everyday life" was of course a charged concept; the fallen tree that Lee Kun-Yong sourced for the 1971 debut of *Corporal Term* (pl. 79) was a casualty of the South Korean government's ambitious ten-year highway construction program, birthed in 1967, while newspaper was, for Sung Neung Kyung, a perfect leitmotif to consider the susceptibility of information.³⁷ Made for the third ST Exhibition, in 1974, *Newspapers: After 1st of June 1974* (pl. 64) foreshadowed the infamous December 1974 "blank pages" incident, when, buckling under intense government pressure, advertisers withdrew their support from *Dong-a ilbo*, the largest newspaper in South Korea in the early 1970s, but one known for its criticisms of the Park Chung Hee government. From newspaper sheets mounted upright on blank walls, Sung cut out sections that he then dropped into a transparent acrylic box. The rectangular slips of paper strongly resembled ballots, alluding vividly to the ballot stuffing and erasures that constituted everyday politics in Yushin Korea.³⁸ That Sung was nevertheless able to exhibit his work at a government institution, the National Museum of Modern Art, located in central Seoul, was a testament to how visual art could operate as a credible alibi against charges of sedition. Each cutout reinforced the imbrication of sight and reading, with the display of such sheets in the museum drawing attention to seeing as a collective exercise undertaken voluntarily by the public and not by *gungmin*, the term used since the Japanese colonial period to define "the people" as citizens necessarily subject

Fig. 26 Jung Kangja with her work *The Spring of Woman*, 1970. No longer extant



to state rule and primarily actualized through their supposed obligations to the nation.³⁹

Yoo June-sang, in his address at Hongik University in 1966, suggested that the relationship between art and society hinged on having to navigate between vastly different scales of operation, from "hometown" (*gohyang*) to "history" (*yeogsa*).⁴⁰ *세계전도, 世界顛倒, An Upside-Down Map of the World* (1974; pl. 71), another work by Sung Neung Kyung, is a prescient expansion of Stuart McArthur's *Universal Corrective Map of the World* (1979), a revisionist approach to the Mercator projection showing Australia and the Global South at the top of the world and the supposedly more advanced countries of the Global North at the bottom. Sung reshuffles the map entirely by cutting a standardized world map into rectangular segments, which he then arranges in a grid in no particular order, save for an interest in the even distribution of color. *세계전도, 世界顛倒, An Upside-Down Map of the World* underlines how maps represent arbitrariness masquerading as objective fact.

세계전도, 世界顛倒, An Upside-Down Map of the World further suggests how Experimental art expanded the remit of contemporary Korean art to include expatriate artists in the U.S., France, and Japan, such as Nam June Paik in New York, Kim Soungui in Paris, and Lee Ufan in Tokyo.⁴¹ For Sung Neung Kyung, the consummate performance artist was the storied dancer Hong Sin Cha, who in February 1973 performed *Mourning* in New York City.⁴² Making full use of sound as well as gesture, Hong grieved her older sister's death by reenacting traditional mourning practices, just as the South Korean government expanded the Family Ritual Code of 1969 discouraging traditional Korean customs by limiting what could be spent on weddings, ancestor veneration ceremonies, and

Fig. 27 Installation view of Park Hyunki's *Work 2* at the exhibition *Media as Translators*, Daegu, June 26–27, 1982



funerals.⁴³ But like Kim Munja's laundry work, Hong's performance showcased how intensely local protocols might seed new genealogies, unencumbered by requirements to be for or against a particular politics. Experimental art anticipated the force of a multitude expressed through small, accumulated refusals rather than exemplary individual heroics.

By 1977 the currency of Experimental art had lessened as artists such as Kim Soungui rejected its "institutionalization."⁴⁴ The Daegu Contemporary Art Festival had launched a veritable franchise, with like festivals happening in Seoul, Busan, Gwangju, and Cheongju. Organic communality buckled under the pressure of large-scale organization, with formerly renegade works, including *Transparent Balloons and Nude* and *Newspapers: After 1st of June 1974*, coming into the state fold when shown at the National Museum of Modern Art in its 1978 survey of recent Korean art.⁴⁵ Culture reporter Choi No-suk sounded a different kind of dirge in characterizing Experimental art as unintelligible and alienating: "What does it all mean?"; "What is it supposed to make us feel?"⁴⁶ Questions asking what artworks mean or, worse, what they must mean impart their own kind of violence. They reduce worlds of experience into mere fragments of information. But Choi's lamentation over what he saw as the failures of Experimental art inadvertently attested to its success. For all its susceptibility to the atomization of capitalist Korean society into ever-more specialized options, categories, and areas of inquiry, Experimental art nevertheless remained unassimilable to consensus thinking.

How to preserve a space for dissensus became an increasing challenge for Experimental art in the 1980s. For *Media as Translators*, a daylong event happening on the Nakdong riverbank near his hometown of Daegu, Park Hyunki, one of the flagbearers of the Daegu Contemporary Art Festival, installed *Work 2* (fig. 27). A grassy clearing in a poplar forest surfaces as a cemetery of waste, with several Coca-Cola cans standing awkwardly like tilted gravestones. Two television monitors placed in the clearing show a closed-circuit live feed of the cans. *Work 2* appears as the inverse of Nam June Paik's *TV Garden* (1974), whose integration of television monitors into a lush botanical oasis was among the works likely to have encouraged Park to engage with video-based work (see also pl. 84).⁴⁷ Described by Chang Suk Won as a commentary on pollution, *Work 2* discloses part of the cost of development, insinuating how the unlimited ability to waste and produce waste may be what humans share most in common.⁴⁸ But it also suggests how the middle class—which in 1982 had so rapidly expanded its ranks as to constitute a real social and economic force, independent of state circumscription—was defined by an inertia that misled its members into confusing passive viewing for active participation. If the act of seeing in the 1970s entailed constant vigilance borne of an awareness of a constant state surveillance, by the 1980s it threatened to devolve into yet another form of consumption. *Work 2* frames pollution just as a middle-class viewer might see it from the comforts of home, and therefore at a distance.⁴⁹ The photograph we see resembles a still frame captured from a televised broadcast, suggesting, perhaps, that the best we can do is to preserve moments doomed otherwise to oblivion. Even so, the world according to Experimental art was an eminently testable proposition, one where hope was not lost but patiently waiting to be found.

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- 1 Estimated using Raymond D. Gastil, *Comparative Survey of Freedom, 1972-1976* (Ann Arbor: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1992). When referring to "some form of undemocratic rule," I also include democracies that suspended civil liberties, namely India, where Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency of 1975 to suppress mounting protests against her government and which resulted in mass arrests of opposition leaders, canceled elections, and censorship of the press.
- 2 The jurist Han Taeyeon, one of the architects of Park Chung Hee's Yushin Constitution (used to justify the declaration of martial law in 1972), had been thinking about Schmitt since the 1950s. For Han, the state had to maintain its power at all costs in order to defend itself against its Communist enemies. On the intellectual reception of Schmitt's work, see Kim Hyo-jeon, *Kal Syumicheu heonbeop ironui hangukjeok jeongae* [The development of Carl Schmitt's theories on constitutional law in Korea] (Paju: Beomunsa, 1982).
- 3 An estimated 20% of the Korean population belonged to the middle class in 1960; by 1980 this figure had swelled to 40%. Hong Doo-Seung, Kim Byung-Jo, and Jo Dong-Gi, *Hangugui jigeop gujo* [Occupational structure in Korea] (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1999), p. 141.
- 4 Chang Yunhwan, "Hangugui jeonwi yesul" [Avant-garde art in Korea], *Sindonga* 125 (January 1975), p. 316; see also Primary Sourcebook, p. 251. One speculates whether Experimental art helped consolidate a community of writers critical of state policy. A culture reporter for *Dong-a ilbo*, Chang belonged to the Committee for the Struggle for Press Freedoms, organized in March 1975. Fired en masse from the newspaper in 1975 for their critical coverage of the Park Chung Hee government, committee members subsequently founded the progressive *Hankoreh* newspaper in 1988. Chang recalled that "any journalist writing on art, be it literature, art, or performance, would have naturally reacted keenly to problems in the system." Chang Yunhwan, "Donga ilbowa Bak Jeonghuiwa na" [Dong-a ilbo, Park Chung Hee and me], *Media Today*, November 22, 2012, <http://www.mediatoday.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=106141>. Accessed February 2, 2021.
- 5 Park Youngsook, "Wae, gwanyyeom yesuringa?" [Why, is it ideological art?], *Space* 84 (April 1974), p. 15.
- 6 Jeon Yusin, "1950nyeondaeui pari jinchul jagadeulgwa hanguk hyeondae misurui gukkehwa" [Artists traveling to Paris in the 1950s and the internationalization of modern Korean art], *Hyeondae misulsa yeongu* 39 (June 2016), pp. 147-50.
- 7 Yoo June-sang, "Yesulingwa sahoe" [Artists and society], *Hongdae sinmun*, March 15, 1966.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Quoted in Suk Do-ryun, "Bujeonggwa byeonieui jari ihujakgaenpyeong" [A space of negation and transition: Review of the Post Artist Association], *Kukje sinbo*, April 18, 1968.
- 10 In an October 2004 interview with the curator Lee Youngchul, Lee Kun-Yong remarked that the ST was formed as an extension of Art News, a loose set of artists and critics who discussed essays published in the Japanese art journal *Bijutsu techō*. Lee Kun-Yong, cited in Lee Youngchul, *Dangsineun naeui laeyang: Hanguk hyeondae misul 1960-2004* [You are my sunshine: Korean contemporary art 1960-2004], exh. cat. (Seoul: Total Museum of Art, 2005), p. 306.
- 11 The critic Lee Gu-yeol quoted members of the Fourth Group observing how "permission to assemble is hard to come by, and the police not only do not understand our art, they fear it too." Lee Gu-yeol, "Jopgo pyeswaejeogin balpyo gigwan" [Small and exclusionary exhibition spaces], *Yesulgye* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1970), p. 129.
- 12 Kiran Kim, "Cheongnyeong daehang munhwaeui wisanghakjeok gonggan euroseoeui 70nyeondae sogekjang" [A study on small theater culture of the 1970s as youth counterculture in Korean theater], *Daejeung seosa yeongu* 22, no. 3 (2016), pp. 185-86.
- 13 Lee Jonghyup recalled the encounter between the 19751225 and the police in a 2018 interview with Yoon Jin-sup; see Yoon Jin-sup, "Hanguk haengwi yesulul heureumgwa Daejeonui saeroun misul undong: 19751225 geurubui hwaldongeul jungsimeuro" [The current of Korean performance art and new artistic movements in Daejeon: On the activities of the 19751225], *Seoul Art Guide*, May 28, 2018, <http://www.daljin.com/column/18280>. Accessed April 20, 2022.
- 14 I have discussed Lee's hair installation in "Use on Vacation: The Non-Sculptures of Lee Seung-taek," *Archives of Asian Art* 63, no. 1 (2013), pp. 109-11.
- 15 From 1966 to 1975, the years roughly coincident to the emergence of Korean Experimental art, less than 5% of the entire Korean adult population had received some form of higher education. Statistics Korea (KOSTAT), *Tonggyero bon gwangbok 70nyeong: Hanguk sahoeui byeonhwa* [Seventy years of liberation through statistics: Changes in Korean society] (Seoul: Jinhan M&B, 2017), p. 213.
- 16 For a detailed analysis of Paik Nak-seung's business activities during and after the Asia-Pacific War, which began in 1937, see Joong An-ki, "Ilje ui gungu dongwongwa joseonin jabongau jeonsi hyeomnyeok" [The military mobilization of Imperialist Japan and the wartime cooperation of Korean capitalists], *Dongbuga yeoksa nonchong* 46 (December 2014), pp. 221-76. Taechang, Paik's family company, was disbanded in December 1961 by the Park Chung Hee government.
- 17 "Oneurui jeolmeun geudeul (4) silheom haneun jase" [Today's youth (4): The attitude of those who experience], *Dong-a ilbo*, April 18, 1969.
- 18 The stated goals of Kaidu, ostensibly named after the granddaughter of Genghis Khan (but most likely a reference to Khutulun, the renowned Mongol woman warrior whose father was Kaidu), included dismantling prejudices that filmmaking was a "man's job" and challenging the assumption that a film's worth was tied inextricably to its commercial success. "Silheom yeonghwa mandeun kaidu huyedeul" [The experimental filmmaking descendants of Kaidu], *Chosun ilbo*, July 29, 1974. For the group's second exhibition, Kim produced *75-13*, a forty-minute, part-color film featuring fast-paced music and a knife, which drew directly on the filmic surface to produce what leading film critic Byun In-sik (who initially aspired to a career in the visual arts) described as "art you hear and music you see." Byun In-sik, "Sunsu yeonghwau dongjeongeul jikinda, silheom yeoseong yeonghwa keulleop 'Kaidu'" [Guarding the true spirit of pure film, the female experimental film club "Kaidu"], *Hankook ilbo*, May 5, 1975.
- 19 Kim Yong-ik, "Haepyeong: Hongssi sangga" [A happening: Mr. Hong's funeral], *Hongdae hakbo*, March 15, 1975.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Recalling how the critic members of the AG (Oh Kwang-su, Lee Yil, and Kim In Whan) worked for free and that exhibition costs were largely shouldered by group members, the artist Shim Moon-seup argued for more state support in a discussion of 1970s Korean art with critic Park Youngsook. Park Youngsook and Shim Moon-seup, "70nyeondaeui hanguk misul" [Korean art of the 1970s], in *Hanguk hyeondae misul jeonjip* [Overview of Korean contemporary art], Vol. 20, *Johyeonggwa banjohyeong, oneuleui sanghwang* [Form and anti-form, today's situation] (Seoul: Hankook ilbosa, 1979), p. 138.
- 22 Lim Geunjun argues that the liberal-conservative distinction in Korean society is more a symptom of generational divisions than a reflection of actual ideological differences. Lim Geunjun, "1988nyeong ihu toeseonan ideureui sedaejeok eumi?" [What is the generational significance of those born after 1988?], *Jugan hanguk*, June 23, 2009, <http://weekly.hankooki.com/lpage/coverstory/200906/wk20090623140644105430.htm>. Accessed March 17, 2022.
- 23 Ko Hye-ryeon, "Geu ttae geu saram, 18.69nyeong Baek Nam-jun kompeojiseon churyeon Chung Chanseung, Cha Myeonghui" [That time, those people, number 18: Chung Chanseung and Cha Myung Hi performing in Nam June Paik's composition in 1969], *JoongAng ilbo*, September 15, 1993. In addition to confessing her reluctance to perform in the work, Cha, who left Korea to study printmaking in Marseille almost immediately after the performance, observed that she "didn't want to be defined" by *Sex on the Piano*. Also uncertain is whether the imbalance of age and stature between Paik and his younger colleagues affected the terms of participation.
- 24 Jung Kangja, interview with the author, Seoul, May 30, 2015.
- 25 Other important female Experimental artists included Lee Myungmi, who, at twenty-four, was a founding member of the Daegu Contemporary Art Festival; Lee Hyangmi, the Daegu painter who cofounded the avant-garde group 35/128, and whose sinuous dripped-line paintings injected sensuality into Experimentalism (see pl. 78); Shim Sun Hee, whose 1967 assemblage *Mini 2* threw into relief the conflation of technology, modernism, and female objectification; and Jang Geumja, one of the founding members of the Daejeon '78 Generation Group.
- 26 "Ibenteuwa dareun jilseowa ganeungseong boyeo" [Displaying a different order and potential with event-based artworks], *Yeongnam ilbo*, September 27, 1978.
- 27 Marveling at how closely Kim resembled a traditional "wife," critic Chang Suk Won described her beating of clothes as "beating at the edges of performance art," an observation that places *The Sound of Laundry-08-78* somewhere between art and life. Chang Suk Won, "Eojjaeseo jeonwimisinga?" [How is this avant-garde art?] (1979), quoted in Ryu Han-seung, "1970nyeondae jung hubanui ibenteu" [Event-based works of the mid- to late 1970s], *Journal of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea* 7 (2015), p. 122.
- 28 As the critic and Seoul National University art professor Yoo Geunjun grimly warned a hypothetical female student, "Don't believe you can reconcile everyday life with the life of the mind" in a world that made it impossible to harmonize "family life" and "life outside the home." Yoo Geunjun, "Yeoseonggwa misul" [Women and art], *Yerim* 1 (October 1968), p. 33.
- 29 Depressing wages for unskilled labor was critical to export substitution, a cornerstone of Park Chung Hee's economic growth policy. In 1976 average hourly wages for unskilled labor in South Korea were one-twelfth of the rate in the U.S., with a workweek of almost sixty hours in contrast to the forty-hour workweek in the U.S. Lawrence R. Alschuler, *Multinationals and Maldevelopment: Alternative Development Strategies in Argentina, the Ivory Coast and Korea* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), p. 155. Complicating matters further is the prevailing assumption among employers, and even scholars, throughout the 1970s and 1980s to read all women workers as unskilled

- laborers, irrespective of the actual knowledge required for work completion. Kim Mi-ju, "Gender Division of Labor and Skill as a Factor of Sex Wage Differentials," in *Gender Division of Labor in Korea*, ed. Cho Hyoung and Chang Pil-wha (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 1994), pp. 106–34.
- 30 I use "working class" loosely here, per Myungji Yang's caution that most Koreans avoided identifying themselves with a particular social class due to the internalization of anti-Communist rhetoric that stressed national unity over class division. For a stimulating discussion of the symbiotic relationship between the state, nationalism, and class politics, see Myungji Yang, "The Making of the Urban Middle Class in South Korea (1961–1979): Nation-Building, Discipline, and the Birth of the Ideal National Subjects," *Sociological Inquiry* 82, no. 3 (August 2012), pp. 424–45.
 - 31 This statistic is extrapolated from UN Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2001 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2002), pp. 116–17, <http://www.megacities.unl-koeln.de/documentation/megacity/statistic/wup2001dh.pdf>. Accessed February 23, 2022.
 - 32 Lee Seung-taek, "Hanguk hyeondae jogagui jeonmang" [Outlook on Korean contemporary sculpture], *Joso* 1 (1972), p. 17.
 - 33 Quoted in Yi Haedun, "Hyeondae seogu misurui gyeonghyang—Hanguk cheongnyeon jakga yeollipoeui jibang sullye gangjwa" [Currents in contemporary Western art—Regional circulation lectures by the Union Exhibition of Young Artists association], *Maeil shinmun*, February 14, 1968.
 - 34 In addition to fashion design, Jung had familial connections to the world of popular culture: her older brother was Nam Il-hae, whose 1964 hit song "Miss Red Shoes" had lyrics that could have doubled as instructions for a performance: "the click click of her heels / where is she going / turn around just once / it's worth seeing / are you counting your steps one by one / Miss Red Shoes walks alone."
 - 35 Oh Kwang-su, "Ttappiseuri 3injeon buchyeo" [On the three-person exhibition of tapestry], in *Kim Youngja, Seok Ranhui, Lee Myungsu Ttappiseuri 3injeon* [Three-person tapestry exhibition by Kim Youngja, Seok Ranhui, and Lee Myungsu] (Seoul: Dorajang Gallery, 1971), unpaginated. Seok was a fellow member of the Zero Group.
 - 36 Jung Kangja, interview with the author, Seoul, August 20, 2014. Cited in Joan Kee, "The Long Breath: Postwar Korean Art," in *A Companion to Korean Art*, ed. J. P. Park, Juhung Rhi, and Burglind Jungmann (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), p. 441.
 - 37 Ibid., p. 453.
 - 38 The sense of civic participation alluded to by Sung's acrylic box anticipated the outpouring of support for the beleaguered *Dong-a ilbo* in the immediate aftermath of the "blank pages" incident. Of the numerous private individuals and organizations that took out advertising space in the early months of 1975 to help keep the newspaper in business, Jeong-Sook Lee argues that their transition from readers to citizens was exemplified by their volition. Jeong-Sook Lee, "'Peureseu jeongdonggeul' tansaeng gwa munhakjaeui 'seoneon'" [The emergence of the "press effect" and the "declaration" of litterateurs], *Minjok munhwasa yeongu* 60 (2016), pp. 116–17.
 - 39 Park Myoung-kyu argues that, in describing audiences (*cheongjung*) as *gungmin*, the Republic of Korea was, from its infancy, situating citizens as subjects. Park Myoung-kyu, *Gungmin, immin, simin: Gaenyeom-saro bon hangukui jeongchi juche* [Nation, people, citizen: The identity of Korean politics as a history of concepts] (Seoul: Sohwa, 2014), p. 60.
 - 40 Yoo June-sang, "Yesulingwa sahoe."
 - 41 Even as Korean artists consistently downplayed the impact of Japan, Japanese galleries, critics, and artists played an instrumental role in expanding the international remit of Korean art after 1965, when diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan resumed. Artists like Ha Chong-Hyun were especially struck by the support afforded to Experimental works. Ha Chong-Hyun, "Ilbon hwadaneul dulleobogo" [After visiting the Japanese art scene], *Hongdae hakbo*, April 15, 1972.
 - 42 "From the viewpoint of expanding the area of performance, I think we need to consider Hong Sin Cha"; Sung Neung Kyung, quoted in *1970–1980 nyeondae hangugui yeoksajeok gaenyeom misul* [Korean historical conceptual art in the 1970s and 1980s] (Seoul: Noonbit, 2011), p. 300. Hong's work was also featured prominently in Chang Yunhwan, "Hangugui jeonwi yesul," pp. 324–25.
 - 43 The Family Ritual Code was introduced in 1969 to encourage habits of thrift that might translate into high savings rates as well as "rationalize" social customs. For a succinct discussion of the code from an anthropological standpoint, see Lauren Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea: Of Gender, Morality, and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 68–71.
 - 44 "I don't like my works to be defined as avant-garde or Experimental. That would mean that the works were institutionalized. By this I mean that they are already no longer new and are crystallized within a given frame"; Kim Soungui, interview with Park Jung-ja, "Misurui singanseong-gwa eoneoseong" [The temporality and linguicism of art], *Space* 123 (September 1977), p. 80. At the same time, Lee Kang-So, in an interview with Kim Hong-hee, recalled how the Daegu Contemporary Art Festival ended in 1979 in order to avoid the "politicization" that happens when "one generation is in power for a long time . . . [and] the next generation loses self-sufficiency and becomes weak"; quoted in Kim Hong-hee, *1970–1980nyeondae hangukui yeoksajeok gaenyeom misul*, p. 228.
 - 45 The exhibition, *Trends in 20 Years of Contemporary Korean Art*, was held at the National Museum of Modern Art (the predecessor of today's MMCA) from November 3 to 12, 1978.
 - 46 Choi No-suk, "Silheom misul geu sil-sanggwa heosang" [Experimental art, its reality and illusion], *Kyunghyang shinmun*, July 12, 1977.
 - 47 Park Hyunki first encountered Paik's single-channel video *Global Groove* in 1974 in the library of the U.S. Cultural Center in Daegu and later met Paik, in 1984. Haeyun Park, *Mul, dol, mom: Pak Hyeon-giui jageobeseo natananeun muljil, yeongsang, sinche ui pideubaek* [Water, stone, body: The feedback between matter, image, and body in Park Hyunki's work], exh. cat. (Seoul: Gallery Hyundai, 2021), p. 125.
 - 48 Chang Suk Won, "Bideo inseutallei-syeonui hyeonjanghwa" [Making video installation on the spot], *Space* 178 (August 1982), p. 78.
 - 49 Television ownership rose dramatically in Korea, from 6.4% in 1970 to almost 90% by 1980. Myungji Yang, *From Miracle to Mirage: The Making and Unmaking of the Korean Middle Class, 1960–2015* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 54.