

In the summer of 2009, I decided to meet the artist Yong Ik Kim. This was probably because my impoverished heart, hiding its state behind the façade of the glamorous art world, could no longer be concealed. I was getting tired of working in arts and cultural management; the work was getting busier while my heart was getting weaker. Observing the shift in political power after the 2007 presidential election, I noticed a reshuffling of the people in leadership across Korean society at large. There was the thirst of the times, an epochal aspiration emptied of hope and energy for the future. I needed to meet and talk to a true “great artist,” whose words and acts did not contradict each other, and who was refined and open in thought.

Driven by intuition, I made a trip to Yangpyeong, a small town north of Seoul, to see Yong Ik Kim. My question for him could not have been simpler. I wanted to know what he thought art was and why he **does** it. In his studio I saw piles of work, and read several hundred pieces of writing, each dated in order. Since then, two years have passed. Today, this publication is in print. I still wonder why Kim immediately came to my mind during that troubled period. What kind of person is he? Who is he to the cultural workers active in Korea in 2011?

Kim is the living conscience of Korean art in our time. He has a sound conscience; he diligently probes and consolidates the basics. He has a humble conscience; while living according to his concepts, he has brought himself to confess and correct his past mistakes. He has a calm conscience that sustains his practical judgment of reality. He has a responsible conscience that drives him to show his anger at the state of the times and to act on the frontline. He has a kind conscience; he documents his reflections and listens closely to the words of others. He has a noble conscience that upholds common sense, righteousness, and the dignity of what he does. His conscience is free, not subordinate to his tasks.

In the history of Korean modern art, Kim is typically categorized with the group of artists representing the conceptual modernism of the 1970s avant-garde, who critically accepted (within the cultural reality of Korea at the time) the imported modernism of Japan and minimalism of the United States and strove for the articulation between forms of perception, experience, and concept of art. This categorization of his art, however, is neither realistic nor useful for in-depth academic

research, and does not help us understand Kim as an artist. He is a person who contemplates and lives in the perception of art as signs, and does not see himself as someone who produces works of art.

Kim stands in opposition to the representational aspect of art, which depicts things as seen, and to the concepts of artistic idolatry, mysticism, and autonomy. His idea of “concept” in art is not an icon, a topical theme, or a subjective message, but is grounded in the fundamental premise of art, which asks how “matter,” like a piece of cloth or a piece of wood, and “image” can co-exist with equal weight, without canceling each other out. He is not a person who can readily accept any given premise. It never occurred to him that he would just keep on mass-producing signs of art without probing the premise behind them, because he knows too well that, if he does, this opaque premise will become an intellectual power and an institution. He thus interprets the subjects of his arguments as logically as possible, laying them out concretely. From this practice, he derives his philosophy of life, striving to experience his concepts and penetrate from the inside to reach their ends, rather than describing them after conceiving them. As one of the programs verifying a proposition is to live its logic, he has directed his way of living as a means for experimenting with art. This is easier said than done, but he has done his utmost to choose a life that is guided by this philosophy, and faced art and life much as one approaches learning.

Three chapters in this publication, “Logic and the Natural Flow,” “Closer...come Closer...,” and “Despair Completed” illustrate the artist’s experimentation and verification of his artistic premises over the years from 1975 to 2005. During that period, he carved fissures in monotonous conventions separating different layers of art, which prevent art from opening up the field of thought. Hanging unpainted, unstretched canvases in place of paintings, interfering with the work’s narrative by inserting foreign substances like dust and hair in his paintings, sometimes putting his works inside boxes, writing over them, or even making holes in their surfaces. Kim’s writing during this period offers bibliographical notes as well as the documentation of his thoughts. At the time, art was not only confined to the spaces of galleries and museums, but only limited number of audiences had access to art, let alone appreciate it. As a result, this period of three decades was one in which the prevalent perception involved simply accepting what the picture inside the white cube

was “saying.” The topic of discussion in art at the time was gallery art, to which Kim responded intensely. Going so far as to take his own artistic practice as an object reflecting the “narrow” horizon of contemporary Korean art, he erased all traces of art in himself. As the art critic Chang-Kyong Park has noted, Kim fully understands that the double blades of making and reflecting on art drive his creations back at him like boomerangs. It is for this very reason that he has chosen to **complete despair** rather than regretting it.

It may be a natural consequence that Kim has expanded the conditions of “**doing art**” to apply to the much wider realities outside of exhibition spaces. Entitled “From Your Paradise to Our Paradise,” the following chapter explores art’s *raison d’être* and the role that art can play best in the public sphere. Kim emphasizes that so-called public art is not utilitarian art such as environmental beatification projects, but an act empowering the cultural *habitus*, the attitude of thinking in cultural terms. During this time, he was pursuing the goal of making everyday for a culture-based society, working as a professor at an art school, as a member of the evaluation committee at numerous public art events, and as a participating artist in a variety of exhibitions. In this way, he practiced in situ the cultural criticism and institutional critique much discussed in today’s art scene. Three pieces of his writing during this time, “For the Horizon of Democratization of Art,” “Class! This Is Our School,” and “Why I Am Like This” are perhaps the best part of this publication, illustrating acute realism, concrete executable plans, and the hard process of negotiation maintained by the artist while moving toward the horizon of his artistic and critical practice.

Kim’s painful advice to his younger fellow artists is that, while art requires the courage to strongly refuse the standard aesthetics of the time, one must judge one’s own capacity for imagination and its layers and consider a public that one can address. This means not being too proud when faced with a group of people that you, as an artist, cannot deal with. In other instances, he takes jabs at conventional art and cultural administrations that still think it’s possible to mount exhibitions with no preparatory work, arguing that they have no common sense and should learn to work like professionals. He has even volunteered to edit artwork descriptions written with little research by the curatorial staff at art museums. Most of his writing from this period is both strongly opinionated and is in itself his artistic practice.

Comprising a selection of seventy-seven pieces of writing and one hundred images from Kim's body of work, this publication is only part of his "body- aesthetics." I must confess that I have difficulty coming up with exact statistics on the entirety of his work. It seems that works in series such as "**Closer...come Closer...**," which spans a decade, number more than 300 pieces. His explanation for this is that, because of numerous attempts at variation and experimentation, at times he created large-scale two-dimensional works several times per day. On the other hand, I couldn't help but be startled by working on the series "**Despair Completed**," in which the artist deliberately erased his past works over several years, going over them two, or even three times, using different methods. Furthermore, given the existence of art pieces that have multiple records showing different production years, it is hard to count how many the artist has actually made. It would have been nice if we could simply multiply 3 variations at 100 pieces of work and get 300 pieces in total, but because the amount of strategic erasure differs from piece to piece, it is necessary to figure out the number of attempts and rounds involved in each work, distinguishing "completed works" from originals. Even within each series, there are additional works, in which the artist perfectly transforms each variation on a motif into individual drawings and prints. When he has had a chance to show his work, Kim has not done so according to the setting of an exhibition space or place, but has **changed** his work instead. In the case of his work with series of boxes, several, disparate editions were generated. On top of that, since the artist's philosophy is to leave an artwork "to go with the natural flow," some of the works **in** the land art line, which were installed semi-indefinitely outdoors, have been lost, abandoned, or weathered. All of this has emphasized the dire need for the establishment of a precise documentation system that is the weakest part of research into Korean art. The works of Kim published in this book were selected based on their importance as models for distinguishing the definite changes in the world of his work, with space given to works not yet introduced, and an avoidance of pieces previously published in his exhibition catalogs. Included in this book are most of his works, with written information about the years of working period, which we considered an important part of their historicity, and production years (if known).

After roughly figuring out the body of editorial material, another problem arose. Reflecting the artist's strategy, in which art inflicts fissures on its premises, the

works of Kim often are presented with tiny scratches, smudges, dust, and hair. Although visible to the eyes, most of these photographic images have limited legibility, and are not suited to print. Unfortunately, we had to leave them behind. At once, we were faced with the limits of vision, a paradoxical situation when considering that one of the privileges of art is being able to imagine the invisible and the uncertain. And yet the artist was openly posing a question that his audience look "closer and closer." He was almost begging us to be considerate when looking at his work. Surprisingly, many of Kim's writings, which have been written in the smallest possible letters on the surface of his works, are distinctly readable. More than his non-discernible brush strokes, these writings are intended for close reading and were written letter by letter. However, they are typically described in simple terms, like "as tiny as grains of sesame seed," revealing the usual careless approach to research on Korean art. In this book, the details of the works of Kim, which reveal the true gist of the artist's work, are photographed and included, his writings on art pieces meticulously transcribed and printed directly under the image plates in question.

All of the writing in this publication is by Kim himself. For Kim, writing is another way of "doing art." All his life, he has been writing: as part of his work, as bibliographical notes to his work, as documentation of his thoughts, as his own praxis, and most of all, as an effort to initiate a conversation with others. The writings in this book are largely divided into three sections: essays in column style, descriptions accompanying artwork, and memoranda written on the surface of his art pieces. Created by the artist from diverse social positions, with a consideration for readers' varying standpoints, each text has a different character and a number of layers, and yet is consistent in its flow. Rather than disregarding Kim's writing, we have finely tuned the order of his texts and placed them in such a way that the reader is invited to first read the artist's thoughts in each chapter, then look at the works of art and their accompanying descriptions, and finally travel into the notes written on each piece. I hope that this book will be a help to future researchers who attempt to carry out exhaustive empirical inquiries and analyses of Kim's work. He is an artist who has kept careful track of his artistic practice and can explain his own work in detail, making one wonder how anyone can complain about the difficulty and non-communicativeness of contemporary art. Before paying attention to a myriad of

discourses “outside” of the work of Kim, the research on the artist should be started by taking a closer look at the constellation of rich material provided by the artist himself.

This brings us back to my initial question. What does Kim think of art? Why does he keep at it? Art, for him, is to dream about and draw plans for becoming future-energy. Art is to cast traps for anything blocking this task and to correct blocks with logic. When pushed to the utmost extreme, this logic reaches none other than the natural flow. Ultimately, then, “doing art” becomes the performative struggle of human beings to live in the natural flow. In the last chapter “Timidly Resisting the No-Pain-Civilization,” we see Kim undergoing his everyday revolution in order to live in the natural flow. He still makes art so that he can hold on this philosophy of natural flow and common sense in a society that makes this kind of life harder and harder. Setting himself as an example, he guides us in understanding how far we can go with the natural flow in our urban lives. The last chapter of his artistic endeavor, which offers insight into our civilization, can be found at an introductory exhibition of his work, which is prepared in tandem with publication of this book, and held at Art Space Pool from September 6 to October 14, 2011.

The making of this book was a wild, pleasant process. The co-editors Yumi Kang and Soyoung Kim kept their alertness to the end, Choelki Hong at Bara Studio suffered amid the extremes of photographic technology, Suki Kim, president and publisher of Hyunsil Munhwa, helped with making clarity of the jungle-like editorial content, graphic designer Bohwan Jung made everything visible, and the staff at Hyunsil Munhwa and Art Space Pool stayed up late, proofreading and editing images and texts. I’m most grateful to Kim for being our “anchor” throughout the journey to arrive at this moment.

2011

Heejin Kim

Art Space Pool in Gugi-dong, Seoul

Where we remember Kim Su-young’s poem Pool (1968; “Grass”)

And where Yong Ik Kim once worked.