

Jin Sup YOON

AVANT-GARDE-NESS AND EXPERIMENTATION: RENEGADES AS OUTLIERS

I.

It was 1971 when I first came across information on Korean performances. I was mesmerized by an article on happenings covered in a combined edition of a weekly magazine called *Reading Newspaper* when I was a student at a vocational high school in the countryside. It was a happening titled *Funeral for the Established Art & Culture* conducted by the 4th Group. The happening was an avant-garde art of challenge and resistance by a group of young avant-garde artists gathered in Sajik Park in Seoul at midday on August 15, 1970.

I will talk about the happening in details later. In this article, I would like to narrate the history of Korean performances in a different manner from the past, which is to explain about the experiences I have had and things I have seen against the background of my times. To this end, I will make a brief explanation of my artistic preference or tendency.

When I was in middle school, I was vaguely exposed to avant-garde art after reading the literature of Yi Sang KIM Haegyeong (1910-1937). There was a book in the study in my house in the countryside, which was from the Korean Collection: *Compilations by Multiple Authors* bought by my

eldest sister-in-law when she was married to my eldest brother. The book covered the novels and poems of Yi Sang KIM Haegyeong who pursued dadaistic experimental and avant-garde literature during the twenties and thirties and is admired as a pioneer of avant-garde literature throughout the history of Korean literature. I encountered Yi Sang's poems and novels including *Ogamdo* (which means: Crow's eye view poem) and *The Wings* when I was an emotionally sensitive adolescent. Thus, I passionately read literature books and wrote on my own, and I started to study painting by joining an art club when I entered middle school thanks to my talents in fine art.

The period about 1967-68 is when we saw the full-fledged launch of avant-garde art in the contemporary art history of Korea. The year 1967, when Korea's first happening *Street Protest* was staged, was the year of inauguration of the 6th President of Korea, Chung-Hee PARK who took the helm as a former general through the May 16th coup d'état to gain political power in 1961.

The period prior to that in my memory is filled up with the anecdotes from my seniors along with the vaguely remembered currency reform administered by the militaristic PARK government in the early sixties. In other words,

for approximately a decade starting with my entry into the art college after I grew up and conducted events and performances myself, I would have to depend on information from books or anecdotes from my seniors. Yet, the history of Korean performances after the mid-seventies when I made a debut with an experimental photographic work titled *Mediating Term* can be recounted on the basis of my own experiences and information. Now, I would like to start discussing the history of Korean performances based on my curatorial experiences after the late eighties and my writing career as a critic after 1990.

II.

The film *Parasite* by director Joon-Ho BONG recently won four Oscars, which created a big stir throughout the world. When I visited Poland last October in Poznań, I did a drawing with a unique design for a poster of *Parasite*. In fact, parasites recall not such a pleasant memory from my childhood, when many Korean children suffered from gastric volvulus. In the road by my village there used to be the smell of the gasoline burnt in the cars driving along it, and children liked the savory odor, and many adults said roundworms in their stomach liked the smell.

I took a bus to visit a city like Cheonan and take part in art contests when I was in elementary school. In retrospect, various vehicles including taxis, trains and buses, high-rise buildings (although they were of four or five stories), and flashy window displays enabled me to experience the city's modernity. After the sixties, the shift to modernity was in full swing. The usage of the metric system was implemented in 1963, and the government conducted the population census each year. The implementation and acceptance of the metric system as part of the modernisation of Korea is significant because it meant a shift from an agrarian society to an industrial one. A shift from *sikgyeong* meaning 'for the period of having a single meal' to international standards of metre and kilometre meant establishing a modern institution. Doctorate degree holders made a great contribution for various institutions to be adopted and settled in many fields including politics,

economy, society, culture and education along with advanced Western administrative institutions. Major newspapers in Korea back then introduced Korean Ph.Ds from abroad (including the U.S.) in the society section with their small photos, which aroused an education zeal among Koreans.

Followed by the April 19th Revolution that overturned the corrupt Liberty Party-led administration, general Chung-Hee PARK launched a coup to dominate the regime on May 16th, 1961. In the next year, he established and implemented the Five-Year Economic Development Plan to revive the post-war impoverished economy. The national agenda, including achieving the export volume of 10 billion dollars led by the Saemaueul (New Village) movement was implemented. In 1967, when happenings were presented in the Union Exhibition of Young Artists by artists led by the Mu Coterie and Sinjeon Coterie, the grand plan to construct the Gyengbu (Seoul-Busan) Express Highway was announced as a presidential election pledge.

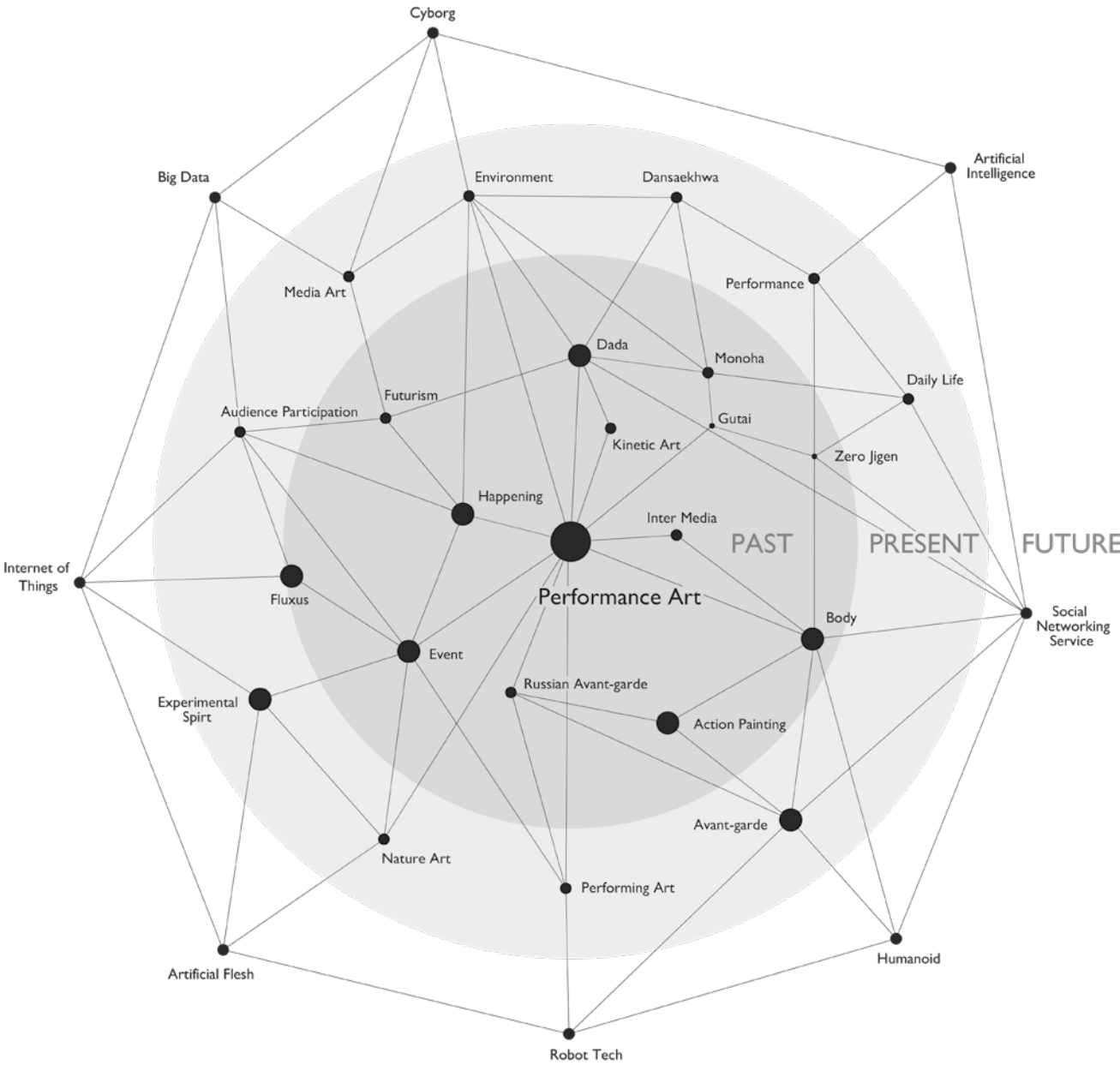
On December 11, 1967, the Union Exhibition of Young Artists¹ was held in the Exhibition Hall of the Central Intelligence Agency. The happening of *Street Protest* by the participating artists, and *Happening with a Vinyl Umbrella and Candlelight* staged on December 14 introduced a fresh and shocking avant-garde art to the then conservative society.

III.

When we are discussing Korean performances, controversies lie in whether or not they are homegrown or imported. True, they had been adopted from the West, but 'happenings' that were popular in Korea in the sixties have a strong autogenous tendency in their content. This is an unprecedented rarity in the world. I once half-jokingly said of this phenomenon, "A cow catches a rat while stepping back,"² emphasizing the positive side of this phenomenon.

According to the memoir of Chanseung CHUNG, a pioneer of happenings in Korea in the sixties, he said he did not even know the word 'happening'. Those that knew the word were

Rhizomatous Map of Performance Art





- 1 Neung Kyung SUNG, *Newspapers: From June 1, 1974*
- 2 Kuk Jin KANG, Kangja JUNG, Chanseung CHUNG, *Murder at the Han Riverside, 1968*
- 3 Mu Coterie & Shinjeon Coterie, *Street Protest, 1967*

correspondents of foreign news in newspaper companies. It is assumed that since they were knowledgeable about overseas novelties, they could have encountered happenings.

Kulim KIM, one of the pioneers of the Korean avant-garde art in Korea, said that it was through foreign magazines that he came to gain information on the Western avant-garde art including happenings. His testimonial was that he came to know of the foreign avant-garde art through such magazines as *Time* or *Life* from the American troops stationed in Korea.³

Chanseung CHUNG or Kulim KIM's testimonials reveal an important fact when discussing happenings in Korea. Back then, KIM became aware of a lot of information by purchasing many books from a foreign art bookstore in front of the Chinese Embassy to Korea in Myeongdong, Seoul. Yet, since he was not familiar with English, he mostly looked at the paintings, which brought about an extraordinary outcome with a unique form of happenings. In Korean happenings, there was nothing with a partitioned structure like Allen KAPROW's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, which is an example showing a unique style of Korean happenings.

Murder at the Han Riverside held by Han River in 1968 or *Funeral for the Established Art & Culture* of the 4th Group' held in Sajik Park in Seoul in 1970 as socially satirical happenings starkly criticized their contemporary social reality. *Murder at the Han Riverside* staged by three artists – Kuk Jin KANG, Kangja JUNG and Chanseung CHUNG – was an avant-garde happening to criticize the rampant scandals of the National Art Exhibition. It was a street happening performed by the 4th Group covering theatrical play, pantomime, fashion and film along with artists. Members that took part in the happening were arrested by the police in the middle of the street protest, imprisoned for a minor offense, and were released on warning.⁴

IV.

The seventies was a period of cruelty when oppression of the media and violation of human rights were conducted by the military regime of

PARK. As shown by *Five Bandits* by Jiha KIM, socially rampant corruption and irregularities caused anxiety about the government among ordinary citizens that led a diligent life. While the early sixties was the period that resulted in the tangible achievement of the Five-Year Economic Development Plan, its side effects were significant. The dark reality of the Korean society during the period, represented by the suicide of Tae-il JEON, a worker who set himself on fire in Pyeonghwa Market, continued until the end of this period with the murder of president PARK on October 26, 1979.

At this time, one had to be rather fortunate to see events in the advanced avant-garde form in the art community when there were less than 10 commercial galleries in Seoul. During the period, performances were dominant in international shows including Paris Biennale and Sao Paulo Biennial, so the avant-garde art gained popularity among Korean artists.

A performance first appeared (under the name of an 'event') in Baekrok Gallery in 1975. It was staged by Kun-Yong LEE who presented *Indoor Measurement and Equal Area*, which had a subtitle of *Event Logical*, which later became a hallmark of him. Yet, in the regular exhibition of the S.T. Group' in 1974, one year before then, Neung-Kyung SUNG performed the act of cutting out articles after attaching a copy of *Dong-A Daily* newspaper on the wall every day during the exhibition period. He dealt with social issues in the art community which back then was fully inclined to modernism. As such, many artists had a weak social awareness which fell way behind the happenings of the sixties.

The piece *We stroke* by the author of this article released in the S.T. exhibition held in Gyeonggi Gallery in 1977 was a playful nomadic event heralding performances of the eighties. The performance inducing the audience to engage in, as I suggested, everyday issues through performance by building a tiny log cabin or making a fence.

V.

The murder of president PARK in 1979 brought the 'spring of democratization' represented through the emergence of the three Kim's – Daejung KIM, Youngsam KIM and Jongpil KIM. And yet, it was short-lived. The new military government that emerged through the 'December 12 incident' in 1979 oppressed citizens of Gwangju and exerted its dominant power along with the inauguration of general Doo-Hwan CHUN as the 11th President of Korea. The eighties were seemingly a period of economic abundance as symbolized by the 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Olympic Games, and they served to disguise the harms of the then political oppression. People's yearning for democratization induced the 'June 29 Democratization Declaration' with the 1987 democratization movement. Performance in the eighties triggered a tendency for total art through cross-genre convergence to the point of forming such groups as the Korean Performance Artist Association.⁵

The early 1980s were a period of a conflict between modernism centered on the Dansaekhwa art dominating the seventies and Minjung (People's) art. The sentiment was officially triggered by the holding of the Contemporary Art Workshop organized by the Dong Duck Museum in 1981. Avant-garde groups, including S.T., Reality and Utterance and Seoul 80 were invited. The theme was 'Modalities of Presentations and their Ideologies in Avant-garde Groups,' which served as a catalyst to discuss the changes and development of the art community in the eighties.

In 1986, the '86 Performance & Installation Art Festival organized by the Artcosmos Museum triggered a gathering of loosely networked performance artists nationwide. After that, the event '86 Here is Korea was organized as a nationwide festival with outdoor installations and performance art.

Korea entered the era of globalization starting from the nineties. The international prestige of Korea after the 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Olympic Games was increased. Korean performance art in the 1980s and 1990s established the prestige that allowed Korea to be prepared for international exchanges in the new millennium of

the 2000s. While diversity thrived, which was not comparable with the sixties and the seventies, the number of practitioners skyrocketed. Active artists back then were: Yongdae KANG, Joonsoo KIM, Jaegwon KIM, Soonchoo NAM, Junggyu MOON, Hyosung BANG, Neung-Kyung SUNG, Youngsung SHIN, Hongjae SHIM, Chiin AHN, Kun-Yong LEE, Doohan LEE, Bul LEE, Ija LEE, Kyungsook LIM, Geunbyung YUK, Jin Sup YOON and Choongyun CHO.⁶ In the Daejeon Performance Art Festival held in Daejeon in 1987, the following artists were invited: Kun-Yong LEE, Neung-Kyung SUNG, Chiin AHN, Yongmoon KIM, Jungheun KANG, Jin Sup YOON, Hyosung BANG, Junggyu MOON, Chuljong SHIM, Changsoo PARK, Doohan LEE, Gunjoon HAN, Honghae SHIM, Taekjoon LIM, Sangjoon KO, Choongyun CHO, Ilgook CHUN, Jungmyung KIM and Myungsoon KIM.

The following quote presents the trend of Korean performance art back then:

The performance held at ['89 Young Artists] exhibition (the predecessor of [Young Search] exhibition) held at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art from March 26 to April 23, 1989 was the first case to have a marginalized performance to have entered into the mainstream. Therefore, this event was the first and the last exhibition to have invited performance artists since its formation in 1981. The then commissioner and art critic Woohak YOON invited Chiin AHN, Jin Sup YOON, Doohan LEE and Bul LEE. They turned the central exhibition hall at the solemn National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art into total chaos. LEE Doohan made a fuss where he baked sauries over a movable cooking stove, covered his body with plaster, and moved around while covering his penis with an alarm lamp. At a recent occasion where I met Doohan LEE, he said he felt a sheer fear threatening his life because of the plaster that so firmly tightened his body.⁷

During this performance I threw 180 eggs over large windows on the facade of the



Neung Kyung SUNG, *How is your business doing*, Namsan Traditional Village, 2015

central exhibition hall, and performed an action-driven drawing session. Bul LEE wore weird needlework clothing reminiscent of a monster, and went around the exhibition hall, and Chiin AHN distributed hundreds of cards to the accompaniment of loud music. This scene was aired on ‘Munhwaga Sancheok’ (A Walk Around the Cultural Circles) on KBS in Korea, and one lawmaker called the broadcasting network to complain by saying, “Is it art?” by calling the head of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (“Wrangling with an art museum on an egg throwing incident against a performance art,” *Segye Ilbo*, March 30, 1989).

VI.

During the period, performances varied from personal discourses – dominance of narratives – to social issues such as AIDS, body-oriented-ness, gender, feminism and homelessness. This can be seen as a transitional signal when social oppression and conflict penetrating into the dictatorship in the

seventies were deconstructed to induce a transition from collectivism to fragmented individualism.⁸

They had a strong tendency to internalize personal discourses including grotesqueness or narcissism in the nineties, unlike those in the eighties when auditory and visual experiences were focused on.

At 10:00pm on December 31st, 1999, performance artists gathered at Theater Zero before Hongik University. They were from all across the nation to attend Nanjang, Millennium Performance: 1999-2000 and present performances set according to a predetermined procedure. The event, which I curated, was voluntarily attended by participant artists, which was a ‘chaotic show’ as an amalgam of boogie, comedy, chaos, disorganization, improvisation and happenstance. The show started with a performance of Neung-Kyung SUNG. He read a statement for a ritual written on a burning paper fan, artists presented their performances. Seungtaek LEE poured *makgeolli* – the Korean traditional liquor – in green wine bottles into disposable paper cups the audience were holding,

and the mouth part of the bottles was exaggerated to resemble a penis, so the liquid being poured was reminiscent of semen. A woman in the audience received it and drank it, arousing booing, laughter and humorous exclamation from the audience. Gukhee LEE staged various performances by messing up the stage. The highlight was that LEE wanted to defecate on stage towards the end of the performance but could not because he was feeling excessively nervous and then a puppy toy stopped moving around. The gesture seemingly symbolized a moment when the century neared its end. Sukhwan KIM who moved around Suwon Fortress, exuding a white cloud by carrying a coffin with a disinfection sterilizer arrived at the site on a truck, and burnt the coffin on the road in front of the theatre. His performance implied disinfection of evil crowds while putting an end to the old generation at the closing of the twentieth century.

The 2000s can be summarized as the era of internationalization of Korean performances. Starting with Seoul International Performance Art Festival (SIPAF) in 2000, the KoPAS Group led by Baekgi KIM, the Bucheon International Performance Art Festival (BIPAF) founded by Obong HONG in Bucheon, 'SORO' led by Jaeseon MOON (and the Performance Art Network ASIA (PAN ASIA) founded in 2008 as an extension of that) are some of the most thriving international events and groups.

The KoPAS Group led by Baekgi KIM has held performances on the theme of 30 Years of Korean Performance Art since its first show in 2002 annually near Hongik University. It has renamed itself as the Jeju International Experimental Art Festival with its headquarters relocated to Jeju Island and held events every year. Jaeseon MOON's PAN ASIA held its 10th anniversary performance festival in the Asia Cultural Centre in Gwangju and Ilmin Museum of Art in Seoul in 2019.

VII.

In the catalogue for *Renegades in Resistance and Challenge* held in the Daegu Art Museum in 2018 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Korean

performance art, there is a conceptual map on the lineage of the performance art in Korea. The map is based on the diagram I came up to explain the concept of 'Dansaekhwa' at the exhibition of *Dansaekhwa of Korea* curated by myself at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea in 2012.

At the centre of the diagram lies the performance art, and two circles spread out outwardly. The central circle is the past, the circle outside it is the present, and what is outside of it is the future. While fine lines connecting big and small dots are interwoven, the lines protrude outwardly. It is the future and the point to which we need to pay attention. It is the area where the present and the future belong, which is called the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Let's take a look at the scattered dots and terms – cyborg, big data, IoT, artificial flesh, robotics, humanoid, social media and AI. They are concepts which the present and future performances would have to encounter explicitly or implicitly or converge together. Ushering in the epochal changes that are inevitably different from the past, a new concept for performance art must be devised. Through the diagram, readers would “fully expect that the performance art of today is not simply an artistic genre or a medium, but the one that bears seeds for ‘performology’ to unfold in the future.”⁹ To this end, we need global discussions and implementation beyond the nation, race and culture.

Notes

¹ Participating groups and members for the Union Exhibition of Young Artists are as follows:

Mu (Zero) Coterie: Bunghyun CHOI, Youngja KIM, Dan LIM, Taehyun LEE, Bokchul MOON, and Iksang JIN; Sinjeon (New Exhibition) Coterie: Kuk Jin KANG, Duksoo YANG, Kangja JUNG, Sunhee SHIM, Inhwan KIM, and Chanseung CHUNG; Origin Coterie: Myungyoung CHOI, Sungwon SUH, Seungjo LEE, Sooik KIM, and Kiok SHIN.

² A Korean expression to describe a situation where one achieves something by slim chance or pure luck as when a bull steps on and catches a rat while taking steps backward without even looking.

³“Kulim KIM, Pioneer of Avant-Garde Art of Korea. Happenings and Events: Korean Performance Art in the 1960s and 70s,” *ACC Asia Culture Archive Report*, no. 4, 2016 (Seoul: Asia Culture Center (ACC), 2016), 16-17.

⁴ The 4th Group was a group in pursuit of total art formed by Kulim KIM against the ideological background of Korea’s traditional ‘Intangible thought.’ Its members include Chanseung CHUNG (art), Taesu BANG (nicknamed ‘Beggar BANG’/ theater), Ilgwang SON (fashion), HoGO (pantomime) and Iktae LEE (movie), etc. They were oppressed for irritating the authorities by satirically entitling them “Tonryeong (Kulim KIM)” which takes the first consonant of the word ‘President’ or ‘Dae-tonryeong’ and vice leader (Chanseung CHUNG). They even formed local organizations, but they were disbanded in a few months.

⁵ It was formed in 1988. I was its founding chairman along with vice chairmen Sanggun HAN (dance) and Doohan LEE (art), etc. Advisory members were: Kuk Jin KANG, Kulim KIM, Sejung MOO, Neung-Kyung SUNG, Woosung SHIM, Kun-Yong LEE, and Manbang LEE.

⁶ They are participating artists for the exhibition of *Art & acts, and humans, and life, and thoughts, and communication* organized by Now Gallery (from July 7 to 17, 1989).

⁷ March 20, 2018. From a dialogue with Doohan LEE.

⁸ Yoon, Jin Sup “Resistance & Challenge and Avant-Gardness & Experimentation: Renegades as Outliers, a Brief History of the 50 -Year Performance Art of Korea,” in *Renegades in Resistance and Challenge. 50-year history of performance art of Korea: 1967-2017* (Daegu: Daegu Art Museum, 2018), 35. Exhib. cat.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 75.

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