

“Synthetic Experience” as Social Commentary and Alternative Media Practitioners in Contemporary Korean Art

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I. Introduction

This article explores the way in which two Korean visual artists, Donghee Koo and Yeondoo Jung, working with moving images, have responded to direct and indirect cultural moments under Korean and Inter-Asia socio-political conditions. Koo and Jung are provoking what I propose is a “synthetic experience,” which is not something real but is a moving image reflection of indirect experiences of social conditions. After examining their works and media conditions, this paper looks at the alternative cultural production of young artists such as Minah Park, Ayoung Kim, a.k.a. Meme Miu (her project called *Acrobatic Tetris*), and other emerging collectives recently presented at the *Goods and the New Skin: Modeling and Attaching* exhibitions and discusses the way they create social media platforms via SNS, Twitter, Korean blogs, and Facebook. Some of these young artists in their late 20s and early 30s emphasize ubiquitous online platforms in which young critics or commentators generate information, reviews, simple responses, commercial trading, and so on. Many emerging young artists outside the parameters of the mainstream art world, hope to show how alternative and independent media practices build multiple subjectivities and identities; they have begun to stage a remarkable ‘critical’ slippage

that is often present in mainstream media environments in order to overcome the commercial and traditional sectors of the ‘white cube’ or the institutions of museums.

In order to guide my assertion pertaining to the digital style by Koo and Jung, I expand David Morley’s critical acumen toward media ‘dislocation’ to the Korean context. He argues that “the networks of electronic communication in which we live are transforming our senses of locality and community—and in this context it has been argued that we need to develop a “politics of dislocation” that is concerned with the new modalities of belonging that are emerging around us.”¹ In Korea, these modalities are shifting too, exemplified by artists such as Koo and Jung, who show their nation state as fragmented, where significant events reach outside their place of origin and filter back in again for local consumption. Whereas Koo’s work directly addresses perceived absurdities of daily Korean life and interrogates Korean language and mainstream culture via HD single channel video, Jung, through a mixture of performance and filmic experimental processes, evokes nostalgic views of the past and present outside of Korea. The main purpose of their strategies is to offer realistic and alternative voices that are distinct and distant from Korean mass media or media controlled ideas. Motivation for their work has emerged from their interests in straddling the cultural line between aspects of artistic mainstream and their own alternative narratives, often challenging Korea’s national exclusivism. They do this through consideration of more international issues often through provocative strategies of engagement: for example, global terrorism for Koo out of Iraq, and natural disasters for Jung emerging from Japan. In this process, their work becomes more transnational in scope, but unlike it in its social analysis and aesthetic exploration of large-scale news events.

II. Donghee Koo’s “Synthetic Experience”

Before analyzing Koo’s work, this chapter scrutinizes the recent climate of South Korean visual art and its relation to the development of a high-tech cultural and

* Part of my idea was first presented in the panel, “Beyond Boundaries in East and Southeast Asia” organized by the University of Tokyo, in collaboration with Mori Art Center. The two-day symposium was held on July 26–27, 2015. This article was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF – 2015S1A5B6037105).

1. David Morley, “Domesticating Dislocation in a World of New Technology,” Chris Berry, Soyoun Kim and Lynn Spigel (eds.), *Electronic Elsewheres: Media, Technology, and the Experience of Social Space* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 3.

civic sphere in Korea. As in the rest of the world, South Korea in the mid-1990s underwent a technical transition from analogue to digital technologies, whereby Korean artists who were then in their 20s and 30s came to experience a more personalized media environment, interlaced with the popularization of digital media. As information technology lined up with Samsung and other large *chaebol* (a large industrial conglomerate), the Korean government's commitment to digital technology in visual art was cemented with the establishment of *the Seoul International Media Art Biennale*, initiated in 2000 at the Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA).² In the new millennium, the global art world was completely divided between what Lev Manovich (1996) describes as the “Duchamp Land” of art history on the one side, and the “Turing Land” of technology-based new media art on the other.³ Since 2000, however, the convergence of these two fields has been more visible in Korea—a confluence of ideas informing both practice and technique which have deeply influenced the artists of this younger generation. One aspect of the impact of digital technology can be observed in how many of the more contemporary Korean artists work with alternative mediums as opposed to traditional forms such as painting or sculpture, favoring, for example, the mixture of documentary found footage with composite editing skills. As a result, collage in three dimensional works of say Robert Rauschenberg to montage in two dimensions as found in Eisenstein's corpus of work from Soviet Union have become widespread features in the analogue world, but many young contemporary Korean media artists edit as a means to remix found materials both on online and offline in the vein of Ken Jacobs. Here such remixing chronicles new timelines and recontextualized fictional and nonfictional images, in order to convey alternative social voices and readings of such images.

Here I posit the composite method as alternative media in the field of visual arts as a means of “digital editing and synthesis,” in the post internet age which was absent with analogue tools.⁴ The topographical transformation of freely using digital tools

2. Although it is known how wired and technologically savvy Korea is, what we do not know is the way such cutting-edge technology is employed by various young artists who are off the mass media radar. See also Hee-Je Bak, “Politics of Technoscience in Korea,” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2014), pp. 159–174.

3. The argument put forward by Manovich is a binary one: he claims, on the one hand, that there is a conceptually driven mode of “Duchamp Land,” confined to plastic experimentation while, on the other hand, there is the “Turing Land” of mechanically reproduced video art and experimental film.

4. For post internet art and its criticism, see Gene Mchugh, *Post Internet* (Lulu.com, 2011); Brad Troemel, “The GIF's Obsession with Compression,” *Peer Pressure: Essays on the Internet by an Artist on the Internet* (Lulu,



fig. 1. Donghee Koo, *Souvenir*, 2008, Installation view of *Synthetic Experience*. Exhibition at Atelier Hermes, Seoul, Korea, Image Courtesy of the Artist.

was experimented on and implemented by Koo's composite editing and synthetic experiences over the past ten years. This editing method was demonstrated in Koo's 2008 solo exhibition titled *Synthetic Experience*, which gathers information on the computer and uses images freely appropriated from the internet as data and source material (fig. 1).⁵ The use of the composite method is also evident in *Overloaded Echo*, Koo's 2006 work that utilizes HD single-channel video. The production of this work began in 2004 during her stay as an artist in residence at the *Akademie Schloss Solitude* in Germany. During the residency she saw online the execution of Kim Sun-il by the Islamic extremist group Al Qaeda in Iraq. The Broadcast of this explicit beheading was banned from all forms of Korean media such as television, the internet, and YouTube access. Although the video of the execution was censored in Korea, the video floated around like a 'specter' on various overseas websites. Koo did not use the images or photos directly in her work but attempted to interpret the

com, 2011), pp. 19–24.

5. For the use of the internet in contemporary art, see Lauren Cornell, Ed Haller, and Johanna Burton (eds.), *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015); Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*. The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).

ways people look at the beheading images like a video game. Since it was another form of simulation, others might interpret the grisly act online much the way one would consume travel images of exotic places. The artist sets up theatrical stages with Korean performers in her film. Korean critic Lim Geun-jun calls Koo's work a type of simulation game intended to explore the mind's ecosystem.⁶ Indeed, Lim's ecosystem claim of Koo's *Synthetic Experience* is an apt summation, but we can also interpret Koo's work as a social system for exploring how the global war on terror has now affected Korean society directly with the death of one of its citizens. In Koo's short film, a naked man wearing a mask is rotating on top of a spinning round table. While he cannot see anyone, bystanders are looking at his going in circles, not particularly inquisitive in their gaze, as if this spectacle does not concern them.⁷ Although the scene itself was motivated by the execution of Kim, the direct emphasis goes beyond mere association with the decapitated Korean citizen captured by Islamic extremists and his subsequent online execution; perhaps a certain distancing from the gruesome act is a way to mediatize acts of terror, then appropriated by Koo for Koreans as nothing more than splintered assemblage, what Morley would call "a second hand sense of the global familiar,"⁸ in this regard, terrorism and its imagery.

Koo gathers images and data disseminated on the internet and social media in order to form an alternative narrative of mainstream society to where "particular geography systematically produce different types of events."⁹ She employs an experimental aesthetic which comments on grand narratives of social media, that is, the de-politicized loss of life streaming online, consumed by Koreans and global netizens.¹⁰ As both an observer and a constituent of this grim material, Koo's deterritorialization of this violent imagery and endless configurations on YouTube, the dark web and commercial media networks such as CNN ultimately emphasizes

6. Lim Geun-jun, "Donghee Koo's Solo Exhibition Review," *Wolgan Misool/Monthly Art* (January 2007), pp. 173-175.

7. For an in-depth study of this work, see my essay, "A Way of Replay of Koo Donghee: Amusement and Vertigo," *The Korea Artist Prize* (Seoul: The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2014).

8. David Morley (2010), p. 3. Here I want to note that Koo's working method prefers collecting information or images widespread in online cultures. She converts and collects these data as materials for her works. She manipulates and defamiliarizes them to add ambiguity to their content rather than directly representing the reality represented in the Internet.

9. David Morley (2010), p. 4.

10. See also David Joselit, "What to do with Pictures," *October* 138 (Fall 2011), pp. 81-94; *After Art* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

terrorism's spectacle-like vectors. Scattered images are turned into artificial landscapes and synthetic compilations that challenge the true nature of our spaces and locations, as well as perceived visual realities. This cinematic mode creates a political space in which alternative voices are heard. Diversity in social voices and linguistic ambiguity is conceptually linked with the words and connotative images that are always employed in Koo's moving images. This kind of confusion, to a certain extent, has created constant tension between what we see and what we know, in this context a terrorist act committed against a Korean citizen.

Japanese curator Takashi Azumaya described Koo's video work as theatrical, but her works occasionally seem dyslexic due to its reversal of images and jumbled content.¹¹ Even though her video installations lack a coherent story, viewers that are familiar with her storytelling style are troubled to uncover and explicate whatever they can through the characters' gestures and behavior. Each production is not a story with a distinct beginning, middle, and end, but exists as a single scene or a series of tableaux. The heterochrony itself is the critical tool of digital editing in Koo's method—verging on digital distribution and dissemination—in flux and open to contestation. This evokes the critical term postproduction, emphasized by Nicolas Bourriaud in his remarkable book, *Postproduction Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (2002). Here the reprogram by Koo is through the ghastly internet content in terms of how it is transformed from one “visual or audio sources, subtitling, voice-overs, and special effects” as well as “the production of raw materials” in our current visual culture and contemporary art practices to something new, or in this case, provocative appropriation of snuff video footage in the age of ISIS.¹²

III. Yeondoo Jung's New Landscape: “Just Like the Road across the Earth”¹³

While Koo is creating the reality in the form of simulacra or a kind of game, Jung's

11. Takashi Azumaya, *2010 Busan Biennale, Living in Evolution* (Busan: Busan Museum of Art, 2010).

12. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York and Berlin: Sternberg, 2002), pp. 13–20.

13. It is taken from Lu Xun's phrase: “Hope cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It is just like roads across the earth. For actually, the earth had no roads to begin with, but when many men pass one way, a road is made.” See Lu Xun and Gladys Yang, *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1960), p. 63.

fig. 2 and fig. 3, Yeondoo Jung, *Blind Perspective*, in *Just Like the Road across the Earth*, 2014, Art Tower Mito, Image Courtesy of the Artist,



work employs the devices of virtual reality and media installations to offer social commentary, usually in regard to civic disaster, collective memory, Korean sub-cultures, as well as Korean fan cultures.

Jung's social engagement of art operates eloquently in many of his media installations, creating "reality-like" virtual compositions.¹⁴ The exhibition title of the *Road* makes us think of the dreams we have let go and bypassed as nothing more than trivial anamnesis in our daily lives. At a time when dreams and hopes seem like an *aporia* that can never be resolved in the social conditions that beleaguer both Korea and Japan—economic inequality, racial discrimination, ethnic exclusionism, and lingering sexism—Jung's work has the peculiar power of awakening lost and forgotten dreams. Jung's *Blind Perspective* (2014) in his exhibition *Just Like the Road*

14. For the method in which Jung employs archives, see Sun-hee Jang, "Yeondoo Jung: Transgressive Archive and Technological Uncanny," *The Korea Society of Art and Design*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2016), pp. 213–218.

across the Earth (figs. 2, 3), installed and presented at Japan's Art Tower Mito, includes his early works *Boramae Dance Hall* (2001), *Six Points, Ordinary Paradise* (2010), and *Tokyo Story—B camera Series* (2013).¹⁵ But the new work, *Blind Perspective*, (which I describe below), presented at this exhibition draws out memories of a lost landscape and land from the Japanese people, who experienced the tsunami in 2011. It is notable that Art Tower Mito is located not far from Fukushima, and thus the fear of radioactivity is a part of everyday life in the region.

In the aforementioned *Blind Perspective*, on the long tunnel-like corridor inside the exhibition space at Art Tower Mito, the audience is asked to wear an HMD (Head Mounted Display) called the “Oculus Rift,” which allows viewers to see a new landscape generated in three-dimensional space. HMD, originally invented by Ivan E. Sutherland in 1968 has since the digital age now evolved into newer Head-Mounted Display systems that enable a greater incorporation of virtual and augmented reality in visual art. In Jung's work, because the audience wears the HMD directly on their head and experiences different vistas and scenery, the emotional and spatial “immersion” is immediate and impactful, while the exhibition space itself further enhances the sensation though encouraging passage as one would traverse an alley or a road.

The landscape installed in the exhibition corridor where audience members traverse without the Oculus Rift is composed of ruined infrastructure and piles of trash found in Japan after the tsunami had swept in with its destructive force.¹⁶ But once the game gear HMD is put on, one encounters a landscape of a different dimension inside the exhibition space. For instance, the strewn plastic bottles actually displayed are transformed into flowers. The clay wall constructed inside the exhibition space is transformed into a three-dimensional mountain. The displayed photographs of Akita, 200km away from the nuclear site, portray the actual landscape after the disaster without the HMD headwear on. Both tsunami and nuclear disasters have transmuted the beautiful mountains and fields into barren objects by caused by this natural/human catastrophe. The audience actually stands on land that is a reproduction of the landscape after the disaster, but what the audience sees virtually

15. For Jung's early works, see *Spectacle in Perspective*, Exhibition Catalogue (Seoul: PLATEAU, Samsung Museum of Art, 2013); *Asian Contemporary Photography: WANG Qingsong·JUNG Yeondoo* (Daegu: Daegu Museum of Art, 2014).

16. Jung also worked with local communities on his works, *Evergreen Tower* and *Borame Dance Hall*: see Kamiya Yukie, “Dreamweaver: Jung Yeondoo,” *Art Asia Pacific*, 39 (2004), pp. 70–75.

in 3-D is the landscape, that had once existed and hopefully will exist again in the future is called into question by this virtual and installed space. In the chasm between the lost and the virtually extant, there exists the possibility of a lost paradise to return to. Jung's work invites us to cherish memory as if it were a souvenir tucked away in our hearts and that memory is instinctively something we hold on to. The place of memory for many viewers replaces a lost reality that they can no longer visit in their lifetimes, and Jung particularly noted that an old lady, who had experienced the tsunami, cried in front of the *Blind Perspective* after viewing the lost world through the Oculus Rift.¹⁷

In Jung's work, the process of starting and forming a narrative occupies a crucial position. After the tsunami, and while the artist worked on this piece, numerous laws were passed in Japan regarding nuclear issues, according to the reports by the World Nuclear Association and OECD's "Fukushima Press Kit." Fear of radioactivity that outlives a human lifespan exists sometimes as silence, sometimes as a lie, or it gradually changes into a device of oblivion. Possibly the title of the exhibition *Just Like the Road across the Earth* was intentionally derived from a passage by Lu Xun (1881-1936) a leading figure of Chinese modern literature. Specifically the artist chose Lu Xun's *Road* (1921), which he found in a bookshop in his hometown, because the notion of proposing hope as an outsider (not Japanese) seemed an inarticulate and unfamiliar gesture, even more so for himself. Perhaps it is the lucid vernacular elements described in Lu's writing that prompted Jung to excogitate further on Japan's crisis. Such contemplative images invite audience members to walk down the long passage as if taking a stroll on the "road," s/he can experience a time of personal reflection about oneself and the wider world against the backdrop of digitized mountains, fields, trees, and flowers. As Mark Hansen argues, the body in such media art becomes an agent that actually experiences virtual environments through our senses.¹⁸ However, the technical accuracy of Hansen's claim overshadows what such digital objects constitute in their social critique: complicated arguments about a given society and its ever-changing interconnectedness to our globalizing world.

When considering *Blind Perspective*, it is highly interesting to examine, in addition to high-tech virtual reality, the symbolic use of waste in relation to technology, since

17, Yeon Shim Chung, Interview with Yeondoo Jung (December 11, 2014); see also RoseLee Goldberg, "Yeondoo Jung," *Flash Art* (November/December 2009), pp. 36-39.

18, Mark Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); *Bodies in Code, Interlaces with New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

it is uncommon to find waste on display in art museums. Waste—residue, garbage—in contemporary art has been interpreted as Georges Bataille’s base materialism in the context of entropy and formless materiality.¹⁹ However, in the aforementioned projects by Jung at Art Tower Mito, the use of waste is rather different from the scholarship on waste because waste is, in this sense, the materiality of existence by the use of the networks of technology. In other words, in a world of excessive manufactured obsolescence, when natural disaster strikes our attention turns often the rumble of infrastructure it creates. Sociologically, Nicky Gregson and Mike Crang examine waste in the realms of management and policy outcomes, and they propose a different incarnations of waste, suggesting “the situational and relational character of the category.”²⁰ Waste, in terms of the tsunami in 2001 calls into question how it was produced and what this scape-of-destruction looks like in comparison to other media coverage of natural disasters such as the Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami in Thailand and India in 2004 or Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. Technology is usually used to recycle, clean, and convert waste, as E. Lupton and J.A. Miller explain in *The Bathroom, The Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination*.²¹ Often high technology is used to clean up dirt and waste for better environmental welfare, as well as for sociopolitical and hygiene issues.²²

However, Jung’s project in Mito employs waste as a symbolic metaphor of new social possibilities with the use of the Oculus Rift. In modern industrial society, technology generally is used for the transformation of rubbish without leaving any remnant of trash for energy or reuse; Jung’s case works the other way by utilizing trash as a souvenir of memory and a source of creative energy. The performative symbol of garbage is closer to the rhetoric of Vik Muniz whose working method is featured in the 2010 documentary film *Waste Land*, directed by Lucy Walker. Muniz initially worked with people, so-called “catadores,” who pick up refuse at Jardim Gramacho on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, to create his photography from recycled materials and detritus. Waste, considered useless and something to abandon,

19. Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

20. Nicky Gregson and Mike Crang, “Materiality and Waste: Inorganic Vitality in a Networked World,” *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 42 (2010), pp. 1026–1032.

21. E. Lupton and J.A. Miller, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination* (NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).

22. Toby Miller, “The Art of Waste: Contemporary Culture and the Unsustainable Energy Use,” Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (eds.), *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois, 2015), pp. 137–256.

is the source of living and labor to someone who collects waste and sells it. Unlike Muniz, Yeondoo Jung works closely with a team of technicians to create three-dimensional landscapes out of trash. His working method is comparable to Donghee Koo, the latter of whom who calls it “composite editing” and “synthetic experience” because the two artists employ “editing” as significant rhetoric of production, by overlapping and mixing the real and the virtual together.

So far, I have discussed the regional social realities addressed in Jung’s work. Since Jung is also highly interested in Korean pop fan culture or sub-culture because he believes its “collective” syndrome is rather similar to Korean collective macho culture according to an interview with the artist, I will now examine Jung’s recent exhibition in Seoul.²³ In *Spectacle in Perspective*, a solo show in 2013 at PLATEAU, Samsung Museum of Art in Yeondoo, Jung presented a diverse oeuvre of photography, performance, and new media works. Producing a new work named *Crayon Pop Special*, the artist invited “popmen,” grown men in sweat suits cheering the girl band “Crayon Pop,” into the exhibition. These uniformly dressed popmen cheered in synchronized gestures, distinctive and popular in South Korea, as if representing the collective identity of the army in their military uniforms. Jung explains that he “felt a scream of the [middle-age] men living in today’s Korean society, as the breadwinners of each household, taking out their sweat suits from their car trunks, following the girl band around the nation, becoming the aging cheerleaders at their performances, and getting vicarious satisfaction.”²⁴ The work articulates a way for these men to ward off the malaise of corporate culture in Korea in a folly-like spectacle in which the whole notion of “liberation from daily life” in Jung’s terms, seems a bit nebulous and solipsistic.²⁵ Even though these male fans’ behavior might bring to mind a socio-psychological aspect of the Lolita complex, a byproduct of the idol craze in this country, their collective gestures and responses reverse, if ham-handedly, the male dominant macho culture prevalent in Korea.

In one of the interior corners of PLATEAU, a video shows a documentary of “popmen” cheering. The White Cube of a museum was deemed an elitist space—by such postmodernist critics of “institutional critique of art” as Brian O’Doherty—that is situated far from Korean sub-cultures. Here, in this exhibition the popmen

23. Yeon Shim Chung, Interview with Yeondoo Jung (December 11, 2014).

24. Yeon Shim Chung, Interview with Yeondoo Jung.

25. Yeon Shim Chung, Interview with Yeondoo Jung.

arrive to the opening in their signature blue sweat suits, as the artist wanted the more conservatively dressed audience to coexist with the popmen performance spectacle. In his interviews with these popmen, the artist notes that they were usually socially respected professional or white-collar workers, such as medical doctors, lawyers, and so forth. Jung paid attention not to the Crayon Pop, but rather to the culture of the popmen, the voices of the socially respectable breadwinners who define themselves as the fanboys of K-pop idols. Such a position is daring in its “kidult” admission of adoration by aging men, typically stereotyped in Korea as indifferent or mocking of more feminine culture.

IV. Alternative Media Practitioners

Lesser-known artists than Koo and Jung do not seem to be interested in presenting the dichotomy between the real and the virtual. This may be because in the digitalized world of smartphones, image has lost its power to discern the virtual from the real, the focus has become redirected toward presenting the tension of the process, and the cultural context of images in an era when the real is false and the false is real, in other words images of simulacra.²⁶ It is thus an image that exists as *aporía*, a contradiction that can no longer be verified through the eyes. When images are edited through post production, or when the artist reuses and mixes preexisting images, as Nicolas Bourriaud illustrates, what does the artist ultimately seek to convey through edited moving images? What kinds of alternative media conditions become apparently visible in the practices of a group of young artists?

Out of this young group, Minha Park's work entitled *Strategic Operations-Hyper Realistic* was significant in pinpointing its alternative construction of dominant narratives by the society. In her working method, the artist starts from the actual training camp for U.S. dispatch troops, but special effects and computer graphics slowly substitute and replace the real image with unfamiliar edited images. Reminding one of Berlin-based media artist Hito Steyerl, who employs interrogation of the “endlessly reproduced and degraded images and texts that make up our digital culture,”²⁷ the post-Internet ontology of “poor images” and “the use of floating,

26. For the use of error and glitch, see Mark Nunes, *Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2017).

27. Paul Peroni, “Hito Steyerl,” *Art Review*, vol. 66, issue 5 (Summer 2014), p. 98; see Yeon Shim Chung, “Hito

moving or traveling images” embody the underpaid generational identity and social perception of the late ’20s and ’30s in today’s Korea, as seen in the editing of Ayoung Kim.²⁸ Park’s work intermingles reality and the virtual at a site in the United States, as viewed at the exhibition of *Film Montage* at the Coreana Museum of Art (Seoul, Korea) in 2015. The floating images online get their ontological places and locations in Park’s films.

Equally, one bridge between the so-called commercial sector and the ‘independent scene’ in Korea, among others, was the recent exhibition held at Ilmin Museum of Art, with the show *New Skin: Modeling and Attaching*. Attaching is a digital gesture of production, thus creating new skin by an editorial tool much visible in the methodology of Jung and Koo. This generational culture of IT fever and digital omnipresence in urban Korea can be seen not only in productions but also in the exhibited works of six Korean artists in their 30s (Dong Ju Kang, Jungsuck Kang, Donghee Kim, Seong-Su Kim, Heecheon Kim, and Minha Park), curated by Youngjune Hhm at the Ilmin Museum of Art in the summer of 2015.²⁹ Although Ilmin Museum is a corporate-sponsored nonprofit museum, the exhibition itself was very much in opposition to the corporate in its nature and generational in its scope. The press release for this group exhibition manifests the following:

Young Korean artists that have just started working in the 2010s grew up in a media environment very different from what the previous generation had experienced. Excessive IT fever, PC room culture, and the prevalence of smartphones substituted the real topography with map services of Web portals, offered gourmet tours through online searchers, provided Webtoons and such as everyday amusements, and even transformed the opportunity of political comment into direct speech via SNS. Having completed the full volume of the real world within their palms, their lives look like game scenarios in which they roam a virtual topography collecting items. In fact, their lives are a collection of sensations rematerialized through the body that has been refracted by media.³⁰

Steyerl and the Ontology of ‘Moving Digital Images,’” *The Korea Society of Art and Design*, vol.18, no.4 (2015), pp. 241–263. See also Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (NY: Sternberg, 2013).

28. See Ayoung Kim’s solo exhibition, *In this Vessel We Shall Be Kept* at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris) in 2016. Kim participated in *All the World’s Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor in the 2015 Venice Biennale, in which the artist presented *Zepheht, Whale Oil from the Hanging Gardens to You, Shell 3* (2015).

29. Hyangro Yoon’s works such as *First Impression* of 2014 are also interesting in the way the artist edits travelling images that are floating around the internet. Yoon collects poor digital images from blogs or Tumblr and creates an alternative narrative of her own.

30. <http://ilmin.org/webflyer/newskin/> (accessed July 3, 2017)

This generation is comfortable using internet slang and jargon such as “Hap-Pil,” an abbreviation of “Editing Necessary Element,” meaning the remix or reedit of sound sources, moving images, sound effects, digital images, or photographic images traveling on smartphones or in computers.³¹ Furthermore, the second-rated “traveling” images on social networks, as confirmed in the cyber iniquitousness of “Tschal-Bang,” which is an abbreviation of “Tschal-rim Bang-ji,” literally meaning “the prevention of being cut (or being deleted) from online postings.” The users are forced to upload attention-capturing pictures or moving images (jpeg or avi files) with the text because the system operator does not allow users to upload only writing; the format of image and text galleries are set up in this “Tschal-Bang.” Broadly speaking, this “Tchal-Bang,” as online slang for Korean users, is traveling images in computers via the internet on computers or smartphones. One can find simply buffoonish photos as well as grotesque and transgressive composite photos. Images of popular entertainers, and controversial characters are publicly distorted on this site; they are also widely shared via Smartphones, on Korean blogs, etc. It is said that repressed alienated feelings are liberated on this kind of online community.

While low resolution images with poor qualities are immaturely edited and combined with the visual and verbal/textural combinations, active producers successfully produce moving images with high-end quality and dense narratives. In the latter, followers create chatty responses, which is part of the game or acts of social media. Anonymous users, whose identities are user names, often exchange opinions and information on how to enhance the technologies or software programs and how to equip them with sound effects or dubbing: free or illegal downloading is also shared. Sometimes, these images are politically lampooned, or they may be cynical or simply humorous; their users may be teenagers, college students, or adults. These “hap-pil” images are not necessarily considered artistic but act as subculture beyond mainstream cultural phenomenon and elite white cubes. The repressed voices of the underground subculture are documented vividly in this visual culture.

So far I have examined more symbolic use of traveling images and artists’ productions and now, finally I want to discuss newly popping up “Sinsaeng Kongan (literally meaning ‘the establishment of New Space’),” which has mushroomed in

31. This method appears in recent exhibitions in Korea. See *Seoul Babel*, exhibition catalogue (Seoul: Seoul Museum of Art, 2016).

Seoul, Korea in the past few years.³² The “New Space (from now on, I will refer to it as NS)” is often supported by very young artists, blog-critics, and curators with very low budgets. Most of the artists represented in the *New Skin* have active exhibitions in this NS. The NS is completely different from the Western-oriented, American-dominant “alternative spaces” of the 1970s. It is also far from the uniquely Korean phenomenon of vernacular type of “alternative spaces,” which mushroomed in Seoul after the financial crisis of IMF in Asia since 2000.³³ The Loop, the Pool, and the Insa Art Space, the latter financially supported by Arts Council Korea, are among those Korean-style alternative spaces of the early 2000s.³⁴

In contemporary Korea, the ‘88’ generation with its low budget cannot enter into the mainstream media and art world, not to mention art market where *Dansaekhwa* (Korean monochrome painting, also known as *Tansaekhwa*) sweeps domestic and international art markets.³⁵ In this climate, the NS that has been popping up in Seoul in the past few years is actively dedicated to the promotion and cultivation of independent experimental arts and artists. Rather than focusing on the dominant art worlds, the participants have attempted to create “a new establishment,” considering the disempowering conditions of art institutions. As in the case of Meme Miu,³⁶ young practitioners take the grammar and compiled images of the SNS, creating easy accessibility and interactivity.³⁷

Both organizers and artists/curators are highly committed to new and self-generating cultural production. It seems that they are cautious to use the word “alternative,” thinking of the history of alternative space in American and Korean art world and markets. The dominant strategy is apparent in the way the shows and installations are disseminated via social media platforms: SNS, Twitter, and

32. It is translated into “New Space(s)” in various texts. See Jeongyoon Choi, “Case Records 2013–2015: Directions of Young Artists,” *Seoul Babel*, 2016 SeMA Blue (Seoul: Seoul Museum of Art, 2016), pp. 210–227.

33. The artists represented in these spaces participated in the *Seoul Babel* exhibition at the SeMA (Seoul Museum of Art) in 2016. For polemical discussions on these spaces in the Bebel show, Hyunjin Shin, “Exhibition Focus SeMA: Blue 2016 Seoul Babel,” *Wolgan Misool* (March 2016), pp. 126–131.

34. Hyunjin Shin, “Alternative Space and its Socialization of the Arts in the Context of Art as Social System,” Ph.D. Dissertation (Seoul: Hongik University, 2015).

35. Yeon Shim Chung, “The Storied Space of Korean Dansaekhwa: The 1992 and 2012 Exhibitions,” <http://www.westkwoon.hk/en/whats-on/past-events/postwar-abstraction-in-japan-south-korea-and-taiwan/chapter/speakers-355> (accessed November 15, 2015).

36. http://goods2015.com/m/artist_31.html (accessed November 20, 2016).

37. Bookyung Sohn, “Meme Miu,” Unpublished manuscript. See also Jungsuck Kang, “Instance Dungeons of Seoul,” (uploaded on May 27, 2015): <http://vanziha.tumblr.com/tagged/text> (accessed October 15, 2017).

Facebook.³⁸ “The weaver” organizes several keywords such as galleries including independent galleries or (pseudo) NS spaces, space information and location, archives, events, independent or used bookstores. It is worth noting that these examples of recent independent art crystalize what is at stake in moving the debate away from theories devoted to the neoliberal logic of its cultural phenomenon.

In the fall of 2015, the NS—artists-run-space or curators-run space—organized an independent and alternative *Goods* in order to target different kinds of art markets. About 15 NS joined the “affordable” contemporary art fair and about 80 artists joined this fair. Confronting the traditional art markets and trends, led by major auction houses and internationally active commercial galleries in Seoul, the NS presented media installations as well as two or three-dimensional artworks as well as idiosyncratic “goods.” The terms of goods are selected to find non-traditional distribution sources and yet their actual fairs and social media activities functioned as a more communal, sharing space for their works, production process, selling, critiquing, and consciousness-raising issues. The most interesting part, as much as their works, lies in the way the organizers “promote” and “archive” all their activities and interviews in real-time via Twitter.³⁹ Not only professionally trained artists but also loosely formed cyber guilds participated; some of them only act online to post their works without having physical space. While mushroomed spaces are popping up, some of them are short-lived and rapidly disappear.

V. Conclusion

As noted in the discussions of Koo and Jung, we have become well aware of the fact that the true nature of images, or should we say the validity of images, is absent in the digital era. In a flood of simulacra, the documentary exists only in the faint nostalgia of the past, but the nostalgia is faint, and does not exist in the present. Nonetheless, after James Cameron’s *Avatar*, the advent of three-dimensional devices will likely bring a day when, as the director as said, the audience will become completely immersed in the story and choose each action to be played out in front of their eyes as if it were reality. After the demise of the truth of documentary films, we now live in an era of image reproduction where photography and video images no longer

38. <https://twitter.com/herbererr/status/611240376548986880> (accessed November 15, 2016). A key Twitter provides GPS tracking of the newest events and shows in Seoul.

39. It is at the following site, <https://twitter.com/goods2015> (accessed November 15, 2015).

represent reality. Nonetheless, real documentaries are distributed through digital media on the one hand and the reproduction of infinitely reproducible images on the other.

By considering both artistic and technological changes, as well as media conditions in contemporary Korea, this paper has attempted to shed light on the emergence of a new cultural production which blurs the boundary between the producers and the consumers of online travelling images. It argues that Koo and Jung created a new path for an innovative mode of creation and that subsequently the next generation experimented with the idioms of internet games and low resolution digital images, employing glitch as an aesthetic tool rather than a temporary error or setback. The ubiquity of smartphones and the post internet context allowed the members of these young new groups to work with a variety of editorial tools as well. The cultural milieu of the artists considered in this paper have transformed media conditions in contemporary Korea but it remains to be seen to what extent these young artists are critical, in a socio-politically sense, of this new phenomenon. One can only conclude that under the cultural, socio-political, and economic analysis, both established artists like Koo and Jung and relatively unknown underground emerging contemporary Korean artists in a sense “negotiate” alternative media conditions in their productions as well as in their way of life, beyond the trajectory of mainstream culture. Their ongoing projects, activities, and gestures seem quite “vernacular” in contemporary Korea, creating a “post-internet” generational shift in artistic tendencies.

■ Keywords(주제어)

Postproduction(포스트프로덕션), Yeondoo Jung(정연두), Donghee Koo(구동희), Korean Media Art(한국미디어아트), Travelling Images(이동하는 이미지), New Space(신생공간), Post Internet Art(포스트 인터넷 아트)

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Abstract

“Synthetic Experience” as Social Commentary and Alternative Media Practitioners in Contemporary Korean Art

Yeon Shim Chung

This article initially explores the way Korean visual artists Yeondoo Jung and Donghee Koo, and young “post internet” generational artists collect digital images and data floating around social networks in order to form an alternative narrative of mainstream social conditions and politics. These media artists in Korea employ a certain cinematic mode, producing experimental alternatives while responding to grand narratives on social media, from natural disasters, conflict, urban and economic crises, to more benign matters. Secondly, it analyzes the recent artistic activities and media practices by millennials in their use of technology, in particular, the SNS, while examining their unique ways of editing travelling digital images as social commentary of their own situations. Because the boundaries of the original and the copy are bleak—not even visible on the digital screen—the artists interplay with the conditions of the *raison d'être* of digitally travelling images. Finally, this essay introduces the newly built “alternative” spaces these young artists employ in addition to their media practices. Their working processes manipulate, distort, and crop digital images that roam the internet, thus producing socio-political comments on the artists’ generational predicaments. Consequently, the working processes addressed by these groups of artists in Korea mark theatrical manipulation and digital editing, and augment *synthetic experience*, the very title derived from Koo’s exhibition.

국문초록

사회적 비판으로서의 '합성적 체험'과 한국 동시대 미술의 대안적 미디어 실천자들

정연심

본 논문은 한국의 미디어 작가들이 인터넷 상에서 떠도는 이미지나 데이터를 수집하고 이를 시각화, 편집화함으로써 사회적 논평과 비판을 가하는 작업 경향에 주목한다. 논문은 구동희, 정연두를 비롯해 최근 한국의 신생공간을 중심으로 전개된 젊은 미디어 작가 및 전시에 주목하며, 사회체계망(SNS) 등을 통해 포스트인터넷 세대들이 만들어내는 대안적이며 시네마적인 편집의 구성이 가져오는 새로운 디지털 문맥을 설명한다. 특히, 자연 재해, 사회적 경제적 갈등 구조 속에서 디지털 미디어에 익숙한 세대들이 만들어내는 새로운 대안적인 목소리와 그들의 작업을 강조함으로써, 인터넷 상에서 부유하는 이미지들을 재사용, 재편집, 재생산(reproduction)의 과정과 미학적 논의를 살펴본다.