

Marked by the absence of light, the experience of night is always multisensorial. Infused with the smell of chilled air, devoid of daytime warmth and the taste of daring desires, the night transcends its narrow definition as a mere demarcation of temporality by producing an unmistakable atmospheric impression. That nocturnal existence teems with these innumerable, minor reverberations could explain why our senses are maximally heightened during those stately hours. Over its course, we are gradually equipped to perceive things that are left unnoticed under the piercing sun—miniscule, elusive reflections of light are rendered all the more palpable against the unlit vista, and the smallest flutter of leaves intensifies into a gushing echo in the fragile silence. Every day, when the sun sets, we are naturally empowered to fracture the darkness that settles, to become aware of those entities that have collapsed into the background and have been made otherwise invisible. As darkness cracks and creases, unforeseen disclosures seep through.

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“I hate the Communists.” These pointed words, uttered by Sung Hwan Kim’s ten-year-old niece Yoon Jin Kim, forms the throughline of Kim’s 2010 video *Washing Brain and Corn*. Exhibited as a part of his solo exhibition *Night Crazying* for the first time in Korea after its premiere at Media City Seoul 2010, the film commences as the cherubic, young Kim narrates a theatrically rehashed version of the haunting, oft-repeated anecdote of Lee Seung-bok. This rather brutal narrative inculcated anti-Communist sentiments to children growing up in South Korea in the wake of the Korean War: when North Korean soldiers barged into Lee’s house near the border one autumn night in 1968 and asked whether he prefers the North or the South, Lee famously retorted that he “hates” the Communists, to which the soldiers took offense and murdered him, ripping apart the right side of his face with a machete. In the film, the ideological epigraph at the heart of the anecdote is delivered rather emphatically in the Korean language—albeit somewhat Americanized with blurred syllables—which contrasts with the rest of the story that is narrated in native English, save for a few interjections and “Kangnaeng,” the Korean word for “corn.” Through this theatrical device, the artist constructs a situation in which the decidedly propagandistic statement is articulated by someone who is almost immediately recognizable as a part of the generation no longer accustomed to the logic of the Cold War. Importantly, this conceit is subsequently connected to the re-articulation of the same statement at the end of the film by another foreign voice untethered to the ideological milieu of postwar South Korea: the voice that appears near the end of the video, against a poignant melody played on the guitar with a hand that awkwardly traces rough lines on a sheet of transparent film, is that of the artist’s long-time collaborator, David Michael DiGregorio. By merging anti-Communist propaganda with voices unfamiliar with political undertones specifically tied to South Korea, as such Kim dwells on the question of how narratives are delivered and reformulated across bodies.

The charged anecdote reveals the ways in which a debris of modern historical order registers differently among viewers who inhabit disparate spatial and temporal zones. Even within South Korea, where the traces of such anti-Communist language can still be located in public discourse, there would be a stark difference between the young and the old. For those in Kim’s generation or older, who were required to take courses on “anti-Communism” at school, Lee’s anecdote serves as an artifact of the bygone days that were shaped by ideological warfare. For the younger generation, it is difficult to

imagine that a narrative seemingly so gruesome and illusory was a part of an official curriculum. And yet, such differences are not only grounded in the discrepancy between generational memories, since that central proclamation of hatred that ignites the narrative of the film also resonates in various tonalities based on the sociopolitical climate of a given setting. The film’s premiere, for instance, took place a few months after the Cheonan sinking, in which a North Korean submarine torpedoed a South Korean navy vessel, killing forty-six soldiers. In that specific context, the variations of the film’s theme that unfolds throughout were probably less conspicuous than the theme itself; *Washing Brain and Corn* could have been construed as an homage to didactic anti-Communist films of the Cold War era, if not a theatrical rumination on the divisive rhetoric that is pervasive in South Korea. The variations of Lee’s chronicle across individuals in and out the film thus serves as a microcosm of the formation of historical narrative, a process that is necessarily predicated upon the transmission of knowledge across biased bodies whose interpretations of facts are always partial and provisional. By producing an epistemic model that replicates the construction of history beyond the frames of the film, Kim accentuates the urgency of the subject matter depicted.

For Kim, each screening of his work is unique, changing with the spatiotemporal context and the resulting historicity of the moment of spectatorship. And while such a characterization could be made of any work of art, the exploration into the potential “iterations” of spectatorship is particularly noteworthy for Kim, since he frequently re-imagines the physical setting of his films and presents them in varying architectural conditions. In *Night Crazying*, for instance, *Washing Brain and Corn* is shown alongside the artist’s delicate drawings. These feature geometric shapes rendered tenderly on parchment paper, mounting board, and transparent plastic sheets, which are conjoined and stacked on top of each other to generate fantastical, abstract compositions that resemble the shapes of an owl (*howl owl*, 2012), burning fire (*a page from Ki-da Rilke (fire-hair)*, 2012/2022), or a half-woman-half-beast creature (*Metaphor drew herself*, 2020/2022). And the transient, liquid surfaces that Kim produces in these series of works by exploiting the physical qualities of the different materials relate to the repetitive, formal devices within the film that refer to the act of drawing. For instance, when Kim narrates the disturbing short story of a protagonist who had a brain implanted in his brain that continued to grow in one sequence, the camera focuses on a hazy reflection of his niece, which is distorted as an anonymous pair of hands places a transparent plastic sheet with a childlike rendering of the human brain between her and the camera and moves it around to give the impression of the organ swelling. And by repeating the formal leitmotifs used to connect the disparate sequences of the film within the his drawings, Kim reinforces the aesthetics of *Washing Brain and Corn* beyond its own frame. Along with the towering walls and geometrically shaped dividers that orient the ambulatory spectator and manipulate the flow of light across the galleries of *Night Crazying*, these formal gestures constitute an apparatus of world-building that enables Kim to blend the filmic and the real. The phantasmagoric atmosphere of the film thus spills into the universe that surrounds it.

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In *Love Before Bond* (2017), layers of ambivalence coexist. In the first prolonged sequence of the film that takes place after the footage of ice falling from above, the face of a young man named Samori Coates gazing sideways fills the frame. His youthful appearance is at odds with the commanding tone of the lines that he delivers augustly: “Put your

legs together...Stand straight...Put your toes to the ground.” These instructions, which at first seem directed at nobody in particular, are in fact guidelines for a girl, who appears from the background as the boy commands, “go in the corner.” Such directives to reshape her comportment (“Stand straight up, confident, like a soldier”) suddenly transition into confessional narratives of her physical beauty after a pregnant pause, relayed, oddly, in the same imposing voice: “Don’t be afraid to show your body. Your body is beautiful. It’s yours. It’s something to be proud of.” In the following sequence, against a Schubert piano sonata performed by Seymour Lipkin (1927-2015), the older Yoon Jin Kim reclaims agency of her body and caresses the boy’s face playfully, widening his eyes with her fingers and swinging it left and right. And when the boy wraps his hands around her neck—quite vaguely so that it could be read as a caring gesture to warm her body or a menacing threat of asphyxiation—the girl speaks out for the first time in the film: “Why don’t you take me in your arms?” That treacherous mélange of love and death takes a grimmer turn when footage of the girl gleefully twisting her body and snapping her fingers is juxtaposed with a disturbing story of murder narrated in Sudanese Arabic: the corpse of a woman, who was killed by her husband because she did not want to move to a new house, was ziplocked and put away in a cardboard box, only to be found twelve years later by her twenty-year-old daughter. The troubling associative potential that Kim constructs in linking an anonymous male voice that narrates the harrowing killing of an innocent woman with the footage of a cheerful, dancing niece is then foregrounded as the sequence is intercut with short takes of her covering her neck with her own hands, as if to choke herself or bending her head backwards in an unnatural, discomforting posture. Importantly, though, this conceptual connection does not crystallize into anything specific: when a nondescript piece of cardboard is removed from the floor, what the spectator sees is the boy from earlier in film, grotesquely pulling down his cheeks so that only the whites of his eyes show. As soon the coexistence of love and death emerges as a possible subject of the film, the artist stages a scene that overturns viewers’ expectations and upends the prospect of an interpretative structure that could be neatly delineated.

The sense of ambivalence throughout the film is not only rooted in the spectatorial impulse to cobble together a coherent narrative from moving image and sound. In fact, it is a condition that defines the bodies of the protagonists, who are in their adolescence and constantly grappling with their undefined existence that oscillates between adult and child. At the same time, though, the state of ambivalence also allows Kim to embark on a web of literary experiments that densely occupy the film. For one, the spoken and written words that appear in the work—appropriated from varying sources ranging from an article from a South Korean news outlet to sonnets by William Shakespeare—are flattened into language devoid of specific referential function and authorial identification, which could effectively be transformed into raw material that could be spontaneously re-shaped. One intertitle reads, “I had never in all my life seen such a concentrated malevolent poverty of spirit.” Precisely who “I” is and what “poverty of spirit” the person is witnessing remains unclear. And such uncertainty of meaning is brought into sharpest relief near the end of the film when the word “apologize” is recited by individually and collectively by the various characters. The imperious, weighty tone employed by the characters, as well as the admittance of wrongdoing or guilt implied in the word, makes apparent that their demands should not be treated lightly. But to whom, exactly, the demand is made and for what reasons remain unresolved by the end of the film. Only the triadic structure of meaning created through the expression “*le pain invisible*” that

precedes the mysterious chants makes it faintly evident that such an inquiry constitutes a rather futile hermeneutic attempt with respect to the film. The phrase, which would literally stand for “the invisible bread” in French, is contradicted foremost by a sequence that depicts loaves of breads as they are held in hands, placed next to each other, or surrounded by ice cubes. Yet another sphere of connotation coalesces around the mismatch between sound and image here when the narrator implies the meaning behind the same combination of letters in the English language: “If I bleed over the shadow / My pain is under the shadow / When they bleed / They bleed above the shadow / only within the contour line of each shadow.” While the rest of the lines are delivered in Sudanese Arabic, the word “pain” is read in English, as if to phonetically emphasize the double entendre at play. Deeply embedded into the structural logic of the film, as such, is the potential for productive misinterpretation inherent to the state of ambivalence.

This liminal space of uncertainties constructed in *Love Before Bond* allows Kim to freely navigate the bounds of fact and fiction, imagining alternatives that overthrow existing historical narratives. Recurring miniature cardboard columns, which first appear as props to produce shadows under and above a loaf of bread (“le pain”), is one element through which Kim realizes such possibilities in the film. Designed as part of Philip Johnson’s 1964 project entitled *The Pleasure Pavilion*—a building placed at the edge of a pond near his famed *Glass House* (1949) in New Canaan, Connecticut—they are an architectural artifact that represent the epitome of his modernist thinking. The concrete columns, whose utilitarian design consists of a curve surrounded by perpendicularly connected straight lines, serve as modular elements that are conjoined repeatedly to create three-dimensional planes. For Kim, though, the columns are not only representative of a specific architectural movement but also a means to bring into view the troubling politics of Johnson, especially since the traces of his fervent support for fascism and Nazi Germany, in the form of articles and letters, were in fact burned in the fireplace at the *Glass House*. And by interlaying images of miniature columns in an array of settings with texts by James Baldwin throughout the film, which effectively juxtaposes the respective forms of output by the two artists, Kim arranges a “fairytale of people who have never met.” Although both were active in New York during the same period, the politically progressive Baldwin, who moved back to the United States from Paris to advance the objectives of the Civil Rights movement, would not have encountered the reactionary Johnson, who was still enamored with the inherently exclusionary ideology of fascism. Through the superimposition of their sharply different lives, Kim invokes how the layered aspects of their complicated lives could in fact resonate with those of the adolescents: their lives as gay men living in an age of pervasive homophobia irrespective of their wildly dissimilar political beliefs, as well as Baldwin’s more explicit political orientation as an anti-racist, recall the experiences of protagonists as people of color in present-day United States. By revealing the commonality between the lives of four people who are separated by decades, the fairytale of Johnson and Baldwin constructed in Kim’s world of ambivalence is recast into a reflective narrative of minorities whose existences cannot be so clearly delineated.

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When the sun sets, the night strips light from everywhere all at the same time. That which could be perceived through human eyes thanks to light can no longer enjoy their privileged status; they fall under the same orbit as those that had to remain in the dark, those that were not

under the auspices of sunlight during the day but whose existence could not be denied as such. All that strive to display themselves in darkness through the luxury of light are forced to put on different masks, unable to exhibit their daytime selves during the night. The night is thus egalitarian—it is the period of the day during which the interstices between the seen and the unseen are abridged. And that is perhaps the reason why Kim's films, which engage with the ways in which history is transmitted and varied across discrete bodies as well as the imaginative potential that stems from different forms of ambivalence, are exhibited in the context of the night. Through the absence of sight that enables a certain reorganization of the senses, we are equipped to focus on the "unseen" that informs the crux of his practice. Over the course of a crazed night, those images and sensations that cannot be so easily grasped and put together in clear-cut logic are finally reborn into songs that have remained hitherto unsung.

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