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SPACE AND TIME: AN INTERVIEW WITH SUNG
HWAN KIM

Storytelling in Space and Time: An Interview with Sung Hwan Kim

PRESS



Sung Hwan Kim, *Temper Clay*, 2012. Film still.

[Sung Hwan Kim](#) (SMVisS '03)'s practice utilizes video and performance art, illustrations, and light effects. His work incorporates Korean culture, folklore, and myth with personal experiences. A [2018 article in Tate Modern](#) discusses his film, *Temper Clay*.

Kim's interest in storytelling can be traced back to his studies while at the Visual Arts Program (a predecessor of ACT).

During his time here as a student, Kim took courses at Harvard in German and Comparative Literatures, including two taught by John Hamilton, which were influential: 'Poetic Fury: Madness, Inspiration, Genius,' and 'Literature and the Visual Arts: Iconophilia and Iconoclasm.'

Marissa Friedman: How did the literature classes at Harvard inform or deepen your work?

Sung Hwan Kim: One class, 'Poetic Fury: Madness, Inspiration, Genius,' explored what is considered to be madness, and its relation to creativity. The course went all the way from the Greek plays through 20th century literature. Sometimes the writers we read suffered, or thrived from, melancholia, and at other times there were more analytical writings, like about the history of mental institutions and how they function in western civilization. It was eye-opening because it focused on something that is longer than what contemporary art is used to; the relation between a person and society and vision and story and so forth, and it's all documented in writing of experiences and vision, either hallucinatory or verifiable; imaginary or actual.

And another class by Hamilton that I took was on Iconophilia and Iconoclasm, which discussed the relation between imageries and texts. One of the texts I read there was *Rameau's Nephew* by [Denis] Diderot. It was all about how two people talk about a performance that only one of them has seen, and how it is impossible to describe exactly

what that experience was. A performance is an event that then disappears.

MF: What excited you about being back and teaching at ACT? Is teaching at ACT different than teaching elsewhere?

SHK: The differences partly depend on the age group. Here, all my students are graduate students, so they are more informed and have thematically specific interests. It's interesting to learn from them what they want to do, what they know or want to know. If you're teaching undergraduate students you have to give a little more background. I was taken aback because I was teaching a class elsewhere with 14 students and only 2 people knew what *King Lear* was, or had even heard of it. I think that has to do with anti-canonical teaching; I think it's important to have some common ground. Otherwise it's difficult to talk about differences that are more nuanced, when you lack too many common references and everybody's coming with a different vocabulary.

MF: This is the first performance art workshop at ACT in some time. What do you think is the importance and value of having performance art taught in this academic, and more visually-based, art program?

SHK: I think performance is a very broad term now, which covers so many kinds of things. What I like to emphasize through this class is that in performance there is space and time, and there are people watching it. And whatever happens during performance time is what the artist makes

out of these elements. It is not as simple as just bringing something in and showing it. There is something that you need to solve in that time and space, and the solving is through the performance, bodies and objects moving through time, exposed to the viewers; when you're presenting, the labor has to be put in again, and the tension has to come out again, every time. It is completely different from film or video or any kind of object where things are finished and then you move it and install it. I think dealing with a temporal space is a very valuable experience for artists and audiences.

That said, I am focusing this course at MIT with a history of cinema. I find it interesting that in the wider public sphere what is being talked about in terms of performance, and sets, and lighting, and stories from various times of history, is through film and literature, and not through performance history. I think one reason for that is accessibility. I like to talk about performance in relation to films. Joan Jonas, who has taught this course I am teaching at ACT, for instance, was very inspired by looking at films; even if you're not directly quoting it, you're in relation to that field. You are watching films or you live with others who watch them.

By looking at the history of film, even if that is one sided and distorted, one can illuminate the unexposed parts of that very history. Some people, some genders, and some ethnicities are not to be found in any documents recorded in the film or performance history. By looking at what is documented in an accessible and well distributed medium

like film, one can see what could not have been documented in certain times and places, and one starts to wonder why.

MF: How would you describe or characterize your own art practice?

SHK: I change with every project, so it depends – maybe that's the character.

This year, I haven't worked on a production of performance, theater, or film. Therefore, I didn't need a studio. With the current market, it is very difficult for artists to sustain their work production and life at the same time, at least in New York; it is almost impossible. It's interesting to do something that is cost-efficient, when space is not available. It could be writing, or a research project. This year I've developed a series of lessons, which allows me to practice bridging the distance between the space of an esoteric and eclectic nature of long term research; and the space of the audience unaware and excluded from the research. It's about bridging the long and the short. It is similar to Lear's concern: "The oldest hath borne most: we that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long." I was inspired by Roland Barthes' lecture series like *The Preparation of the Novel*. So it's sort of like a practice of communicating, but I don't think that the art world would receive this as work, for example. Unless I package it as such.

MF: What is it like being back in Cambridge, at MIT?

SHK: I spent four years in Cambridge for school. I'm not

thinking too much of being back in the school as much as back in the architectural space, which contains certain memory of it.

When I was a student, I didn't look outside much. Now I know that places like Casablanca and Brattle Theatre have interesting histories related to me. I just realized yesterday that Casablanca closed a few years ago. I hadn't known. This month, I was reading Hiton Als' book *The Women* and there's a scene where Dorothy Dean in the 50s is hanging out at Casablanca with some other people. I was excited to go back now, after reading about it, but then it was gone. I'm asking my students to experience the site, at which they reside. One of the most interesting things about Boston is MIT and Harvard. These schools have such big significance, and are changing everything about the city, about the architecture, the real estate. When I was crossing the Charles River, I realized that the picture of the Harvard campus looks exactly the same as a postcard from the 19th century. They make sure that the cityscape doesn't change so much. You can really be transported to another time, and I find that I'm seeing more of that now than when I was a student.

MF: What are you working on now?

SHK: Last summer I started research for a new project focusing on the first immigrants to the United States from Korea, from 1884–1910. The majority of these immigrants, beginning in 1903, coming to the United States via Hawai'i, were plantation farmers who came as strikebreakers used

against Japanese workers in the region. They eventually moved to the mainland, centering around Reedley, Riverside, and Dinuba in California; and Butte in Montana. Many of these Korean immigrants and their offspring remained undocumented until the signing into law of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act. An even earlier minority Korean immigrant group, containing the first to naturalize as a United States citizen, starting around 1884, comprised government officials and their offspring, coming as students of Christianity. They attended schools on the East Coast, like Governor Dummer Academy, Vanderbilt University, and Emory College, as well as Claremont College in California. Systemic racism embedded in the Reconstruction Era was ever-present, and the postbellum discourse on race was at its height around these newcomers; and yet, this discourse was not synthesized and folded into the immigrant community's knowledge or collective experience.

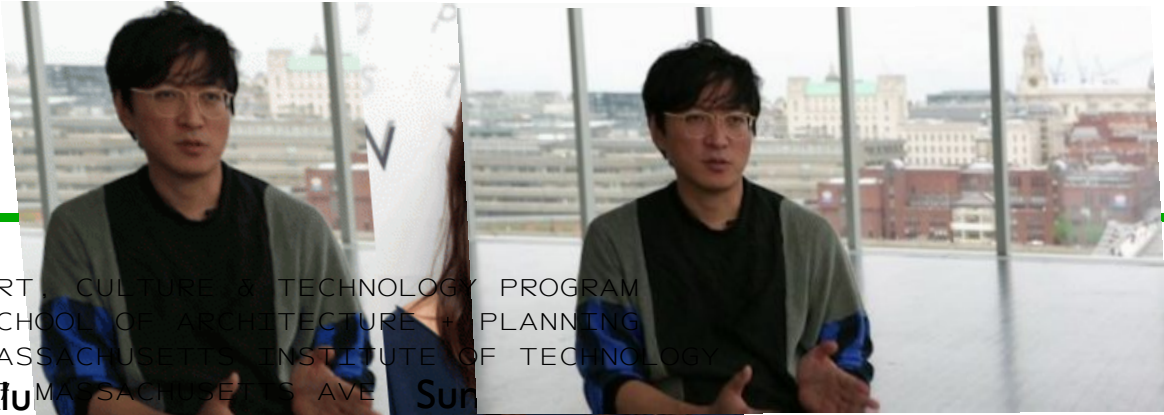
Kim is currently teaching 4.361/2 | Performance Art Workshop, and will be giving an Artistic Research Luncheon presentation on Tuesday, March 19.

Most recently, Kim exhibited his work at daad galerie, Berlin (2018), the 57th Venice Biennale Arte (2017), National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, Korea (2017) and Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival, Berwick, UK (2017).

Solo exhibitions include *Sung Hwan Kim*, CCA Kitakyushu (2016); *Life of Always a Mirror*, Artsonje Center, Seoul (2014); *Sung Hwan Kim*, The Tanks at Tate Modern, London (2012); *Line Wall*, Kunsthalle Basel (2011) and *Sung Hwan Kim, From the Commanding Heights...*, Queens Museum, New York (2011).

His works were shown in international biennales and film festivals, such as the Gwangju Biennale, Performa, Manifesta, Berlin Biennale, Rotterdam International Film Festival, and Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin. He was a fellow at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten (2004/2005) and a recipient of Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD (2015).

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