

## Review Copy Only

Written by Park Chan-kyong in 1998 and recently translated by Young Min Moon, “Fundamental Perspectives in Understanding Conceptual Art, *Minjung Misul*, and Activism” is to be published in spring 2015 in book form, provisionally titled *Interference: Archive and Beyond—Korean Art Criticism*. This text is one of two writings that the curators Binna Choi and Seewon Hyun selected for the upcoming book.

Conceived by Art Space Pool under the directorship of the curator Heejin Kim, and further developed in collaboration with the Asia Art Archive (AAA) in Hong Kong, *Interference* is a compilation of critical essays, manifestos, interviews, and curatorial texts written by active practitioners in Korea including artists, curators, critics, and theorists from the late 1960s and onwards.

The Interference project is generously funded by the Foundation for Arts Initiative (FfAI) in New York.

Art Space Pool, Seoul, Korea

January 2015

# Fundamental Perspectives in Understanding Conceptual Art, *Minjung Misul* (Grassroots Art), and Activism\*

Park Chan-kyong

1.

The 1970s might have been a blessed time. Vanity surrounding debates of why pieces of rock had to be placed in a certain way at certain spots at least reveal some sense of the “purity” of the era.<sup>1</sup> The progressive arts and literature of the 1980s often advocated a return to the 1930s. Such unrealistic and contrived movements faced difficulty in resisting the dominant ideology of the time. The effects of the ideology functioned as a major smokescreen to prevent artists deciphering their socioeconomic position. What mattered more than the issue of survival itself as an artist was opacity. According to what is known about artists in general, they are supposedly unable to subsist entirely on being an artist; if they could, their lives tended to be rather “dubious.” To speak in simple terms, though it may also be true in other disciplines, what the media, family, and schools teach with regard to art has no bearing on what it actually takes to become and lead a life as an artist. In the process, artists become unable to measure the implications of distinguishing the life of an artist and a general sense of competition to survive. In such an environment, artists may even easily forget that they are artists. The life of an artist is not only peripheral in society, but also for artists themselves.

In spite of the marginalization of art in both internal and external terms, contemporary Korean art can sustain itself, largely due to its reliance on the almost “irresistible” means of regurgitating art in its sheer quantity. It would be difficult to conceive of a method that is more suitable for self-perpetuation and reproduction than relying on absolute quantity. In this regard, it is rather strange that art historians and critics are disinterested in art cram schools, or *hagwon*. There are too many art galleries, but then art cram schools have several hundred times more influence than galleries. Likewise, “art exam magazines” devoted to university

---

\* First published by Alternative Space Pool (now Art Space Pool), under the title “Gaenyeom misul, minjung misul, haengdongjuuileul ihaehaneun gibonjeogin gwanjeom” in *Forum A*, no. 2 (1998): 20–23.

– Translator’s Note: The original essay in Korean did not include footnotes. The author explained that he has written this essay not for academic purposes but considered it as an “activist’s essay.” The citations in the original essay were direct quotations made from Korean translations of the foreign authors, so, I have located the Korean sources in order to find the original passages in foreign publications.

1. Trans. Note: The author is referring to the work of Ufan Lee, the principal theorist and leader of the Mono-ha movement in Japan.

entrance exams far outnumber professional art journals. In the end, the culture of sheer quantity proves its own significance through its regurgitation of art. So called art in a public space is at once a gigantic piece of metal and an administrative-arithmetic quantity representing one-percent of the construction cost of a building. Even the artist lists or rhetorical exaggerations of art criticism found in Korean art history texts have mostly evolved around the criterion of quantity. While such quantity is exchangeable with hard currency, it does not explicitly reveal “a quantitative equality between the cost of a ticket and the tears of an actor or the luxuriousness of a set.”<sup>2</sup>

It is no wonder that the practice of art has never been as corrupted as the extent that we face today. To be more precise, it is not that contemporary art is dead or rotten, the fact that the boundary between art and death is now meaningless is not due to the quality of the preservatives, but its quantity. The “fraud” of art is not the rhetoric of some dandy avant-gardists who favor cool subversion, but rather a simple fact. Artists and dealers alike participate in hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of wheeling and dealing, and create tax evasions through collaborative scams that surround the process of commissioning so called public art. Just as low-ranking civil servant corruption stems from economic hardship, before considering ethics, Korean art can become the subject of legal-artistic interest because of what everyone knows but doesn’t want to admit: That it is very difficult to attain all the basic means of existence as an artist, such as living expenses, studio rent, and production costs. The space of consuming art *fictionally* presupposes the space of creation, far beyond the degree to which a humble artist’s studio might allow us to imagine a decent gallery space. Upon scrutiny, the space of consuming art—such as galleries, and large national or municipal museums—is akin to a ludicrous comedy in which the magic of transformation is commonplace, as it inflates the virtual realm of the artistic “production of space” as though it exists.

## 2.

In the previous section, I offered a corrupted image of the status of art and its mode of regurgitation today in an effort to conjure up the theme of a democratic culture. In one aspect, the purpose is to show how routinely, directly, and spontaneously we are bound to have some misgivings about the “civil culture” in Korean society. Such misgivings always point towards the immaturity and instability of the culture of civil democracy. In the end, it not only implies

---

2. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), 155.

poverty, but also ideological conditions akin to *angina pectoris*, or discomfort in the chest due to poor blood circulation in the heart, which characterizes the pseudo-modern aspects of Korean culture. This requires a simple examination of what artistic autonomy has meant for us.

In the cultural and artistic discourse, “essentialism” appears to consist of two major types of knowledge. While there is a theory of the creation of culture and art that does not presuppose the production mechanism of capitalism, the production mechanism can be seen as an inalienable element in determining the value of a work of art. The uneasy attitude among artists practicing realism in general and *minjung* art in the 1980s regarding artistic autonomy were quite incompetent in their examination of the dialectic of far distance and the proximity between works of art and society, and “overdetermination” and the “last instance.”<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the trajectory of Korean modernism and postmodernism, which appears to endorse artistic autonomy, remained merely as “an institution that claims autonomy.” These two forces, having dichotomized the 1980s and remained in existence at least ostensibly in the 1990s, were negatively mutually dependent. The latter has never been able to move beyond the limits of the institution itself. Meanwhile, *minjung* art has concealed its own shortcomings in terms of its content by the legitimacy earned through its critique of institutions. The critique of the rearguard’s use of the dictum “artistic autonomy” in rationalizing their practice remains valid and important, yet it should also be noted that the relative autonomy of art has generally been understood in terms of “rationalizing” art practice.

The foregoing reminds us of an important fact that there have been few serious attempts to open up the possibility of establishing a more mature civil culture than the previous state of affairs in visual culture. The virtual absence of forceful and truthful high culture not only implies that avant-garde has a weak base—even though it would be ironic for the avant-garde to require a specific “base”—but also, in the larger sense, that it is deeply associated with the poverty of content in popular culture. However, the recent cultural discourse tends to ignore this. Especially in South Korea, the critical attitude concerning elitism was not born because the word actually implied elitism. Rather, it often tended towards the ideological, because there were no precedents among powerful high art, or, even if it had existed, it had not been widely circulated in a creative manner. As a result, art has failed to distinguish itself from

---

3. Trans. Note: The author is referring to French philosopher Louis Althusser’s notions of “overdetermination” and “economic determination in the last instance,” which explain the mechanism of reproducing the relations of production in reference to Freud and Marx.

what the conservative, lowbrow popular culture pursues. Instead of maintaining any critical stance with regard to pop culture, it has instead contributed to its own, becoming similar to pop culture. In an excessively hasty kind of capitalist society such as South Korea, art has only existed as an institution. Precisely for this reason, high art as an institution and actually high art must continue to be distinguished—even if the word “actual” is a qualifier given through the process of agreement rather than as evidence of a result.

It seems that there two different situations that require avant-garde activities in a broader sense of the word. It is one thing for art to attain institutional equivalence in a civil society. It is an altogether different matter when the institution of art is hardly on a par with the general standard of democracy. In fact, the core art systems in South Korea have not even reached the precarious level of the democracy attained in the political arena. Even if South Korean society is facing a comprehensive crisis, it remains a fact that in general, democracy has improved throughout modern Korean history, and that the growth of democracy has been accomplished through labor and political struggle must not be underestimated. It is conceivable that the future vitality of art actually depends on accomplishing the artistic institutional equivalence of democracy, that is, enforcing the transparency of institutions established through rational decision-making by the very subjects involved in the cultural sphere. Given that the means by which artists, institutions, and audiences participate in the cultural sphere does not even constitute the minimum form of procedural democratic processes, avant-garde artistic activity must be inclusive of the most basic level of common sense matters. If, in South Korea, where fundamental public interest in modernity remains collapsed, “negation” or “line of flight” does not critically support the modernist rationalism, then it would merely be a pediatric symptom of intellectuals or a self-fulfilling prophecy of the avant-garde at best.

Therefore, it is necessary to approach the theme from the opposite direction by redefining the role of culture within our civil society. The cultural theorist Shim Kwang-hyun wrote, “Civil society, in a large sense of the term, is a cultural sphere in which activities of all types take place in order to promote improvement and development of each individual’s physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities in close association with natural, technological, and society environment. In this regard, civil society is not ‘political democracy’ in the formal and procedural sense, but rather a space in which ‘cultural democracy’ operates

practically and content-wisely.”<sup>4</sup> Seen this way, accomplishing the cultural-institutional equivalent of civil democracy may appear passive and an inadequate alternative. Rather, it would be imperative that artists insist that democracy be implemented, changed, and created in terms of the culture.

### 3.

Given that artists ought to remain vigilant about the fairness and transparency of cultural policies and administration, and exert influence and improve them, what then remains is whether they actually pursue those actions. However, it is not simply a matter of how to practice activism, as a special class as artists are subject to a perpetual state of crisis within a capitalist society. The matters of institution are not limited to “legal institution,” as it is related to every form of communication media. The issue also involves the question of the value of a work of art. If artists neglect the internal relationship between art and the institution, art activists will end up marching in the street. In other words, the question of the institution in an expanded sense—from rigid and real to a soft and “sensitized” institution—pertains to the matters of the reality of communication. Of course, the reality of communication refers to the realities of media, cognition, senses, discourses, the everyday, social structures, etc. It is a synthetic concept that encompasses reality’s integrated yet chaotic relationships. In turn, it also refers to the endless movement that alters both the subjective and objective topography of such integrated reality. Hence, the question of how a work of art in South Korean society contains and fixes meaning can only ever yield feeble and relative importance. The important questions are how artwork gives rise to meaning in various methods and explodes them, and as Gilles Deleuze questions, how parallel circuits and circuits in proximity can operate.<sup>5</sup>

The foregoing does not simply stop at pointing at the structured ways in which art is experienced indirectly through print media, art education, and the words of culture section reporters. It also does not merely point out that the reception of art most commonly takes place through a proxy experience or informational experience, which subsequently influences the construction of its meaning and the context of the distribution. Therefore, the issue is not

---

4. Shim Kwang-hyun, “Sinjayujuiwa simin sahoeui wigi: muhwajeok gonggong yeongyeogui chulhyeon [The crisis of neoliberalism and civil society: The emergence of cultural public sphere], in *21segi hanguk sahoewa gonggong yeongyeok guchugui jeonmang* [A perspective of constructing Korean society and public sphere in the 21<sup>st</sup> century], ed. The National Association of Professors for Democracy (Seoul: Munhwagwahaksa, 1998), 76–77.

5. Trans. Note: Due to the difficulty in retracing the source, I resorted to paraphrasing this particular quotation of Deleuze.

limited to a question of how to alter and intervene in the consumption of art in the realm of the proxy experience and informational experience, rather than the artwork itself, just as conceptual artists have tried to do as a responsive strategy. For instance, in response to the fetishization of art, conceptual art's strategy of usurping the hierarchy between materiality versus information has greatly expanded the boundaries of art, or at least made a compelling case for reengaging the already-expanded field of art. However, it is also possible for such a strategy to fall into the trap of fetishizing either the theory or Platonism. Indeed, the dilemma of the conceptualist avant-garde could not be better revealed than by the extent to which theory has become fetishized in contemporary art. Conceptual art is dead the moment it can become theorized in general terms, rather than understood as a "historical activity" through a change of specific contexts. Dada, pop art, and conceptual art have tried to reveal the mechanisms of making art and the delivery of meaning as honestly as possible. They understood the role of the negotiator and the dynamics of the cultural topography operating at the borders of the inseparable realms of artwork and the institution.

#### 4.

Put simply, organizing a certain kind of rupture from various angles in the reality of communication requires desiring that art be active, and alive. If a work of art transforms the reality of communication, an institutional critique may be inherent in the art, and conversely, changing the institution itself can be the real work. This calls for liberation from the "professionalism" of being an artist, and reclaiming the rightful dimension of being an artist as a holistic person. For example, considering a urinal, a gold-plated urinal induces mild irritation in us. Changing the context of art production and reception is not about making some kind of art historical "move" or wanting to belong to a "predetermined avant-garde." When Lucy R. Lippard posed the question, "how do we define ourselves not through the opposition but through our own positive goals for an empowered, democratic art?,"<sup>6</sup> she implied art as activism, some kinds of art that are active in every possible direction.

Seen this way, the crucial question is what concepts artists should embody in their lives. To interpret conceptual art in a wide range of practices from events to painting is to open the boundaries of art to accept various kinds of activity aside from making "artwork" as art. If an artist relies substantially on factors external to the artwork to disseminate the meaning of their work, then the artist is no longer simply a "producer" of artwork. If we have

---

6. Lucy R. Lippard, "Headlines, Heartlines, Hardlines: Advocacy Criticism as Activism," in *Cultures in Contention*, eds., Kahn and Neumaier (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985), 243.

to discuss much about a work of art, it is due to its discursive and non-discursive mechanisms, and its possibilities for mobility and re-creation. For instance, we are preoccupied with the afterlife of text, rather than the mutually dependent relationship between art and criticism, or images and text. This is rooted in the prevalent attitude that sees images as material-based and text as mental-based. That an image is recognized as an “image” implies that such recognition takes place in the mutual interaction between the mind and the matter. The boundary between the mental images and the image or artwork as an independent thing is not so clear. What is seen through the eye is the “imagery,” and deciphering such imagery requires the ability to categorize and name the object. Moreover, it is subject to endless transformation under the influence of the body, memory, and the environment.

The reason I bring up this rather fundamental observation on image is that it is related to the broadness and significance of what we call cultural politics. Its implication is that the practice of art can be expanded from the Formal Reality<sup>7</sup> approach of “actual (work of) art” to a concept or general human activity. To push this idea to its extreme, it would mean that being an artist does not necessarily entail actual making of paintings; that performance, words, writing, or even the life of an artist itself are works of art, and that the boundary between art and life is purely descriptive. The greatest strength of such a position lies in the pursuit of the liveliness of “direct democracy” without institutional mediation between “art” and life, and the artist and their audience. However, in “happy” cases, such a position is also subject to turning into a fetishized document via critical language, art history, or accompanying photos; the “unfortunate” case, more often than not, ultimately becomes synonymous with everyday trivialities. Worse still, that the mundaneness of the everyday is registered as the documentation of a fetish in art history is another dilemma.

However, I must also point out that the avant-garde’s notion of a “fateful dilemma” entails the limitations of fatalism. There is no such thing as fateful, and all things past are only permanent within their historical specificity. The problem is that the institution of the avant-garde as fashion does not understand avant-garde art as avant-garde. Theodore W. Adorno observed, “Instead of exposing itself to this failure in which the style of the great work of art has always achieved self-negation, the inferior work has always relied on its

---

7. Trans. Note: According to the theory of philosophy by Descartes, Formal Reality is the reality something has in the virtue of existing.

similarity with others—on a surrogate identity.”<sup>8</sup> Avant-garde art can only be living avant-garde when it recognizes itself as avant-garde art. In spite of that, historical avant-garde art’s insistence has given the impression of being prone to factional and being acutely critical; I want to emphasize that it moves towards universal principles. Thus, as Andreas Huyssen noted, “. . . It is the task of the artist to break out of art’s ivory tower and contribute to a change of everyday life. . . . He would be . . . no longer accepting the separation of the philosophical and the non-philosophical, the high and the low, the spiritual and the material, the theoretical and the practical, the cultivated and the non-cultivated; and not planning only a change of the state, of political life, economic production and judicial and social structures, but also planning a change of everyday life.”<sup>9</sup>

## 5.

“If an artist calls it a work of art, it is so.” If an artist claims the importance of something, then it can become important and self-reflexive; the realm that is free from the myth of the rather narrowly defined “professionalism” remains intact as a basis for art. That is to say, about half of the business is the “lying mechanism,” and so it follows the ethics of “the exaggeration itself becoming the truth.” This is how the logic of the historical avant-garde continues. Art is the ability to persuade, but not persuasion itself. Given this, art is “shedding light on problems,” and is more nominal than substantive. Artistic attitude and discovery are more important than the art itself. In this sense, an artist is a “living sculpture,” and every artist is a conceptual artist. Likewise, art must grapple with the autonomy of art in relation to political ideology or social structure. Such a zone of autonomy overlaps with the “autonomy of negation,” which criticizes such autonomy. When the Situationist International stated, “art can really be suppressed only by being realized,”<sup>10</sup> they expanded the boundaries of art by criticizing artistic autonomy.

For the same reason, the great heritages of art cannot be generalized under a single ideology, and “progressivity” is not a firm and transparent entity, but must be justified with a theoretical basis and value to support the foregoing. In reality, when “depending on situations,” art could have been progressive by deliberately taking an antagonistic stance regarding all forms of ideology. In such situations, the progressivity of art is produced,

8. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 1115.

9. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 157–158.

10. Situationist International, “Response to a Questionnaire from the Center for Socio-Experimental Art” in *Art and Social Change*, eds., Bradley and Esche (London: Tate / Afterall, 2007), 127.

invented, and creatively consumed by the relational meaning between artwork and society, “contextual activity,” changes in circumstances, and in the initiation of events, rather than the iconographical narrative of art, fixed truth as “text,” or a work of art as a physical object.

The most significant accomplishment of conceptual art lies in considering such circumstances and contexts as being decisive elements. It is precisely at this point that conceptual art and art activism overlap. Minjung art initiated an art movement, and the inherent meaning of the word “movement” always predicates a transformation not only in relation to specific political situations and contextual relationships, but also in the relationships of art itself and what is not considered art. The shock and reverberation of early minjung art stemmed from such “contextual targeting and rupture,” and the economy of means and immediacy in “using the context as medium.” However, as time progressed, minjung art more or less remained at the level of iconographical social reflection, and the politics of representation, using particular forms of pedestrian metaphor. The fact that late minjung art stopped short of modernism in terms of the recognition of realities in other dimensions—such as the cognitive, communicative, and spatial—is due to their lack of such contextual thought processes. Minjung art’s persistent representational approach in moving toward “symbolic-installation art”<sup>11</sup> only rationalizes the public’s conservative tastes, while posing no questions at all.

In this aspect, minjung art has shown a strong tendency to interpret the task of reflecting social relationships in terms of a self-fulfilling, dreary white paper on the criteria of sincerity. For this reason, minjung artists found it difficult to accept changes in perception or media, the subversion of space, and the practical aspects of the cultural turn of institution and cultural politics in and of themselves constituting social change. While minjung artists called for a grasp of reality in concrete terms, they tended to antagonize inquiry into the condition of architectural and multilayered meanings in communicative actions subtly, or safely dodge inquiries by simply explaining it as “too difficult,” a virtually meaningless utterance. (Difficulty in contemporary art is a myth. Contemporary art is not particularly difficult.) Having become limited in this manner, minjung art simply substituted “reality of art” with “the reality shown by art,” and even moved further to circumstances in which the transparency of reflection of social reality very actively replaced the opacity of various realities—institutional, psychological, cognitive, situational, theoretical, etc. When minjung

---

11. Trans. Note: Here, the author is referring to the common art form that utilizes the emblematic and symbolic forms “installed” in a space as installation art, when installation art initially evolved as a means of countering such rigid forms in sculpture.

art is perceived in such limited terms, like current minjung art, it becomes “art not for the sake of art,” or more seriously, becomes “art for the sake of art not for the sake of art,” thereby ghettoizing art culture. The issue is that the question of what to choose or oppose in the countless criteria of art moves to the question of how to integrate or sever them. Whether dealing with minjung art, modernism, or whatever else, the same holds true.

Of course, minjung art is not the only object to untangle from such context. The notorious notion of self-referentiality in modernism should also be freed from returning and belonging to the artwork itself, and become diversified, enriching its values. Just as minjung art ought to diversify its self-referentiality, “movement,” insofar as it is relational, can only be self-referential. In addition, self-referentiality, as a critique of visual delusion in its broad sense, is already set in motion as a mechanism, not a dead object with a blank look.

## 6.

I think that the separation, entanglement, and inversion of artists’ studios and museums indicate that there is a lack of “action” between the two. It would be true if this observation were charged as a rationalization of my own action as an artist and critic. Importantly, it is my hope that readers understand that I am not insisting that everyone share this observation. Conceiving contextual and activist art movement as a method of putting forth a firm “strategic alternative” would represent a self-contradiction. John Tagg observed that “The political resonances, here, are clear enough, but against the ambitions of totalizing theory, Michel Foucault’s ideas of micropolitics make us think much more about how practices engage with specific kinds of institutional relations, power relations, ways of speaking, ways of prohibiting.”<sup>12</sup> However, simply declaring that the way of thinking in the West in the 1970s, as exemplified by postmodern visual culture theorists such as John Tagg and his notions of “the big push, the answer, the strategy”<sup>13</sup> and that in ours in the 1980s would be problematic as it is merely a radical fantasy. It is not sufficient to distribute each’s “share” under the banner of a single aspiration in a contrived manner, as there remain endless relations between struggling “monads.” In this sense, I do think that micro activities should be allowed to open up, and I see no reason to resist certain possible solidarity emerging from them.

---

12. John Tagg, quoted in Joanne Lukitsh, “Practicing Theories: An Interview with John Tagg,” in *The Critical Image*, ed. Carol Squires (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 223.

13. *Ibid.*

The goal of solidarity among artistic producers is the creation of a democratic art culture. However, it does not so much demand solidarity *for* democratic art culture, but rather “communication toward” it at the level at which it is inseparable from activism as work. This simultaneously means initiating changes in the reality of communication from within art, and not doing so. The reason artistic activities have failed to engage various social activities and the implementation of discourse is because it has been insufficiently carried out at both the micro- and macro-level. In fact, contemporary artistic activities in South Korea have hardly conducted any culturally meaningful activities in any dimension, but is it not a shared burden in every field in South Korea, as everyone has to do a great deal of work to make such meager advances? For instance, for an artist to engage with a labor culture, one has to engage both physically and within the overall topography of a culture. Presently, artists and the labor culture are likely to collide with one another, and for both to give up either art or the resistance movement. However, just as the work of Henri Matisse and Gene-uk Choi<sup>14</sup> are not the exclusive property of the artists, why does it still feel odd to claim that minjung art or Lewis Hine’s photographs are not the exclusive property of workers? As long as artists can safely inhabit, or be held hostage, knowingly or unwittingly, by such a clumsy yet rigid institution, we will always find ourselves in a terrible situation of being sick and tired of merely complaining.

– Translated by Young Min Moon (Artist, critic, and associate professor of studio art at the University of Massachusetts)

---

14. Trans. Note: Gene-uk Choi, born 1956, is a South Korean painter. Most recently, he participated in the 2014 Mediacity Seoul biennial exhibition at the Seoul Museum of Art.