

A closer look at Jung Kang-ja, female trailblazer in Korean experimental art

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"Transparent Balloons and Nude" (1968), performed by Jung Kang-ja, Kang Kuk-jin and Chung Chan-seung / Courtesy of Jung Kang-ja, Arario Gallery

Jung's solo show at Arario Museum in Space presents her creative evolution beyond 1960s-70s experimental art through self-portraits

By Park Han-sol

"It takes 15 balloons, a semi-nude woman's body, loud, loud primitive beats and psychedelic lights to make some graduates of art schools claim that they have produced a work of art."

So begins the June 9, 1968, article in *The Korea Times* to describe — in a rather dismissive tone — what turned out to be the first known feminist, nude performance in Korea, "Transparent Balloons and Nude."

Staged at C'est Si Bon, a live music hall in downtown Seoul, in May 1968, the young artist trio — Jung Kang-ja (1942-2017), Kang Kuk-jin (1939-92) and Chung Chan-seung (1942-94) — invited audiences to attach balloons to Jung's semi-naked body before popping them while the deafening music of John Cage blasted in the background.

This so-called "happening" immediately sent shockwaves throughout society, with some calling it "outright deranged." Jung, who was also giving art lessons at a private academy at the time, recalled that all of her students stopped coming to class shortly after the performance.

Despite the cynical reception, by transforming the classically objectified image of a female nude into moving, participatory art, Jung here claimed the agency over her own body to challenge the established aesthetic practices and suggest alternative artistic expressions.



Jung Kang-ja was among very few – if not only – female artists who were at the forefront of the country's budding experimental art scene. Courtesy of the artist, Arario Gallery

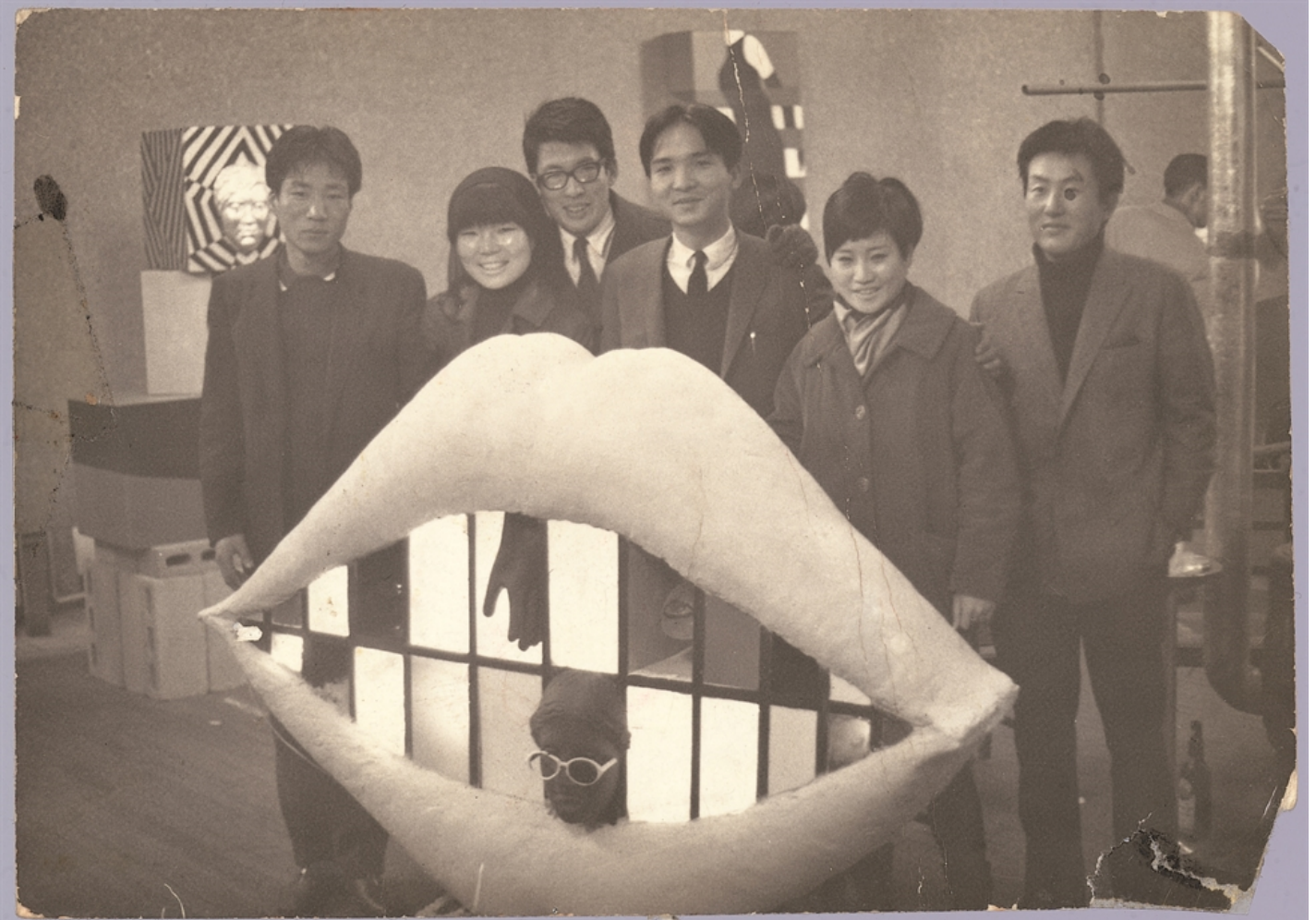
Such an act of creative subversion performed by the young avant-garde artists was what ushered in the advent of Korea's experimental art in the 1960s and 1970s. During the tumultuous period of military dictatorship, state censorship and breakneck economic growth, these spirited creatives consciously went on a hunt to find their own language of resistance via a mix of temporary happenings, installations, photography and video.

And Jung was among very few female artists — if not the only one — at the forefront of the country's budding avant-garde art scene. In fact, she is one of the trailblazers who will be highlighted at the group exhibition, "Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s-1970s," as it tours the Guggenheim in New York in September and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles early next year.

But while her provocative experimental works produced against a backdrop of political turmoil form an important chapter of 20th-century Korean art history, her artistic journey did not end there.

This is where her latest solo show, "Dear Dream, Fantasy and Challenge," at Arario Museum in Space in central Seoul comes in. The show begins with archive materials detailing the artist's notable projects from the late 1960s to early 1970s, before moving on to present her evolving creative vision grounded in her interest in women's personal and social identity — namely, through a series

of self-portraits.



Artist Jung Kang-ja, second from left, poses in front of her installation, "Kiss Me" (1967), at the Union Exhibition of Korean Young Artists in 1967. The sculpture, which was remade in 2001 under Jung's supervision after the original was lost, will be exhibited at the upcoming group show, "Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s-1970s," at the Guggenheim in New York in September. Courtesy of the artist, Arario Gallery

One can glean from the archive photographs on view Jung's projects that left an indelible mark on the country's experimental art scene.

Her installations like "Kiss Me" (1967), which portrays gigantic pink lips made from everyday household objects, and "A Woman's Fountain" (1970), where water drips from a sculpture's nipples, sought to unapologetically represent women's autonomous desires in conservative, male-centric Korean society, thereby questioning its gender and sexual norms.

With Kang and Chung, she staged another radical performance, "Murder at the Han Riverside" (1968), which took a visceral jab at the institutionalized art scene at the time. Under the present-day Yanghwa Bridge in Seoul, the trio began by carrying out a self-burial. After coming out of their holes, they wrote condemning phrases on vinyl fabrics — such as "cultural fraudster" (pseudo-artist) and "illicit money maker" (bogus great master) — before burning them.

She also participated in the production of Kim Ku-lim's "The Meaning of 1/24 Second" (1969), known as the first experimental film in the history of Korean cinema.

However, it wasn't until August 1970, when Jung marched down the streets of Seoul with her fellow

artists with a coffin and Korean flags as part of the street performance, "A Funeral for the Established Art and Culture," that things took a turn.



"Murder at the Han Riverside" (1968), performed by Jung Kang-ja, Kang Kuk-jin and Chung Chan-seung / Courtesy of Hwang Yang-ja

鄭江子
無体展



국립공보관 화랑 • 1970. 8. 20~24

A leaflet for Jung Kang-ja's first solo exhibition, "Mutche-jeon" or "Non-Corporeal Exhibition" (1970) / Courtesy of the artist, Arario Gallery

The funeral procession, choreographed by the short-lived avant-garde collective The Fourth Group, drew police attention and was forced to come to a halt midway. Park Chung-hee's Yushin regime deemed these youth-led cultural events — which borrowed the form of street protests and took place outside of the white-cube contexts — as subversive threats to systemic power, prompting the government to clamp down on experimental art.

Jung's first solo exhibition, "Mutche-jeon" or "Non-Corporeal Exhibition," which opened just five days after the incident, was forcibly shut down the next day.

"The artist felt frustrated with such reality as her creative efforts continued to be thwarted by the authorities and met with criticism," Chang Yeon-woo, senior curator at Arario Museum in Space, told

The Korea Times. "She eventually found marriage as sort of an escape."



Installation view of Jung Kang-ja's solo exhibition, "Dear Dream, Fantasy and Challenge," at Arario Museum in Space / Courtesy of Arario Museum in Space

In 1977, she moved to Singapore with her two young children to follow her husband, who started a business to export Korean films to Southeast Asia utilizing his experience as a movie director. But life in the new country wasn't as smooth as she had imagined. Her husband's business was failing, and she had to become the breadwinner as an art tutor, while raising her baby son and daughter.

But Jung never chose to put down the brush, according to Chang. She turned to "batik," a traditional technique of cloth dyeing in Southeast Asia, but put a twist of her own to the medium. Whereas conventional batik features intricate, repetitive patterns, the artist used the dyed cloth as a stage for her dynamic figurative paintings — like "The Room in Singapore" (1979), a self-portrait that visualizes her inner conflict and unstable life in a foreign country.



Jung Kang-ja's "The Room in Singapore" (1979) / Courtesy of the artist, Arario Gallery

She continued struggling to find a balance between art and livelihood — between her creative ideal and reality — after her divorce and return to Korea in 1982 with her children.

"Throughout her life, she was never in a situation that allowed her to solely focus on her art. There were always challenges — financial burden, housework and child care — and she had to find solutions all on her own," the curator said.

In her self-portraits on display, the artist explores her sense of identity as an artist, mother and homemaker — a woman who constantly labors.

"Night Blooming Flower" (1988) portrays Jung facing forward with a brush and palette in her hands under a moonlit sky. After a busy day, she was only given a few hours in the nighttime to concentrate on her own canvas work.



Jung Kang-ja's "Night Blooming Flower" (1988), left, and "Art Studio" (1977) / Courtesy of the artist, Arario Gallery

Meanwhile, the vast panorama of desert seen in "The Sahara" (2011) or the bleeding red lips standing in the middle of a surreal, Dali-esque landscape in "Title Unknown" (2001) recalls countless trips she made to the remote lands of Africa, South America and South Pacific in the late 1980s in search of her own visual language after entrusting her children to her ex-husband.

The exhibition ends with "Invited to My Funeral. 71 days since My Surgery" (2015), a prescient depiction of her own funeral that was produced two years before her actual death.

"At a time when Jung's contribution to experimental art scene is getting a global spotlight, this exhibition aims to shed light on her personal life as she led a fierce battle in life as a mother, laborer, but more importantly, as an artist who never let go of her creative spirit," Chang said.

"Dear Dream, Fantasy and Challenge" runs through Sept. 10 at Arario Museum in Space.



Jung Kang-ja's "Title Unknown" (2001) / Courtesy of the artist, Arario Gallery