Contents

Artists’ names are listed in the traditional order of family name first, except where individuals have chosen the Western order of family name last. All family names are in capitals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On the Recent Movements in Korean Contemporary Art</td>
<td>010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seung Woo BACK</td>
<td>020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAE Bien-U</td>
<td>026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHO Duck Hyun</td>
<td>032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U-Ram CHOE</td>
<td>036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHOI Jeong Hwa</td>
<td>042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHUN Kwang-young</td>
<td>048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHUNG Suejin</td>
<td>054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIMhongsok</td>
<td>060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAM Jin</td>
<td>064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyungah HAM</td>
<td>070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEON Joonho</td>
<td>074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael JOO</td>
<td>078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeondoo JUNG</td>
<td>084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atta KIM</td>
<td>090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIM Beom</td>
<td>096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I have never thought of myself as expressing Korean-ness or Asian-ness. Art is simply an expression of the individual.¹

This declaration of artistic freedom by Nam June Paik (1932–2006), the acclaimed pioneer of video art and possibly Korea’s most internationally celebrated artist to date, illuminates the apparent position of many artists within the vibrant and diverse world of Korean contemporary art.² Unlike elsewhere in Asia where it may seem pertinent, at times, to understand contemporary artistic output in clearer classifications, it is more problematic to approach the field of Korean contemporary art in contexts of major thematic positions or of collective identity. Korean artists, most notably of the younger generation, would much rather establish a practice based on their own individual interests, concepts, and philosophies. Nonetheless, their artistic productions are also the creation of an intrinsic and shared cultural tradition and national history. Despite the obvious impact of globalization on their work, there is no doubt that Korean artists are rooted within their rather distinguishable cultural and historical contexts, regardless of whether this inherited legacy is of any conscious concern to their work.

The contemporary art scene in Korea has emerged in the last twenty-five years as a rich, dynamic, and innovative cultural force. However, it is only since the mid-2000s that it has gained widespread attention within the global art system. An ever-growing number of museums, galleries, biennales and triennials, auction houses, and art fairs are now engaged in presenting contemporary Korean artists at important international art destinations in the East and West. I still recall the surprise and curiosity of artists when visiting their studios around Seoul during the late 1990s and being informed that I was among the very few from overseas who had visited them. Now, finally, the band of international art professionals trekking to artists’ studios in Korea is an established reality.

The 4,300-year-old civilization of Korea is considered one of the oldest in the world. During its history, the country has witnessed continual external threats and invasions, endemic to Korea’s strategic geographic position at the center of Far East Asia. Its modern history was no exception. The Korean twentieth century witnessed the Japanese colonial period (1910 to 1945) and the Korean War (1950 to 1953) that divided the peninsula into the two nations of North and South Korea. In the South, the thirty years from the First Republic (1961) to the Sixth Republic (1987) were marked by authoritarianism and nationwide political instability, even to the point of the introduction of martial law. Nevertheless, the ruling regimes also established radical and far-reaching economic reform programs that laid the foundations for the developments that reshaped the nation.

Contemporary Korean art developed concurrently with Korea’s democratic transition, with the 1988 Olympic Games symbolizing the profound shift in the sociopolitical landscape. Indeed, the decade subsequent to the Olympic Games attests to a nation in an extraordinary era of rapid development, one that transformed the economic, social, and cultural spheres of Korean life. A dynamic hybridism began to emerge between deep-rooted traditions and the
influx of new ideas. It was within this fertile environment that a highly energetic and experimental contemporary art scene took hold.

Until the early 1990s, traveling abroad was still restricted to a small minority of the population. It was only in 1993, when the Whitney Biennial edition traveled from New York to the National Museum of Contemporary Art, near Seoul, that the public and many artists were able for the first time to engage directly in the critical discourse of the international contemporary art community. In 1995, the country’s first international biennale, the Gwangju Biennale, was established in the southwest city of Gwangju, the site of the tragic Gwangju Incident (May 1980). This first edition, Beyond the Borders, attracted a whopping 1.6 million visitors. Also in 1995, the permanent Korean Pavilion in the Giardini was inaugurated at the Venice Biennale. Another important art event in Korea, the Busan Biennale, originally named the Pusan International Contemporary Art Festival, opened in 1998. The developments in contemporary Korean art were fueled in part by government initiatives for promoting local culture, commerce, and tourism, and in part by international collaborations that reflected Korea’s newfound status as an industrialized nation.

The growth of alternative spaces in Seoul during the late 1990s, such as Ssamzie Space, Project Space Sarubia, and Alternative Space Loop, was also critical in fostering Korean talent. These non-commercial spaces, often operated by artists, provided an alternative platform for emerging artists to propose new positions and experimental works far from the gallery and museum system. The 1990s also witnessed the proliferation of private museums such as Artsonje Center, founded by the Daewoo Group, and Rodin Gallery, founded by the Samsung Cultural Foundation. The year 2004 saw the opening of the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art designed by acclaimed architects Mario Botta, Rem Koolhaas, and Jean Nouvel.

This book is intended as an introduction to the field of Korean contemporary art and surveys the broad spectrum of artists who work in diverse media including painting, sculpture, installation, photography, performance, video, text-based works, and new media. Whether through critical recognition, their relevance within a Korean art-historical context, their contributions to the international contemporary art discourse, or through the sheer strength of content and visual form, the thirty individual artists presented have all earned their place on the pages of this book. These artists represent the most innovative and compelling current artistic output within the relatively young and still rapidly evolving endeavor that is Korean contemporary art.

As a prologue to the presentation of the artists, an essay by Shinyoung Chung will look at the paradoxical artistic landscape crystallized by Nam June Paik’s remark. In order to expand the possibilities of how Korean contemporary art might be discussed and understood, the essay will introduce art-historical perspectives, recurring themes that emerge, as well as look at specific artists and artworks, distinguishing the authority of each artist in expressing their individual voice.
Atta KIM, ON-AIR Project 029 (From the series Sex, 1 Couple, 1 Hour)
2003 • C-print • 188 x 248 cm, 96 x 118 cm
On the Recent Movements in Korean Contemporary Art

Shinyoung Chung

Distinctly monochromatic, Ham Jin’s (b. 1978) clay structures dangle on the wall or swing from the ceiling against the white space of the gallery: a slip of clay thinner than a toothpick turns into a stick figure protruding from the wall, or a man with an open stomach metamorphoses into numerous miniscule spheres and lines. Abstracted forms and simple coloration provoke open possibilities for interpretation, a dramatic development from the previous series with tiny character figures and their comical storylines as if from a scene of stop-motion animation.

The apparent influence of popular culture, such as cartoons, animation, TV games, sci-fi films, or character goods, has been a prevailing trend in recent Asian art, generally considered to be the resurgence of Pop in the loosest sense. In Korea and Japan, where the myth of the capitalist utopia reached its apogee in the beginning of the 1990s, the arrival of the Pop phenomenon in the early to mid-1990s seemed timely, considering the emergence of American Pop under the burgeoning economy of the postwar era. Under economic superfluity, the abundance of media as entertainment overwhelms the will to abstraction (thus the possibility of signification) in the plastic arts, registering instead a set of readymade realities (deceptively real, yet from a disparate sign system) as the Pop manifestation.

Formally speaking, this montage of realities is in sharp contrast to the series of sheer abstract paintings produced as the result of the modernist (Greenbergian) moments that Korean or Japanese art had experienced in the latter half of the twentieth century struggling between Western abstraction and Eastern ideology. Divorcing themselves from the specifically formal concerns of the reductive strategy, the artists of the next generation have been attempting to engage issues of social affairs expressed through non-traditional means. This essay takes on the current trend of Korean Pop as a starting point, driving somewhat chronologically backward to the abstract visions of the 1970s to investigate the intermediating tendencies.

As far as the Pop influence goes, in the Japanese scene the “Superflat” syndrome of the cartoonish paintings and blown-up vinyl figures inspired by the character figurines collected among hobby art fanatics known as “Otaku” gained wide recognition in the 1990s, categorized as Neo-Pop or Tokyo Pop; Chinese Political Pop, in turn, propagated the revolutionary spirit of the post Cultural Revolution by directly referencing the methodology and icons of 1960s American Pop. Korean Pop by comparison seems less a particular movement in the formal sense and more of a light-hearted, casual, and materialist mindset on the part of the individual artists who grew up with an everyday dose of pop culture. They are the generation of artists born in the economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s, and who have enjoyed rapid modernization, peaking with the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The globalized worldview and rapid exchange of information in the new millennium introduced them to the real-time international art scene, enabling them to opt for styles other than the conventional oil/ink paintings or sculptures taught by the academy.

Ham is only one of many whose works had been identified with the Pop trend; his previous works include the series Aewan (2004), a love story between a fly and a clay figure of the same size who date and engage in the act of love, or City on a Bombshell (2006), a miniature city complete with the details of streets, cars, parks, and its inhabitants set on the shell of an unexploded bomb found near a US military camp. The cute expressions of the typically exaggerated head, eyes, and eyelashes of the smallest humanoids, their slapstick comedy, as well as the overtly fictitious narratives derive from the open resources of popular cultures, as the artist is a big fan of comic books. Consequently, these characteristics are what viewers
lined up for with magnifying glass in hand, contributing to the early success of the young artist. The so-called booming art market in the 1990s fostered the growth of artwork born from the Pop phenomenon, albeit symptomatically only immediately entertaining rather than engaging in any critical discourse. This is partly why Ham’s recent show is an encouraging example of the foreseeable future for the Pop generation, as he breaks free from the comic affairs of the miniature world and delves into a realm of unnamable shapes and unimaginable situations without regressing to Pop travesty.

Science fiction cartoons have inspired U-Ram Choe (b. 1970), whose line of robotic new species involves sensor-activated motors and computer programs. Built on the fictive existence of inorganic life forms, the Anima Machines (as he calls them), Choe’s CPU-controlled kinetic machines with plant, fish, or insect motifs, come complete with make-believe encyclopedic naming, classification, habitat, and behavior. Often feeding on the byproducts of human civilization, such as the pollution in the air or the electromagnetic waves beneath the city ground, these phantom creatures are simultaneously the celebration of advanced technology and a warning about such artificial environments. Expanding on the fictive narratives, the Anima Machines’ contextual works, such as the invented scenario of the discovery of new species and the pseudo-documentary photographs in their natural habitat, crisscrosses the frontier between reality and fantasy.

Hyungkoo Lee (b. 1969) is also a master scientist of fictitious biology; at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, Lee transformed the Korean Pavilion into a showcase laboratory of an anatomist-turned-post-structuralist-inventor. Lee became famous for the comic-horror genre that he devised: the imagined skeletal configurations of famous cartoon characters carefully reassembled and spotlighted on stage; enormous front teeth and gigantic beaks link the otherwise bizarre bony figures to Bugs Bunny and Huey, Dewey, and Louie Duck. Bodily deconstruction is what Lee sets out to do, from the anatomically deformed creatures of Disney or Looney Tunes that are idolized by the global market, to his own physique, about which he started developing a keen consciousness while living in the United States, where he communicated with people of different races. Helmets that make the wearer’s eyes and mouth look bigger and tubular gadgets for the arm and hand to appear enlarged are products of Lee’s struggle to locate himself in the global context.

The succinct and sophisticated designs of cartoon graphics seem to have an addictive resonance, as they are frequently adopted by painters of the recent generation. Donghyun Son (b. 1980), Dong-ki Lee (b. 1967), and Kwon Ki-Soo (b. 1972) are the most famous and obvious examples; Jiha Moon (b. 1973) and Chung Suejin (b. 1969) present less immediate influences commingled into their eclectic styles. In Moon’s paintings, amongst a dizzying fanfare of bright colors and weaving brushstrokes, a few sharp-edged shapes such as ribbons or flowers take form in the typified style of animation—flat coloring inside the clear outline; in some cases the iconic brushstrokes of Lichtenstein are quoted as if in homage to the pioneer in the field. Chung’s use of canvas surfaces that fundamentally defy depth, scale, and perspective, as well as the simplified depiction of objects or humans on the verge of becoming part of a cartoonic sign system (with the occasional appearance of speech bubbles as well) also maintain a considerably close relationship to the Pop-related tendency.

Arguably, Pop as modus operandi was first implemented by Choi Jeong Hwa (b. 1961) in the early 1990s. Choi initially appeared on the Korean art scene in the late 1980s when the so-called small-group movement boomed,
as emerging artists who resisted identifying with the existing parties devised their own groups to launch a series of group exhibitions. Soon leaving his group, Museum, by the early 1990s Choi began to form his signature-style installation of readymade silicon food—vegetables, fish, or the steamed head of a pig—and artificial plastic flowers, abandoning the oil paintings and shaped canvases he had been trained to work with. Now a regular at international art events, his installations of blown-up vinyl flowers or rows of totem poles made of household baskets exemplify the aesthetics of the tacky industrial colors and exaggerated designs of low-end consumer products, introducing the visual codes specific to the local mass-production market into art venues.

Arriving on the scene a few years prior to the major outbreak of the Pop phenomenon, in the mid-1990s to early 2000s, a handful of those who had studied abroad in Europe or in the U.S. (often after undergraduate study in Seoul) U-turned to Korea, some charged with the progressive, liberating energy of the West and armed with the advanced technological skills garnered from high academies, and others distressed by mistreatment or discrimination against their racial and cultural differences; yet most chanced on an objective point of view from which to appreciate their Korean identity after a few years’ sojourn. Through the transfusion of fresh ideas directly from the international scene, the art object was redefined, the viewer was born as an integral part of the piece, and representing the conditions outside the realm of art became a necessary statement.

Returning from Düsseldorf and Paris, respectively, Gimhongsok (b. 1964) and Sora Kim (b. 1965) are typical of the returnee artists of the period, who explore art as a fundamentally communicative device. If the Pop generation prefers to experience and express reality filtered through media, measuring their creative success by tightly constructed fictitious scenarios and professional prospects, Gimhongsok and Kim use as their primary medium an active engagement with social reality, opting to minimize the materiality of their artwork. Their artworks are rarely—nor can they be—preserved as aesthetic objects, but linger invisibly as artistic experiences. As they frame reality or the parody of reality as their artwork, only the context of art, such as exhibition space, opening parties, catalogues, and viewers as a point of connection, define their activities as art.

In a recent solo show, Ordinary Strangers, held in the spring of 2011, Gimhongsok hired actors and actresses who would sit dispersed in the exhibition space and narrate stories provided by the artist to the gallery visitors, on subjects such as chairs, rocks, water, people, and concepts. Listening to an actress reciting the text, one realizes how the main body of the work is being realized less by the conveyance of the text than through the complex, uncanny feelings arising from the immediate human contact, such as an acute discomfort felt by the listener from sitting in proximity with a stranger who tries with nervous tension to narrate the memorized line, or from the strange communal sense born among the few members of the audience gathered around the narrator—the subjectification of the participants (actors/listeners) has been one of his continuing themes. Gimhongsok’s other works have dealt with more political and historical issues, such as his Gwangju Biennale presentation Ich bin ein Berliner (2006); for the piece, the artist asked a native Gwangju boy to recite the Korean translation of the famous speech delivered by John F. Kennedy on his visit to West Berlin, in the style children were trained to orate patriotic and anti-communist speeches in the 1980s. Here Gimhongsok makes a multi-layered commentary using the mismatched combination of a minor with highly propagandistic oration in form as well as content: the far-reaching impact of the Cold War on Korean
culture in which anti-communist sentiment is deeply entrenched; the condition of Gwangju as a scapegoat city that bore the sacrifices of national democratization; and the prolonged self-victimization of Gwangju and its people as a result. The process of the translation act, that is linguistic, sociocultural, and historical, and what is lost in between as the result of social interactions, is typically explored in many of Gimhongsok’s works.

Kim Sora shares a rebellious mischievousness with Gimhongsok. In her most controversial work, *Vacance de M. Lee* (2001), Kim sends a public sanitation worker and his family on a summer vacation using her project fee, turning their excursion into an art production. The photographs taken by the family at the vacation spot were shared at the exhibition as artwork; the ultimate function and boundaries of art, the ethics of an artist, and the degree of interactivity are all questioned in this astute piece.

The balancing act between the visions of reality—particularly the issues concerning the immediate conditions of life or individualized narratives that summon the mise en scène of the past—and the supporting medium that effectively encapsulates the quoted reality constitutes the backbone of the works by the next two artists. A returnee from Paris, Minouk Lim (b. 1968) often employs video or theatrical performances to convey the ramifications of her reality. *New Town Ghost* (2005) successfully addresses the keen awareness of the dramatic changes taking place in Seoul with no regard for the specifically local socio-historical or emotional context of the Yeongdeungpo district; she achieves this through neither a literal documentary nor a fictional storyline, but through the sophisticated sequence of images and soundtrack with a precise yet disinterested stance typical of the artist. Shot in the chaotic Yeongdeungpo market area, where a reconstruction plan by the government was underway despite local ambivalence, the camera follows a moving truck where a “slammer” (in contrast to the stylized technique of a rapper, a slammer takes a more immediate stance using a raw voice) rides shouting to the beat of an on-board drummer about the displaced state of a young local as a “ghost” amidst the rapid capitalist remapping of the city. Three elements make the piece extraordinary: the powerful attraction of the androgynous diva who with her husky voice commands the scene, occasionally making eye contact with viewers through her smoky eyes; the kaleidoscopic background imagery behind her, where the chaotic signboards of the old markets, new skyscrapers under construction, and the curious eyes of pedestrians observe her flash by as in a fleeting vision; and the rapid, rhythmic editing that reflects the agility and restlessness of the time. If Kimsooja’s Bottari truckload embodies the hegemony grounded in the era of the demise of the metanarrative, typically touching on the issues of nomadism, diaspora, feminism, and ethnicity, Lim’s concern extends to the deconstructive moment of post-capitalist dystopia when the problems of dislocation and dismemberment resonate through the beat and the loudspeaker.

The specificity of the local context is often the key to reading the works by Yeondoo Jung (b. 1969), who returned to Seoul in 2000 after finishing studies at London’s Goldsmiths College. *Evergreen Tower* (2001) lines up thirty-two families residing in the Evergreen apartments in Seoul posing in their living room as they wished to be photographed. Though the project was born from a voyeuristic interest in finding out the different lifestyles of local families, the astonishing similarity in their conditions, i.e., the little-varying composition of the family (mostly a couple with one to three children), the identical position of the furniture (the TV facing the couch next to the standing air conditioner), or even the limited coloration of the couches (black, white, or brown-beige) proved the work to be rather a successful
typological project, one that gives an account of a cross-section of petit-bourgeois Korean life. In Handmade Memories (2008), the memories of the older generation are told to the artist and re-fabricated in the studio; in Wonderland (2005), children’s dreams are recast in a photographic presentation; in Bewitched (2001), the desires of participants are realized through the elaborate set, costumes, and make-up. In all cases, more intriguing than the visual representation is the unfolding of certain characteristics common to the different memories or dreams of each generation; the potency of Jung’s work lies in the visual reification of the social and historical identities by assembling the stories of the unsuspecting constituents.

Overall, these artists who came of age in the 1990s with a fluent command of relevant media, a clear methodology in concretizing ideas, and a conscious reference to contexts specifically local (primarily Korean), are the first generation who, in the strictest sense, have demonstrated their competitive potential in a global context, with the exception of their legendary predecessor Nam June Paik (1932–2006), who spent little time in his native Korea, and Lee U-fan (b. 1936), who has led most of his professional life in Japan. Considering it was only in 1995, not even two decades ago, that Korea first participated in the Venice Biennale with its own pavilion and hosted the first international biennale (Gwangju) on its soil, this surprisingly rapid artistic maturation and recognition on the international scene is typically Korean.

When it comes to dealing with reality, photography is an irresistible choice to those with an attraction to cold, hard facts, especially through the sterilized visions of the Neue Sachlichkeit or the manipulated reality of digitalized means. The Düsseldorf-based German photographers who surfaced in the 1990s, figures such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, and Thomas Ruff, made a significant impact on the Korean photography scene via their introductory exhibitions held in Seoul and through the works of those who had studied abroad under the auspices of these stars...
photographers. The increasing popularity of photography as a major in art schools in the 1990s and the sudden expansion of digital photography in the 2000s furthered interest in the field; artists like Jung employ photography as an important element in their work, gradually bringing about its recognition as an independent discipline. The established generation of photographers are often identified with delicate and poetic black-and-white photographs, the most apparent example being the dark, misty forests of pine trees by Bae Bien-U (b. 1950), whereas the younger generation—Yoon Jean Lee (b. 1972), Kim Sanggil (b. 1974), KDK (b. 1973), and Seung Woo Back (b. 1973)—use slightly subdued, sophisticated color schemes in their work, typically calm, sterilized, and non-subjective, in strong reference to the German examples.

Seung Woo Back’s solo show in the summer of 2011 displayed a wide variety of different photographic approaches in a single venue: in Seven Days (2010–11), a series of digitally altered urban landscapes set in Japan, each piece is haphazardly given a title from the seven days of the week and the time (morning, afternoon, or night); Utopia #032 (2011) is a blown-up found image of a building complex from North Korea cut into thirteen pieces, each strip having a slightly different color spectrum as they were printed in thirteen different countries and reassembled; Archive Project (2011) and Memento (2011) are about the rearrangement of archival images in order to construct new identities. The ambitious exhibition attempted to summarize the popular debates surrounding photographic projects, such as the Saussurean sign and Lacanian slippage of the signed, the archive as a collective memory, and the false vision of reality through artificial means. Back’s multifaceted interests reflect the expanding significance of the photography beyond the visual phenomenon.

Employing a mock typological framework, Hein-kuhn Oh (b. 1963) took bust shots of middle-aged women in the black-and-white series titled Ajumma (1997–98), a common yet derogatory appellation for women over a certain age. In dramatically dark tones, their tired look, awkward posture, outmoded fashion, and daring attitude come to light, aligning them somewhere in between the “freak” collection of Diane Arbus and the categorical examples of different people by August Sanders. Oh’s provocative vision continues in his series Girl’s Act (2002–3), in which high school girls in acting schools are cast to pose in their uniforms; as in Ajumma, Oh’s penetrating vision is sometimes disturbing, yet the rich middle tone of the photographic surface disguises well the not-so-innocent intentions of Oh, as well as that of the teenage actresses.

In retrospect, one can easily have anticipated the diversity of the current art scene from the activities of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as those who finished school in the 1970s debuted with rebellious gestures toward the then prevailing abstraction known as Monochrome. In a surprisingly progressive spirit, outdoor performances were held, live hens or goldfish were employed in installations, and the slide carousel replaced the exhibition; the now well-established Kang So Lee (b. 1943) and Shin Moon Seup (b. 1942), painter and sculptor, respectively, were frequent provocateurs, with Moon Beom (b. 1955) being the one to lead the following generation of artist groups such as Seoul 80 and Logos & Pathos, now typically categorized within the small-group movement of the 1980s. The revolutionary Seoul 80 group launched a series of thematic exhibitions in the early 1980s, experimenting in the newly celebrated genre of installation or working with the imported concept of minimalist “objecthood.” Although Moon has seen it as based on the independent capacities of cutting-edge artists who naturally assembled in group activity as a mediating frame, the movement is undoubtedly telling of a shared notion of an avant-garde attitude.
Moon has persistently questioned the boundaries of the modern painting: through his color-field canvases with metallic objects affixed to represent the intrusion of reality into the painterly vision (early to mid-1990s); canvas covered in car paint approaching the status of an object (mid-1990s to early 2000s); and the exploitation of the process of image formation where the gesture is transferred to produce meaning-structure (mid-1990s to the present). His role in the progression of the 1980s scene, as well as his own independent pursuits, make him one of the pivotal anchor points of Korean contemporary art.

Arguably, the non-conformist spirit of the small-group movement came about as a result of the overpowering existence of the Monochrome phenomenon. Korean Monochrome was an effort to reconcile the influence of Western modernism and the Orientalist way of thinking that “implies limiting of the ego in the intellectual sense and a curbing of involvement in the act of painting,” as stated by the critic Lee Yil in the catalogue essay for the 1992 exhibition Working with Nature: Contemporary Art from Korea. One of the participating artists in this groundbreaking exhibition held at the Tate Liverpool, Park Seo-Bo (b. 1931) led the Monochrome movement and his tutelage fostered numerous followers of monotonous canvases constructed with repetitive gestures and patterns. If the monochrome of the West often symbolizes the “lack” of—Achrome—or a particular—IKB (International Klein Blue)—color, the Korean Monochrome denotes less a chromatic association and more an ascetic and meditative attitude that trains the mind while painting; only the range of whites were considered to be of symbolic value, representing the spiritual identity of the Korean people. Coinciding with this in the 1980s was the Minjung movement, strongly political realist art that instigated and visualized activism against the military government. Altogether, small-group, Monochrome, and Minjung camps coexisted as competing tendencies until the mid-1990s, when each movement was apparently disassembled into independent activities of the members. The different camps left for the coming generation a strong tradition of modernist abstraction and a history of incessant challenges to the institutionalizing framework of modern tendencies as well as an example of socialist realism in an anti-modernist context. With the three camps being disintegrated, the general sense of freedom and strategic globalization characteristic of the civilian government starting in 1993 were copied in the artistic realm, as the new generation who are currently active came to the fore.

As this was written, one could see the work of at least a dozen of the artists represented in this book on view in Seoul, three in solo exhibits. This prosperity is telling of the productive force of the scene. It is difficult to resist making an analogy between the profuse creation and presentation of artworks and the countless consumer products Korea has been exporting to global consumers. The name of the cellular phone company or the automobile manufacturer may be more familiar to some than that of the country they originate from, but this is what the country with a rather small and split territory had been aspiring to, once it regained its sovereignty in 1945. In much the same way, the artists strive to establish themselves through their artwork on the world stage; some are beginning to be recognized by their works, more are in the process. The reason that the flourishing, ambitious art scene of Korea is more reassuring than the large market share of cellular phones is that it is a healthy indication of progress, whether it leaves behind mere debris of history or chances on a memorable accomplishment.

Do Ho SUH, Bridging Home
2010 • Steel structural frame with sub-timber frame, Filcor 45 FRA EPS bonded to 19-mm marine plywood, painted finish • Dimensions house (1:1 scale) suspended between buildings that are 4:23 meters apart, lowest point: 3.52 meters above ground, highest point: 10.326 meters above ground

Installation view at the Liverpool Biennial, 2010
Jiha MOON, American Halfie
2010 • Ink, acrylic on hanji paper • 55.9 x 71.1 cm
The photographic practice of Seung Woo Back focuses on investigating the ambiguous interrelationship between the real and the unreal in the visible world. Engaging in a strategy of interventions and acts, Back draws our attention to the potential of images to blur the viewer’s ability to distinguish between the two.

The series *Blow Up* (2005–7) derives from photographs taken by Back during a visit to the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, in 2001. All tourists are required to be accompanied by government “guides” who dictate at which locations and times photographs may be taken. These allocated sites display apparently random scenes of people and situations that are often in reality pre-staged scenarios scripted by the propaganda authorities. Years after Back’s trip and while viewing a colleague’s recent Pyongyang documentary photos, Back recognized a familiar scene of a girl holding a flower albeit with the girl now a few years older. Back has noted: “I felt very strange ... I vaguely had this vision of a *Truman Show* movie set, only it was actually happening. This existed in reality.” Back revisited his Pyongyang photo archives and began enlarging small sections of the photographs to reveal hidden snippets of the reality of North Korea embedded within the censored images.

His series *Utopia* (2008) is based on found black-and-white North Korean photographs of largely industrial and government buildings, and once again the artist has intervened in the imbued “truth” presented by the official images. Back digitally constructed fictitious buildings by combining images, exaggerating or removing sections of buildings, or adding color reminiscent of vintage North Korean propaganda posters. His manipulated architectural works create a fantastical yet bleak world as he challenges the significance of the original images and constructs his own altered interpretation of the utopian world view.
Archive Project-#009
2011 • Digital print • 150 x 194 cm
\Blow Up-001
2005 • Digital print • 111 x 178 cm

† Blow Up-009
2006 • Digital print • 80 x 102 cm

\Blow Up-005
2005 • Digital print • 110 x 100 cm

→ Blow Up-007
2005 • Digital print • 137 x 180 cm

→ Blow Up-011
2006 • Digital print • 182 x 160 cm
Stark im Kommen: Kunst made in Korea