

KIM YONG-IK: INTENTIONAL INEXISTENCE

PHILIPPE VERGNE

Let's start with an honest statement. Just under two years ago, I did not know of the work of Kim Yong-Ik. But as I visited his survey exhibition *Closer... Come Closer...* at the Ilmin Museum of Art in Seoul in the autumn of 2016, it became clear to me that I had missed a meaningful link in the development of Korean contemporary art history.

As I entered the exhibition, I was stopped in my tracks by the *Plane Objects* series that Kim Yong-Ik initiated in the mid-1970s. Made of plain muslin cloth, the *Plane Objects* hang freely, unstretched, from the wall, occasionally in the corners of the room or reaching or expanding onto the floor. Some are simple squares, others are composed of a succession of overlapping squares of different sizes, and others cascade off the wall from a single hanging point. The fabric is left untouched except for strategically placed marks sprayed with an airbrush to create a dark patina tracing previous folds or enhancing the tension points produced by their simple, nail-in-the-wall hanging devices.

At first they appear to be pure readymade objects, pure matter. And that would already make them a radical departure in painting or in a deconstruction of painting as an object, a convention, and a tradition.

But the airbrush mark-making adds a dimension to an understanding of these works: there is a trompe

l'oeil quality to them that seems to defy any kind of representation or pictorial intervention.

To complexify things further, the exhibition and its accompanying publication presented what the author Sohl Lee, in an extremely well-documented essay, named Kim's "career suicide". In 1981, as his contribution to the First Young Artists Exhibition organised at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul, Kim exhibited some of his *Plane Objects* wrapped and packed in cardboard boxes. Each box bore a label with the text "Dedicated to the Young Artists' Exhibition" accompanied by the conventional information provided by a wall label (title, date, materials, dimensions) and a black-and-white photograph of the actual *Plane Objects* hanging on a wall.

With this decision to conceal the works that had been the hallmark of his early visibility, the field of his work broadened. The opposite of a "suicide", this disavowal of painting constituted a powerful and foundational iconoclastic gesture, one that radically broke with Kim's own aesthetic context and upbringing. It would, in a similar manner to Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Minus Objects* (1965–66), constitute a base, the establishment of both a methodology and a vocabulary for the development of his oeuvre.



Man Ray, *L'Énigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, 1920
Photography published in *La Révolution surréaliste*, December 1924

John Baldessari, *Cremation Project, Corpus Wafers*
(*With Text, Recipe and Documentation*), 1970, detail

It revealed a rigorous and analytical relationship with painting as an aesthetically and politically charged form and a radical and critical understanding of the conditions that define, dominate, and institutionalise the presentation of a work of art.

This fundamental gesture in many ways begins with the idea that what we call the avant-garde, dating back to the early twentieth century, has almost always been inaugurated by iconoclasm. One has to “erase” the accepted canons in order to push forward. Be it Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) or *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), Man Ray’s *L’Enigme d’Isidore Ducasse* (1920), Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953), or John Baldessari’s *Cremation Project* (1970), the notions of creative destruction and of an invisible, forbidden, impossible image or work have been recurrent in the development of avant-garde art for one hundred years. But in all these cases, and with Kim Yong-Ik’s 1981 presentation at the First Young Artists’ Exhibition, we are facing what Graham Harman, inspired by the nineteenth-century German philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano, calls an “intentional inexistence”.¹ If, Harman says, the iconoclastic avant-gardes suggest the disappearance of an existence, it does not mean a nonexistence, but rather the existence of something within something else: namely, “every mental act [...] is directed toward some object immanent in the mind.”² That statement could equally be applied to a set of aesthetic values. And for Kim, that would be painting, its conditions, and the legacy of his predecessors and mentors.

But I must add a caveat here, as all of these examples are taken from the book of Western art history and avant-gardes, whereas Kim’s circumstances and context were Korea’s art world and history at a very key moment in his country’s relationship with the rest of the world.

His most iconoclastic gesture, therefore, might have been to think of his art in a fully international context rather than one informed by national/nationalistic and cultural specificity.

In the 1970s artists in Korea were debating the terms of their own approach to modernity. One trend was highly influenced by international modernism and abstraction, and in the same breath, it was attempting to establish or reinforce a national identity through aesthetic language. The Dansaekhwa movement, represented among others by artists Ha Chong-Hyun, Yun Hwang-Keun, and Park Seo-Bo, espoused an aesthetic of “painting degree zero”, which was essentially based on monochromatic explorations of painting by pushing the medium itself, pushing the gesture of painting to its limits. Labelled at

some point the École de Seoul by Park Seo-Bo as a nod to the École de Paris – the city where the Dansaekhwa artists achieved great visibility through the Paris Biennale – these paintings belong on the pages of art history with those of Mark Rothko, Cy Twombly, Agnes Martin, or Yves Klein. On the group’s periphery was Lee Ufan, Korean born, but living and working in Japan. He was a bridge between the modernist aesthetic associated with the Japanese Mono-Ha group and the Korean Dansaekhwa, triggering at a transitional phase in the diplomatic and political relations of Japan and Korea strong nationalistic feelings and impulses on both sides of the cultural divide.

Another trend emerged in the late 1970s/early 1980s as a reaction to the dictatorial regime of Chun Doo-Hwan and the Kwangju massacre of May 1980. The artists involved – Kim Pung-Jun, Kim Jeong-Heon, and Im Ok-Sang – were using more traditional means, such as painting and woodblock prints, with a figuration inspired at times by the Mexican muralists, to call for a sociopolitical awakening and a democratisation of art and culture. Kim lies outside both of these trends. As far as I can tell, he introduced into the Korean scene the logic of conceptual art practices, as we know them in the West, and escaped the identity-driven debates of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Again, the *Plane Object* series presents the true principle of Kim’s aesthetic and work. With equal importance, however, they resonate with (without being influenced by) the wave of international conceptualism, in all its forms, that spread throughout the 1970s. Taking a look at the exhibition publication *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* provides a rather comprehensive overview of the development of conceptual practices worldwide.³ Yet Kim was absent from the exhibition and was mentioned only in a reference in the publication. Intentional inexistence? This is undoubtedly a testimony to the nature of his commitment, to his sceptical methodology, free of self-promotional strategy and informed by a certain humility; or to his role as a committed teacher and organiser. Among others, Kim Yong-Ik was involved in 1999 in the establishment of Alternative Space Pool (now Art Space Pool), a leading non-profit organisation based in Seoul and fostering contemporary art productions and interdisciplinary ideas and debates. Even though he has remained an active practitioner, these involvements seem to signal a need to go beyond the studio or the gallery, to have real impact by extending the consequences of his aesthetic research, through teaching or finding alternative ways to implement visual culture and literacy.

So why are the *Plane Objects* and his 1981 “career suicide” so fundamental to understanding Kim’s development?

Firstly, for an artist who came into his own through the generation of artists connected with the Dansaekhwa movement, his use of the canvas in a quasi-monochromatic way seems to be consistent with his predecessors and their exploration of the pictorial space through paint, surface, and texture.

But somehow Kim goes further and his reference to “plane objects” might just be a tongue-in-cheek affectation. The *Plane Objects* are far from being flat planes. They do not adhere to the conventional quality of painting that the Nabi artist Maurice Denis famously identified in 1890: “It is well to remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.”

Kim liberated the canvas and the flatness of the pictorial surface by allowing the fabric to hang freely, to drip from the wall, reaching into the third dimension of sculpture and connecting with the rest of the exhibition space, including the floor and corners.

The works hang like towels, the vulnerable, humble, bare skin of what is left of painting. By this simple gesture, Kim connects with explorations that were happening simultaneously all over the world – explorations that critically deconstructed and stretched (no pun intended) the possibility of painting as a medium and as the fetishised support for art and representation.

Of course, we might think of Robert Morris’ felt pieces from the 1970s, which seem to share with the *Plane Objects* their presentation strategy of dropping from the wall and their “anti-form” aesthetic.

But many other aspects of the works separate them. First, Kim does not come from a minimalist and experimental dance and choreography background, which makes his interpretation and perception of phenomenological space very different from those encapsulated in Morris’ sculptures.

Furthermore, Morris’ felt sculptures highlight their industrial qualities, through the sole physical presence of the material, the felt, which intrinsically bears an industrial narrative.

At the same time, Morris’ felt works are not immune from the decorative qualities evoked by the subtle symmetry of the cut felt, which leans toward an anthropomorphic suggestion. Finally, Morris’ felt works have a monumental quality. Most of them. They occupy the space with an authority of scale that makes them dominate the viewer. They exist in a room, in a space with an aesthetic and

physical gravitas that purposefully affects the way one moves and perceives and the way surrounding objects interact with one another.

Kim’s *Plane Objects*, by contrast, are very humble; even the largest ones. There is no production value added to them, the pieces of cloth have no intrinsic qualities – they simply are. Instead of an industrial quality, they have a very mundane, quotidian one. They can be traced back to a world of intimacy and domesticity and their vulnerability signifies a form of alterity.

Though *planes*, they are certainly not plain. As mentioned earlier, the artist used an airbrush to leave abstract black traces on the folds of the fabric. Because these marks follow the creases of the material and seem to simulate natural dust accumulation, they have an almost hyper-realistic appearance, though it is only a trick of the eyes, or the illusion of an illusion. These marks have nothing in common, for instance, with the hyperrealistic water-drop paintings of the Korean artist Kim Tschang-Yeul, who was close to Dansaekhwa at least chronologically. His water droplets are saturated with a display of pure technical prowess and do not provide any critical understanding and approach to the medium. They remain traditional, if not conservative, representational works.

There is also a superficial similarity between Kim’s *Plane Objects* and Sam Gilliam’s drape paintings. What they have in common is the liberated canvas that enters the third dimension, wrapping around the room. They might also share certain motivations behind the liberation of the canvas. As an African-American artist working during the height of the civil rights movement, Gilliam challenged and freed a medium that was identified with white and dominating institutions – both the institution of painting itself and that of the museum, which hosts the narratives passed down through the traditional canvases. This signified not only an aesthetic departure but also a political statement. Furthermore, by overlaying the shaped and stretcherless canvas with the visual language of abstract expressionism and Color Field painting – both schools mostly, but not exclusively, identified with white, male artists – Gilliam articulated a soft and quiet subversion of the status quo.

Kim and Gilliam share this quiet approach with respect to cultural or historical conventions. For the Korean artist, the focus is that of the abstract modernist tradition and the political conditions he was living under during the mid-1970s and early 1980s; dictatorial conditions that silenced the voices of many. For Kim, adhering to the conventions would have amounted to complicity with the regime.



Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1967 (remade in 2011), Lynda Benglis, *Night Sherbet*, 1969, and Kim Yong-Ik, *Plane Objet*, 1977
 Installation view of *Selections from the Permanent Collection* at MOCA Grand Avenue, 2016

Sam Gilliam, *Carousel Merge*, 1971
 Acrylic on canvas, 305 x 2286 cm, overall installed



Claude Viallat, 1971-009, 1971
Dye on fabric, 203 x 213 cm

Noël Dolla, *Structure Étendoir II*, 1967
Wood, fabric, rope, and clothespins, 50 x 50 cm

But unlike Gilliam, Kim demonstrates systematic restraint in his pictorial production, thus warding off the subjectively loaded dimension of abstract expressionism. His gesture confines itself to the smallest common denominator of painting – making a simple, objective, and impersonal mark on the medium. This airbrushed mark thus assumes the status of a critical tool.

Therefore, whether knowingly or not, Kim was absolutely a part of an international zeitgeist that defied and deconstructed the idea of painting by using the means of painting itself.

Closer to home, Lee Ufan was conducting a comparable pictorial investigation (though approaching a style more than an investigation) with his *From Point* and *From Line* series. These involved applying brushstrokes serially, either vertically or horizontally, across a monochrome canvas without any affectation and stressing the materiality and space of painting as well as charting the flow of time. Lee and Kim were both interested in a critical approach to painting that, echoing Roland Barthes's notion of the "death of the author", discarded psychology, self-expression, the "hand" and the ego of the painter/author.

From their perspective, painting's main attribute, the "tableau", must be reduced to its absolute basic components: the surface (canvas) and mark making.

In this way, Kim's embrace of an analytical and critical abstraction was very much parallel to the investigations of artists' groups such as Supports/Surfaces and BMPT (Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni) that surfaced in the French political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For Supports/Surfaces artists such as Claude Viallat and Noël Dolla, among others, and their main theorist, Marcelin Pleynet,⁴ the argument was not the everlasting one of the death of painting, which dominated many aesthetic debates at the time. Their poststructuralist purpose was to consider painting as an "object of knowledge". To that end, Viallat has developed a critique of lyrical and geometrical abstraction by applying an ovoid shape systematically and often in a gridded pattern on a very diverse range of free-hanging, unconventional surfaces and focusing on colour as one of his main concerns.

Since 1967 Dolla has investigated painting in all its facets, from its materiality to the conditions of its visibility and presentation, as well as all the art-historical certitudes and dogmas that support the history of the medium.

Within Supports/Surfaces, and because of his own proximity to the Fluxus movement and its interest in subversion and the everyday, Dolla brought the social into the pictorial.

The porosity of his visual language makes Dolla's work, like Kim's, truly singular. He uses cloths, bed sheets, mops, and drying racks, associated with a very deliberate and restrained use of signs (dots, holes, crosses, etc.), through which he attempts to exhaust all possibilities within the medium. Both artists evoke the richness of their zeitgeist while remaining difficult to pin down within any specific movement.

What brings them together is their urge to question and deconstruct the notion of art.

Kim would push further by interrupting the pictorial investigation before it could become a trademark, an identifiable sign, and eventually a style.

His investigation fit within an experimental zeitgeist that took on various forms – from Fluxus' iconoclastic disruptions of all canons by inserting, at times with humorous violence, everyday life into art, to the more strategically conceptual approach of the short-lived group BMPT (December 1966–December 1967). The works of BMPT refused to communicate any kind of message or emotion. Like Kim's *Plane Objects*, they were systematic, with each artist working within an extremely restricted visual language.

All four artists painted on square supports of roughly the same size, about 2.5 by 2.5 metres. Daniel Buren's works were made of readymade vertically striped fabric, on which only the outer edges of the raw fabric were covered in vertical bands of white paint.

Olivier Mosset's monochrome white canvases had a small black circle painted in their centre.

Michel Parmentier spray-painted horizontal gray stripes on his canvases. And Niele Toroni applied a uniform brushstroke at 30-centimetre intervals using a no. 50 brush. BMPT as a group operated through events or *Manifestations*. Two of the most memorable were *Manifestation 1* and *Manifestation 2*.

Manifestation 1 was the group's agreement to take part in the 18th Salon de la Jeune Peinture at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and to have their works installed on 3 January 1967.

Manifestation 2 took place later the same day when the members of the group de-installed their own works and very publicly left the exhibition.

Reduced to almost nothing, BMPT works freed themselves of the values of perfection, communication, skill, illusion, emotion, and narrative. The works were absolutely interchangeable and had only one quality: to be – to exist as a critical tool of knowledge.

BMPT strategy was often to frustrate or relocate the experience of art and painting – to create a disjunction triggering reflection on the institutional, commercial, and political status of the artwork and its social rituals and protocols.

When Kim Yong-Ik, a few years later, elected to present his *Plane Objects* concealed in cardboard boxes, he generated a similar frustration, inviting viewers to question the nature of what they were experiencing, and eventually, through this relative disappearance, the meaning of a muted work of art. He wanted them to question why, under an authoritarian regime, a work of art, a voice, stays silent.

The change of status that occurs when the *Plane Objects* shift from being visible artworks to being invisible packed objects that are documented and photographed anticipates the legacy of works of art when they are processed, digested, and institutionalised through art history and the museum. They are archived, documented, stored, and removed from view. Once they were art, and now they become culture. Art is what artists do; culture is what is done to them and their work. Culture is what gags art. The dictatorship of bureaucracy silences art. Power gags the voices of dissent and disruption.

I am not sure, as I have not asked the artist, if what might be perceived from a Western art-historical point of view as pure “institutional critique” was actually an attempt to use the strategy of institutional critique to address the larger political situation in his country at the time. Nevertheless, integrating crates, wrapping material, and cardboard boxes with the works themselves and operating within a very defined visual code and language are now an integral part of Kim’s repertoire.

Not unlike his airbrush marks or the recurring visual signs of Viallat and BMPT, Kim’s later paintings make use of their own system of signs: a circle that he conjugates in as many scenarios as possible.

At this point it is also important to stress that Kim never fully concealed his works. The *Plane Objects*, even when packed in cardboard boxes, remained visible thanks to their photographs attached to the packaging. As the work developed he continued to pursue this same logic, resulting in a series of abstract paintings. *Closer... Come Closer...* (1996–2013) is a stretched canvas with squares and rectangles located symmetrically at the periphery of the canvas and along its median; it was displayed hanging from the ceiling at the Ilmin Museum of Art in 2016 wrapped in a transparent plastic sheet inscribed with notes and handling instructions. Similarly, *Deeply... More Deeply...* (1996, 2013) is presented against a wall, and the canvas, painted with a grid of black and gray circles, sticks halfway out of cardboard packaging with handwritten notes by the artist.

The dates, 1996 and 2013, refer respectively to the year the painting was executed and the year of the packing. In

this way, the work itself shows its evolution and tells its story. The abstract language Kim uses for this painting is part of a system and reappears in different iterations.

Both works carry a recurring motif. The geometrical abstraction of *Closer... Come Closer...*, for instance, was used for an installation in 1997 at the Gallery Euro in Seoul. There, the geometric shapes were applied on paper sheets directly pasted onto the wall, making the difference in the repetitive patterns visible and giving the entire room a visual rhythm.

The circles of *Deeply... More Deeply...* are the common denominator of many of Kim’s works, from paintings and prints to graphics and pamphlets. They take many shapes and colours, at times carved out as holes in freestanding sculptures; they expand from the canvases to the walls following geometrical patterns that unite the space of the painting with the physical gallery space.

Rectangles and circles are therefore the true continuation of the airbrush marks of the *Plane Objects*. They have a “nominative” quality that underlines the critical and conceptual backbone of Kim’s work and his attempt to use painting as an object of knowledge that reveals the conditions of the work. His critical abstraction is a nonretinal work that on the one hand acknowledges a general context of international avant-garde art and on the other hand resonates with attitudes rooted in Taoism and Korean culture as a whole.

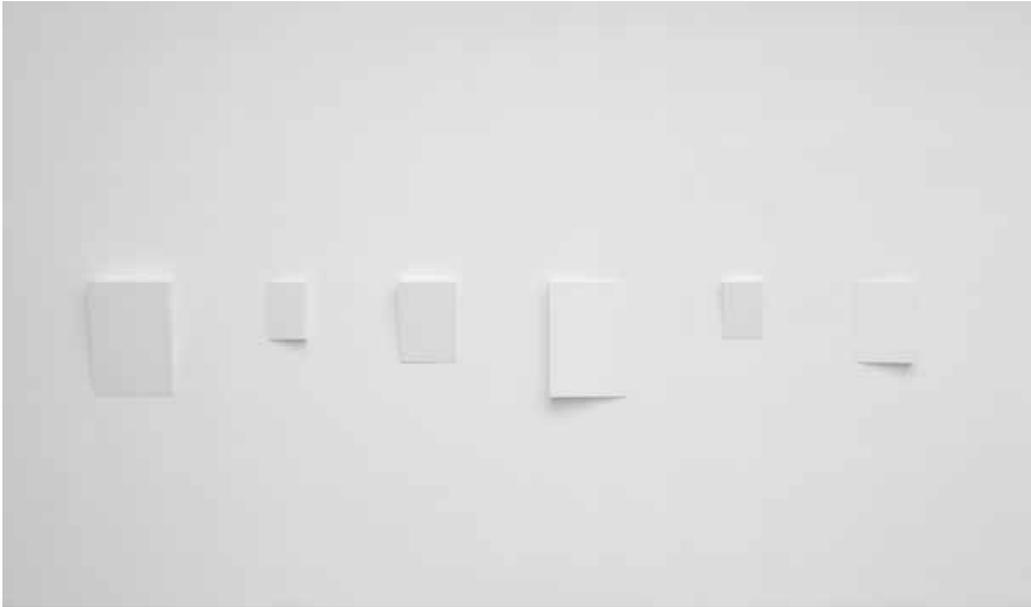
The artist says he first began working with the circle motif by chance, as he was cutting holes in the surface of his drawings; he also found the circle to be a practical means for “erasing” or “concealing” the underlying surface. In many Eastern traditions, though, the circle represents enlightenment. It is the symbol of teaching, continuity, balance, and wholeness. The circle, as well as its variations, is the most fundamentally simple shape and yet the most complex.

This complexity, both culturally specific and universal, makes Kim’s works so potent and relevant.

In the same way that he might not have been directly receptive of specific international trends, his own philosophical openness has made it possible for him to capture the questions and issues that the art of his time has articulated, both in and beyond Korea, from the 1970s and continuing in the present day.

His ability to create art as a revolt against art opened many doors and has certainly inspired many.

Kim has liberated painting, by electing to defy it through and within its own means, without however launching an attack on painting. His contribution is about generosity and all that can continue to be gained from a body of



Haegue Yang
DIN A4 / DIN A3 / DIN A2 Whatever Beings, 2006–2007.
MDF, filler, paint 6 parts, 29.7 × 21 × 5.4 cm; 29.7 × 21 × 3.6 cm;
42 × 29.7 × 7.4 cm; 42 × 29.7 × 5.2 cm; 59.4 × 42 × 10.4 cm; 59.4 × 42 × 7.3 cm

Haegue Yang, *Storage Piece*, 2004
Wrapped and stacked artworks, Euro pallets, variable dimensions

work. It has to create controversy. Kim and the many artists of his generation who have shared his artistic concerns and research, techniques, skills, and system of representations have expanded the possibilities of the field. A circle is rarely fully closed and completed. It has some leeway.

I will not attempt to list all of the artists who might recognise themselves in the works and presentation strategies that Kim put in place. It would surely be endless and arbitrary.

Still, when looking at Kimsooja's stacked bundles sculpture (*Deductive Object*, 1993), the discreet memory of *Plane Objects* and their implications is alive.

In 2004 when Haegue Yang created *Storage Piece* by packing on palettes works that she did not have the means to store, did she have Kim's 1981 career suicide in mind? It is difficult to say and the answer might not be of interest anyway, as it would close the work rather than open it. Her *Whatever Beings* (2006/2007–2011) are white monochromatic fibreboards that protrude slightly from the wall and reach out into the surrounding space; in revealing or concealing "whatever", they expose the exhibition space itself, the conditions in which an artwork exists, which are often, for the artist, as important as the work itself.

This tension between what is to be seen and what cannot be seen is the core of Kim Yong-Ik's work. What he has given us is the ambition, methodology, and rigour of an intentional inexistence, towards the existence of something within something else. It might be art, it might be knowledge; it might be a circle, it might not be. But to have a sense of it, we have to *come closer* and delve deeper, *deeply, more deeply*.

- 1 Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (New Alresford: Zero Books, 2011), 115.
- 2 Harman, 115.
- 3 *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1990). The exhibition was organised by the Queens Museum of Art and travelled to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the Miami Art Museum.
- 4 Marcelin Pleyne, *L'Enseignement de la peinture: essais* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971).