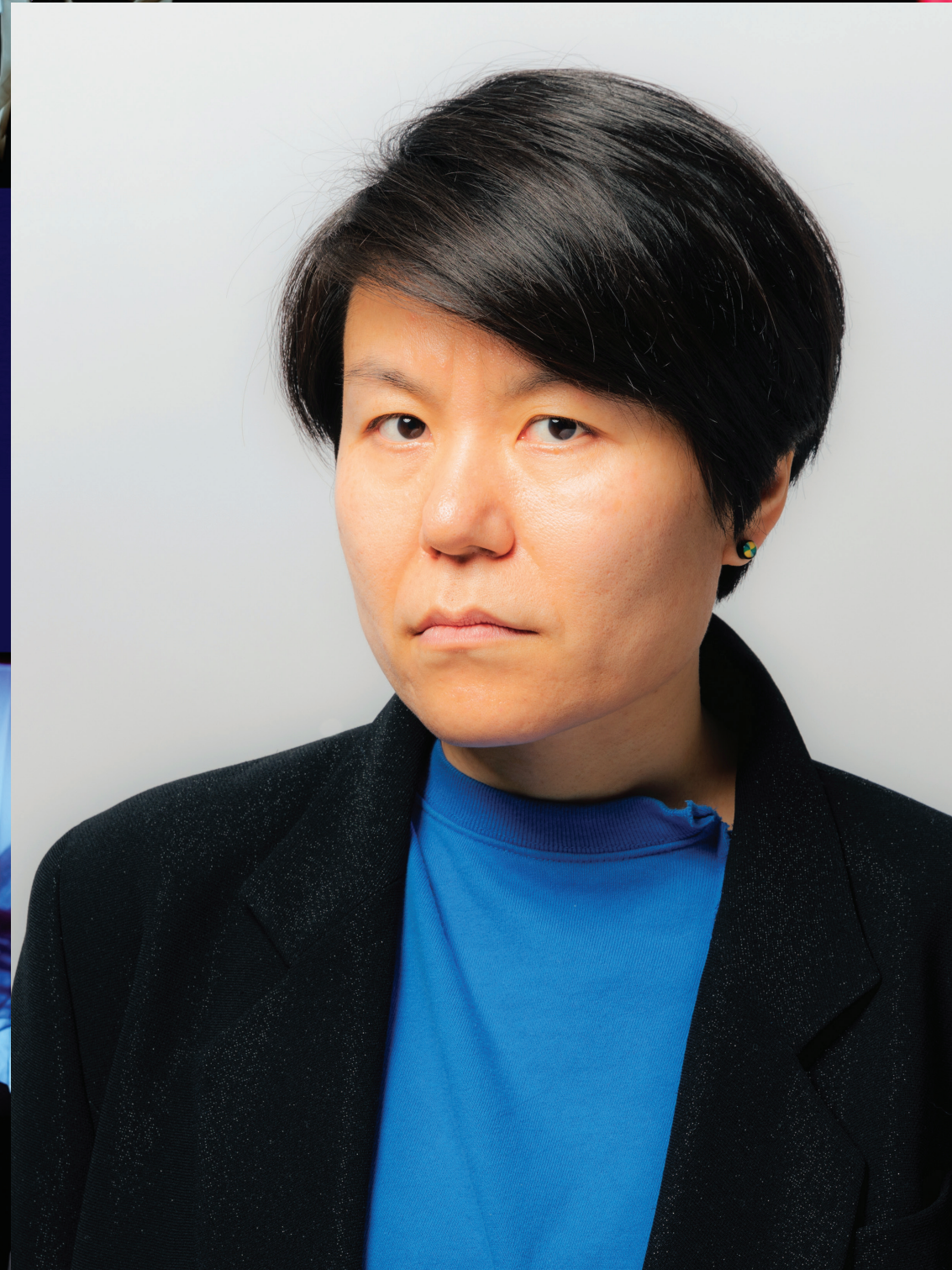


SIREN EUN YOUNG JUNG



Portrait of siren eun young jung. Photo by Sustain Works. Courtesy Korea Pavilion, Venice Biennale.

SIREN EUN YOUNG JUNG, *Deferral Theatre*, 2018, still from single-channel video: 35 min 5 sec. Courtesy the artist.

Con/With Tempo

BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

In 2007, siren eun young jung began to photograph the doors that obscure the impossibly narrow passageways between nightclub buildings in the small city of Dongducheon, South Korea. Pictured with partial views of their garish neighbors' facades, these flimsy wood or metal gates represent a threshold between the city, overrun with US military complexes, and the cheaply rented homes of so-called unregistered club sisters: sex workers who are ineligible to receive government benefits or legal status, despite the essential nature of their labor for the industry.

When jung showed this series, "Narrow Sorrow" (2007–09), at New York's New Museum in 2008, she pasted the images of the thresholds on the walls, in some instances projecting an image onto crevices of the gallery space as if to evoke the boundaries between interior and exterior, Dongducheon and New York, and us and them. The empty streets and spaces represent, in her words, how "public memory is constructed from a selective narrative of memory, erasing narrow spaces . . . and deleting women's bodies that fill these spaces."

This pair of themes has extended to the works that jung has made over the decade since, and speak to her innate rejection of the long-held patriarchal and social constructions that are paramount in South Korean society. In her installations, films and performances, she unpacks the behavioral conditioning and historical traditions still operative today, in particular, harmful ideas around hetero-normative sexuality.

Jung works methodically, or some might say, slowly. Her body of work comprises only three projects thus far—perhaps the result of her ongoing, personal examination of her role as an artist. "Narrow Sorrow" had marked a critical shift in jung's artistic practice in probing personal memory and feminist theories, a result of her degrees at Seoul's Ewha Womans University and the University of Leeds, where she studied under visual theorist Griselda Pollock. In recording the living conditions of unregistered sisters, she began to consider the plural, sometimes problematic, roles of an artist like herself—as feminist, artist, ethnographer, activist, theorist, even temporary citizen—in the context of other people, who also, in disparate ways, perform for society. "I was struggling morally with the idea of artists intervening in communities and sites," she mentioned, citing Hal Foster's words in his 1995 essay "The Artist as Ethnographer?" in which he warns of "the danger . . . of 'ideological patronage'" and of the assumption that "the

site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation, and, more, that this site is always located elsewhere, in the field of the other." She had even considered quitting being an artist altogether, troubled by the implications of representation as a political act—yet a chance meeting with "outsized stars of a [bygone] era, who now had the appearance of ordinary grannies" led her another way.

The struggle to be authentic to oneself—whatever that may be—is a potent metaphor in jung's ongoing series about the short-lived, mid-20th century genre of all-female theater *yeoseong gukgeuk*. Born out of the lack of opportunities for female actors in mainstream productions, the genre was ironically later condemned by male-led theater organizations for being overly exclusive. Moreover, most of the performers were former *gisaeng* ("female entertainers"), which was generally frowned upon by more traditional theater critics. The genre did not survive such patriarchal critiques, and was largely left behind during the rapid modernization of Korean culture. Yet at the height of its popularity in the 1950s, its actors enjoyed intense public attention. In several works from the "Yeoseong Gukgeuk Project" (2008–), jung captures this apex by pairing archival images with accompanying stories collected through one-on-one interviews, such as in *The Wedding* (2011), a staged photograph of a ceremony in which a fan had requested to "marry" her favorite *yeoseong gukgeuk* performer. "I hope the viewers recognize that there are histories of individuals that appear to be hidden, as they failed to become part of mainstream history," said jung recently, in relation to her research. "I want to show they, however, have continued to survive on their own."

Another force at play in jung's works is the clash between modernity and contemporaneity, two elements that she collapses into a third identity called "con/with tempo." She explored this concept in the video installation *Deferral Theatre* (2018), which was one of the works exhibited at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, that earned her the Korea Artist Prize in 2018. The work features interviews with three performers specializing in three fading traditions—*yeoseong gukgeuk*, *changgeuk* (traditional Korean opera) and *gagok* (traditional Korean vocal music)—and one contemporary drag performer. Each describe their practice around themes of empathy, sexism, artistry and genderqueerness, suggesting a continuity between the genres.

In *Deferral Theatre*, Nam Eun-jin, a second-generation *yeoseong gukgeuk* performer, expresses a bitterness toward both the strict traditions of mainstream Korean theater—which Nam had trained in prior to running away from her mentor—and the perceived lack of support for subgenres of theater. As the video plays, the work's documentary style begins to break down, revealing jung's manipulation of the footage. The audio is cut off, rewound and interspersed seemingly randomly in between words and blocks of color: blue and red, the former taken from a "computer system error page," and the latter referencing the grandiose halls and curtains of traditional theater, resolving old and new. These effects visualize jung's idea of "con/with tempo," as she explains that it "should be alive and breathing, and it should ceaselessly raise questions of normativity of the world, critically re-examine societal phenomena and discordantly relate to history."

Working with the same subjects for such durations—rare among contemporary artists—jung has developed an empathy for the performers. She is aware that the way the *yeoseong gukgeuk* actors emulate characteristics of masculinity goes against concepts of queerness and nonbinary theory. She even criticizes the genre of *yeoseong gukgeuk* as being old-fashioned. Yet in the majority of the interviews, videos and installations that comprise the project, jung looks beyond these issues to try and respond to the larger, rooted idea of constructed binaries in South Korean society and the "demanding two gender system." "I often found out that [the performers] are very conflicted between two genders," jung mentioned. "They expressed obviously discordant experiences around gender identification, expression and normativity."

Jung will stage these complexities in her presentation at the 58th Venice Biennale in the Korea Pavilion, alongside works by Nam Hwa-yeon and Jane Jin Kaisen, in an exhibition curated by Hyunjin Kim. The multi-installation *A Performing by Flash, Afterimage, Velocity and Noise* (2019) will chronicle the stories of a second-generation *yeoseong gukgeuk* performer, a transgender musician, a disabled performer-director, a lesbian actor, and a drag-king performer, in an assembled deconstruction of gender and role-playing, and in a tracing of the genealogy of queer performance. Looking to the present and the future, jung appears to be proposing that although some traditions are no longer active as they once were, they are survived in other, perhaps freer, ways.