

This essay accompanies the exhibition *In the Room* by Sung Hwan Kim  
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**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

## The Forgotten Gesture, The Additional Act

by Fionn Meade

Occupying a space somewhere between storytelling and spectacle, the video installations and live performances that comprise New York-based artist Sung Hwan Kim's practice adopt elements of theater even while disrupting the escapism and subjective identification so often associated with the medium. *In the Room* (2006–2008), for example, mines the fraught dynamics of master and subaltern via a series of elliptical scenarios that present authority and interdiction — the lawful and the forbidden — as mere social conventions to be played with and outmaneuvered. Often presented as both an installation and related performance, Kim's is an additive trajectory based upon interdisciplinary variation. In bringing together childhood memories with oneiric fantasies and hybrid motifs borrowed from folklore and mythology, Kim's restive style betrays an attitude of approaching "life as a pretext" to quote the artist regarding his own idiosyncratic denouement.<sup>1</sup>

By alternately embracing the roles of director, actor, narrator, editor, set designer, and autobiographical subject,

Kim's artistic persona and thematic interests are fragmented through what German critic and theorist Walter Benjamin called the "mimetic faculty" and its "powerful compulsion... to become and behave like something else."<sup>2</sup> Acting the other without a circumscribed ritual or fixed cultural context, however, Kim's elaborations upon alterity employ strategies of estrangement alongside direct engagements with materiality, figuration, and task-oriented performance; simple backdrops, meager sets and score-based interactions repeatedly position the performing body in tension and contrast with fitful and opaque narrative loose ends. The formal adjacency that results from such furtive tactics and deliberate discord keeps the subject in Kim's work perpetually in motion, donning and discarding itself through a series of deferrals and role reversals.

*Dog Video* (2006) is a seven-minute video central to both the exhibition and performance that enacts an abstract comparison between two homes and the house rules that apply in each domain.<sup>3</sup> Part of a recurrent series bearing



Sung Hwan Kim, documentation, *In the Room 3 (dog I knew)*, STEIM, Amsterdam, 2006 (photo taken by Mieke Van de Voort)

the overall title “In the Room,” *Dog Video* and *From the Commanding Heights...* (2007), also on view, incorporate intimate anecdotes from Kim’s upbringing with émigré visions of an absurd, world turned upside down. For, even as *Dog Video* takes place in an everyday apartment environment, it tells a suggestive story of subordination, restriction, and loss. Utilizing makeshift props and costumes, a disjointed, episodic narrative is played out between two young men who pantomime acts of heeling through erotic subjugation and paternal scolding. They also make visual references to the servility of dogs as depicted in 17th century Dutch painting. Playing off the notion of mimesis as a form of realist pictorial representation, Kim here appropriates images by Dutch masters as a provocation to imitate and become the dominant other.

A key scene in *Dog Video* serves to underscore Kim’s protean role-playing. Duplicating the sound of a banal voiceover, subtitles reiterate what the viewer hears...

My father, he was a strict man. When he needed anything he would ring the bell to call me.

Following the sonic cue of *pang-eul* (Korean bells) ringing, Kim the performer steps from behind a curtained backdrop bearing the stern countenance of paternal disapproval. The doubling of language associated with the appearance of this partial persona reveals a tactic crucial to Kim’s repertoire. Verging on parody, the depiction of the castigating father quickly morphs into a series of increasingly abstract gestures as the voiceover falls out and only the subtitle’s commands continue alongside the performed actions...

Water with ice. Two people massaging each leg. Early breakfast. Morning newspaper.



Sung Hwan Kim, video stills, *Dog Video*, 2006

This layering of subtitles and fragmented narration with gestures abstracted by degree — sometimes in synch with the action, sometimes in opposition or interference — provides a central dynamic to all of Kim’s work.

Lacking conventional dramatic unity, Kim’s uneasy marriage of metaphor and gesture puts forth a logic of displacement and associative meaning that frustrates the catharsis associated with conventional plot and character development. Recalling the episodic structure extolled by playwright Bertolt Brecht, a “literalization” of performance occurs in the layering of recited and printed texts used in Kim’s scenarios. Often replacing choreography and dialogue altogether, simple declarations of difference and otherness propel the action, avoiding the false resolve of comedy or melodrama. In this way, the action “unreels in a contradictory manner; the individual scenes retain their own meaning; they yield (and stimulate a wealth of ideas); and their sum, the story, unfolds authentically without any cheap all-pervading idealization...”<sup>4</sup>

To return to the scene above, for instance, the traditional demands of authoritarian respect are pitted against the deviant departures of an imagined other, evoking a law of contrast encountered repeatedly in Kim’s work — namely a recurrent use of archetypal figures and motifs countered with the promiscuous excesses of desire and fantasy. Interspersed between and layered with Kim’s volatile imaginings are the original songs of composer and vocalist David Michael DiGregorio (also known as the recording artist “dogr”). A longtime collaborator and performer in both the videos and live performances (musician Byungjun Kwon also appears briefly in the live performance), DiGregorio punctuates all of the work on display with live and pre-recorded singing and instrumentation. *Dog Video*, for instance, closes with DiGregorio’s mesmerizing falsetto bemoaning, “the forgotten



gesture, the additional act,” to a spare electronic beat and a montage of details from various Dutch paintings. Presented with a “speaking-against-the-music” self-awareness, to borrow another Brechtian phrase, the contingency of DiGregorio’s music is always matter-of-fact in its presentation, often bluntly asserting itself into the proceedings.<sup>5</sup>

Kim’s exaggerated and aberrant scenarios also feature otherworldly metamorphoses in which figures often appear masked, cloaked, or distorted by the camera. *From the Commanding Heights...* encounters Kim positioned directly above the camera’s lens while drawing the travails of an exotic woman with a third ear atop her head where the rain keeps getting in, and the sudden appearance of a family of snakes deep inside her throat. Similarly, the live performance *In the Room 3* features a live animation recounting the penury of a fox whose tail has grown heavier than the rest of his body, or a woman who suffers the burden of a tiara made of eyes, and other confabulations. With DiGregorio playing the role of a one-man chorus, Kim’s improvised drawings and narrations summon up a half-human, half-animal menagerie culled from the night visions of folklore; unfolding on translucent sheets of paper that pile up beside him, Kim’s performative bestiary conveys a melancholy vision of hindrance, obstacle, and affliction.

In mixing highly gendered live performances with props and mediated imagery, Kim extends and complicates the influence of pioneering video artist Joan Jonas. Having worked as a collaborative performer on Jonas’ *Lines in the Sand* (2002), presented at Documenta XI, Kim’s use of a live projected video feed of his performing body in conjunction with elements of narration and drawing is both an homage and departure from performance tactics developed by Jonas. In Kim’s configuration, the convex effect of a piece of transparent plexiglass placed directly above the lens of a



Sung Hwan Kim, documentation, *In the Room 3 (dog I knew)*, STEIM, Amsterdam, 2006 (photo taken by Mieke Van de Voort)

video camera captures the gestures and cropped view of his live drawings and facial grimaces. This enlarged but alienated perspective faces the audience while Kim sits cross-legged in profile to the audience throughout.

Faintly reminiscent of a series of “byobu” screens — decorative barriers used in Japanese interior design to produce a sense of intimacy in which the body is partially visible but also obstructed — Kim’s set designs, whether on stage or in film and video, repeatedly include “soft” barriers that invoke the appearance and subsequent opacity of the performer behind layers of ephemeral, often transparent material. As a result, the body is shown and covered up, trumpeted and disguised. Far from didactic, however, Kim’s use of distancing techniques allows for a rehearsal of becoming that characterizes his overall project.

Neither programmatic nor codified, Kim’s performances and film and video works prompt and provoke us through myriad guises and false starts, embracing what mythologist



Sung Hwan Kim, video stills, *From the Commanding Heights...*, 2007



Heinrich Zimmer once identified as the “never to be culminated understanding” of visual metaphor in his seminal book on storytelling, *The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul's Conquest of Evil* (1948). In describing those who like Sung Hwan Kim delight in symbols, who converse and live with them constantly in mind, without seeking to hedge or define their nature, Zimmer alights upon the metonymic resilience of folk imagery: “It is because they are alive, potent to revive themselves, and capable of an ever-renewed, unpredictable yet self-consistent effectiveness in the range of human destiny, that the images of folklore and myth defy every attempt we make at systemization.”<sup>6</sup> Alive and thriving in Kim’s personification of objects and ageless theatrical effects, the unruly nature of becoming declares itself renewed.

1 Sung Hwan Kim, “Short Statement,” an unpublished writing provided to the author by the artist and quoted here.

2 As a full quotation of Benjamin reveals, a compulsion to act the other is posited as the basis of all innovation, while much of the rest of his essay outlines a distrust and opposition to performative mimesis in Enlightenment thought. “Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than the rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.” Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 333 – 36

3 While the video refers to a nameless “here” and “there”, the homes appear to indirectly reference Amsterdam where Kim was a resident artist at the Rijksakademie (2004-05) and Seoul, Korea where the artist grew up.

4 Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (Hill & Wang), p. 279

5 Not unique to Brecht, such adjacency is a consistent feature of traditional theater and storytelling across cultures. Influenced by such examples, Brecht’s insistence upon the singer ‘being shown’ resonates with the parallel arrangements of Kim and DiGregorio’s collaboration: “If he drops into a melody it must be an event; the actor can emphasize it by plainly showing the pleasure which the melody gives him. It helps the actor if the musicians are visible during his performance and also he is allowed to make visible preparation for it (by straightening a chair perhaps or making himself up, etc.). Particularly in the songs it is important that ‘he who is showing himself be shown’.” Ibid. p. 45

6 Heinrich Zimmer, “The Dilletante Among Symbols,” *The King and the Corpse*, Bollingen Press, Series #11 (Princeton, NJ, 1971 ed.), p. 4

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Korean artist **Sung Hwan Kim** is currently based in New York. Previously, he lived and worked in the Netherlands over a period of four years, during which part of the time was spent as a fellow at the Rijksakademie. Variations of *In the Room* have been exhibited or performed around the world at places including STEIM, Amsterdam; Project Arts Centre, Dublin; Kunst-Werke, Berlin; and Witte de With, Rotterdam. In 2007 he was awarded the 2nd prize of the Prix de Rome from the Netherlands and the Korean award Hermes Korea Missulsang (Hermes Korea Prize for Contemporary Art).

## ABOUT THE WRITER

**Fionn Meade** is a writer, filmmaker, and curator living in New York whose writing appears in *Artforum*, *Parkett*, *Bidoun*, *BOMB*, and *The Phillip Review*, among other publications. Recent and current curatorial projects include a group exhibition *Degrees of Remove: Landscape & Affect*, co-curated with Sarina Basta at SculptureCenter, NY, which included a series of related film programs at Anthology Film Archives; *Bivouac*, a group exhibition featuring the work of Alex Hubbard, Sung Hwan Kim, Meiro Koizumi, Anna Molska, Lucy Raven, Sara VanDerBeek, and Steve Roden, currently on view at Vox Populi Gallery in Philadelphia through April 2009; and *Entr’acte*, an exhibition featuring the work of Cosima von Bonin, Tom Burr, Catherine Sullivan, and Artur Zmijewski on view at The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College through March 2009.

*In the Room* is presented in conjunction with the 22nd Images Festival, April 2–11, 2009 ([imagesfestival.com](http://imagesfestival.com)).

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