

## A conversation with Kim Yong-Ik

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page 1 of 8



Kim Yong-Ik. Courtesy Kukje Gallery. Photo: Keith Park.

Kim Yong-Ik is the understated rebel of the Korean art world. Over his 40-year career as an artist, writer and curator, Kim has resisted aligning entirely with the dominant Korean movements, from the monochromatic and minimalist painters associated with Dansaekhwa, to those making socio-politically concerned Minjung or 'people's art' in the 1980s. Declining an offer to align with the latter group in 1985, Kim committed himself to challenging the principles of modernist and the avant-garde by embracing an 'anti-art' aesthetic and concealing his political gestures in subtlety.

Born in 1947 in Seoul, he conceived of formative 'Plane Object' series (1975–1981) while he was still an undergraduate at Hongik University, where he graduated with a BFA and MFA in painting in 1980. 'Plane Object' comprises wrinkled, washy and airbrushed unstretched canvases, hung directly on the wall and lightly painted to give the illusion of depth and folds. Kim quickly became known for these illusory works; but, uncomfortable with the trappings of the mainstream art world that came along with recognition, he periodically stopped working on the project in 1981.



Kim Yong-Ik, Plane Object (1977). Airbrush paint on cloth. Approximately 200 x 370 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery. Photo: Keith Park.

He began depicting repeated and perfectly aligned polka dots on mostly-plain backgrounds in the early 1990s. Yet in defiance of precision, Kim deliberately blemished the canvases by smearing them with dirt, vegetable juices and other substances, even circling and annotating the imperfections with pencil to draw the viewer's attention to the 'mistakes'. This intentional ruination has been a consistent theme throughout his practice; Kim is none too precious about his work. He is known for intentionally contaminating or soiling his canvases and sometimes leaving them outside to amass mould, all to the ends of what he calls 'eco-anarchism', or the embracing of decay and cheap materials to minimise waste.

Over the years, Kim often addressed, repeated and modified his own earlier projects, asserting that art has reached a point in which nothing new can be made. In such a state, he says, artists are mere editors of theirs and others' work. On multiple occasions Kim has left his works enclosed in their packaging with only their labels left to indicate their titles, materials and dimensions. The first example of this was in 1981 when the artist was invited to participate in the 1st Young Artists Exhibition held at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, whereby Kim left his works enclosed in opposition towards the increasingly repressive military dictatorship in South Korea at the time.

This act is closely linked to his entombing of old works in more recent years, in which the artist encloses earlier works in 'coffins' and re-exhibits them. For his 2016 solo exhibition at Kukje Gallery in Seoul (22 November–30 December 2016), Kim transferred images from past sketches and prints to canvases and deemed them new pieces; he staged his retrospective *Closer... Come Closer...* at Imin Museum of Art in Seoul that year (1 September–6 November 2016). In his most recent show at Kukje Gallery *Endless Drawing* (20 March–22 April 2018), Kim presented 40 never-before-seen works including crated works, polka dot paintings and conceptual drawings.

At 71, Kim is affable, good-humoured, and generous in conversation. I spoke with the artist at Art Basel in Hong Kong (29–21 March 2018), where Kukje Gallery presented a solo booth of the artist's work as part of the fair's Kabinett sector.



Installation view: *Endless Drawing*, Kukje Gallery K2, Seoul (20 March–22 April 2018). Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery. Photo: Keith Park.

**What was your experience of art school at Hongik University in the 1970s?**

In the 1960s and 70s in Korea, the avant-garde and modernist art scene was in its nascent stages. Even the Dansaekhwa painters that we know now were very under the radar, and there weren't that many magazines or publications on western art at the time. Even if there were, not that many people could read them. But a lot of the Dansaekhwa monochrome painters knew how to speak and read Japanese. So in a way, the modernist language came through Japan. My Japanese and English is very limited, so my only source was small translated excerpts about the western avant-garde that I was very excited to read. But among the scene, Hongik, a journal published by the students of Hongik University, was relatively progressive.

**How did your 'Plane Object' series from the 1970s begin?**

At the time, I was reading about the Japanese Mono-ha movement and read one of the artistic statements, which essentially said, 'leave things as they are'. It really struck me. All the western art history that I had learned fell apart after reading this. What I had previously learned was that art was either abstract or figurative—it was about representation and the involvement of the artist, basically. But Mono-ha taught me that things could be just as they are. You don't need the artist's intervention. That really struck me.

I think the concept itself was not entirely foreign to me, because I was exposed to the philosophy of Lao Tzu early on, which was all about leaving nature as it is. Now I realise that this philosophy was part of my conscience and the Korean culture for thousands of years, but I didn't realise it until I read the Mono-ha statement. I feel that the philosophy was really destroyed during the modernisation period and the war in Korea. It's constantly collapsing, even still.

Going back to the 'Plane Object' series, I thought, why not just show the canvas as it is, without adding any elements to them? Mono-ha artists would exhibit their objects as they are. I do a little bit of airbrushing to create visual tricks. The works show depicted versus literal lines in a very intricate way. That idea is constantly reflected in my practice to this day. It could also stand for how I'm constantly trying to connect my actual life as an artist and my art.

**Your use of disposable, cheap or dirtied materials is described as 'eco-anarchist', a philosophy you took to while in India in late 2009 while on Sandarbh International Artist Residency. What do you mean by that term?**

It arises from the fine line between art and everyday reality. I'm constantly thinking: 'I'm an artist, do I want to be an artist, this is an artwork but this doesn't want to be an artwork.' How do I rectify that? The term is a combination of different philosophical ideas and is not a word that I've created myself, but I adopted the term to explain my idea of how an artwork should embrace damage and be open to change. The artist should be allowed to destroy the work if he wants to embrace dirt and time. I'm very keen on humble objects and I wish to have my works open.



Kim Yong-Ik, *Eco Anarchism Project 1* (2017–2018). Mixed media on canvas. 181 x 232.5 cm; *Untitled (Dedicated to 1981 'Today's Circumstance')* (2010). Second version, after lost original of 1981. Ink, packing strap, box. 15 x 81 x 80 cm. Installation view: *Endless Drawing*, Kukje Gallery K2, Seoul (20 March–22 April 2018). Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery. Photo: Keith Park.

**You've also said that you're addicted to the comforts of a capitalist life and have lost all basis to argue for eco-anarchism. Therefore, your works are a form of self-consolation or self-deception. Do you feel consoled by your own work?**

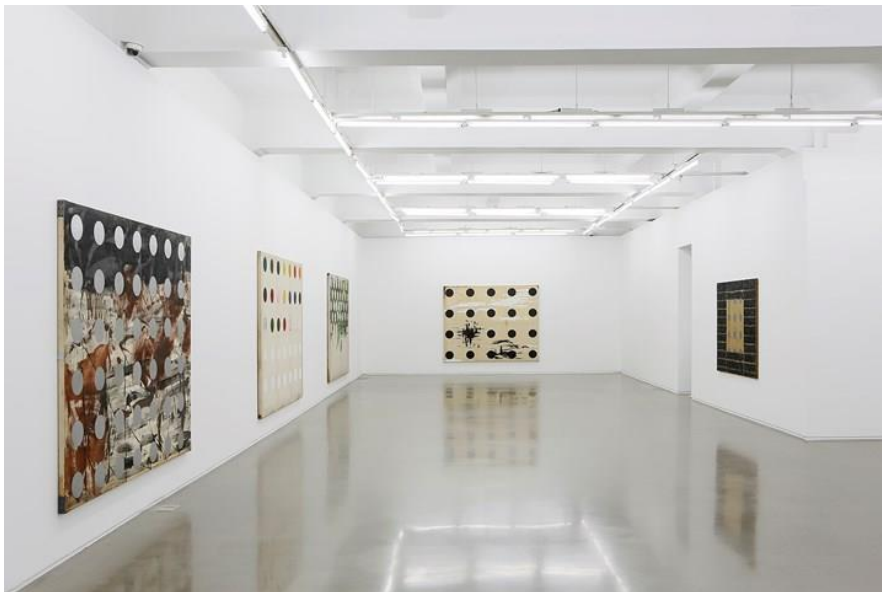
There is a sense of relief, but not an overwhelming one. It's very timid.

**You've argued that the modern world has now exhausted its ability to create new art and we are now in an age where the artist acts as an editor who reappropriates and rearranges existing artworks. Do you consider yourself an editor?**

I'm constantly reappropriating my old works, and sometimes even the work of other artists.

**What appeals to you about polka dots?**

In the 1980s, I moved from the 'Plane Object' series to more abstract and geometric languages. I made some wooden panel pieces that mimicked the drawings. While I was working on that, I tried to create some damages to these pieces by cutting holes in them. A circle is very easy to cut.



Installation view: Closer... Come Closer..., Imin Museum of Art, Seoul (1 September–6 November 2016). Courtesy the artist and Imin Museum of Art. Image provided by Kukje Gallery. Photo: NATHING STUDIO.

**I would have thought it's very difficult.**

I use a compass, which is the easiest device to use to create a perfect form. If you want to draw an accurate rectangle, it's very difficult to be precise. So I did those on thick panels, then I moved to more two-dimensional surfaces in the 1990s and started painting the dots on the surface. While I was doing this, one day I realised they can be in a perfect grid, and the grid itself is a language of modernism.

So, I never presented the polka dots as they were, in a well-aligned manner. I always created a little crack or blemish. That's also part of my personality. I was never outspokenly resistant to modernism, but I always like to create little puns here and there.

I titled those paintings from the 1990s 'Closer, Come Closer'. From a distance, they look like modernist paintings. But if you come closer, you can see little marks, cracks and even where I sometimes stick my hair on the surface.



Installation view: Closer... Come Closer..., Imin Museum of Art, Seoul (1 September–6 November 2016). Courtesy the artist and Imin Museum of Art. Image provided by Kukje Gallery. Photo: NOTHING STUDIO.

**What do you think of when you see your 'imperfect' works in a white cube setting?**

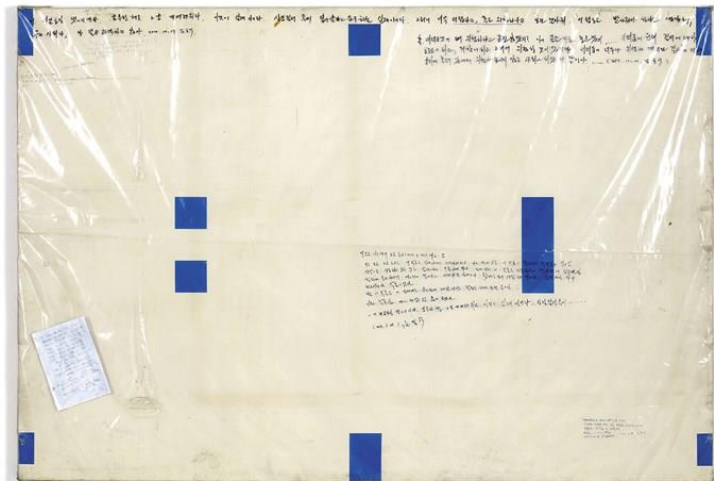
Of course, the work does end up in galleries and collections, which contrast the imperfections I embrace. But I'm trying to destroy modernism and create a crack from the inside, like a Trojan horse.

**One writer described your work as having a punk sensibility. What do you think about that?**

To me, punk connotes a very energetic and unrestrained force. But I think that I am more subtle. I want to delay a fixed interpretation of my work.

**I think perhaps punk can also describe one who is rebellious and has a penchant for breaking the rules.**

There is a true rebel inside me, but when I perform that into an action, I'm not a very energetic and aggressive type. I'm a moderate.



Kim Yong-Ik, Closer... Come Closer... (1996–2013). Mixed Media on Canvas, wrapped in vinyl. 150 x 218 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Keith Park.

**That's interesting; it reminds me of how, the surface of one painting titled Closer... Come Closer... (1996–2013), you wrote: 'I am never an aggressive type, as all avant-garde has been'. Your definition of drawing, given as the part of the press release for Endless Drawing at Kukje, is that it is in continuous work-in-progress. What do you mean by that?**

The idea of a drawing exhibition is not medium-specific. I don't want to define the drawing by its medium in a traditional sense, so I gave my own definition. This idea of modernism that I'm trying to overcome is not just a stylistic advice of modernism I'm talking about, it's also about the modernist idea of life. For example, I think that modernism is about function and efficiency in society and I want to go against that. Art students and artists are obsessed with trying to create a completed product. But to me, an artwork is not a finished or perfect thing. It can always change. Our society and art should embrace things that can change. I want the art students who visit my show to feel a sense of liberation.—[O]