

216

Na Kim is a very special character on the Korean art scene. She's worked as a graphic designer at the very heart of the small-scale but prolific design studios that became an established trend in Seoul from the mid 2000s. And as an artist, she's taken part in numerous exhibitions at major art museums and galleries in her home country. Boldly yet naturally crossing the boundary between design and art—traditionally two clearly distinguished categories in Korea—she's provided young Korean creators with a new role model. But it was in 2008 that Kim's career truly began drawing attention at home and abroad. After studying industrial and visual design in Korea, Kim left to study in the Netherlands at Werkplaats Typografie, where she produced experimental works of design, such as her independent magazine *umool umool*. She was also chief editor and art director of another magazine in Amsterdam, called *Graphic*, which is still mentioned today as a kind of textbook for many designers. Returning to Seoul in 2012, Kim expanded the scope of her avant-garde activities,

## NA KIM

INTERVIEW BY JAE SEOK KIM  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HASISI PARK

deploying original style like a weapon. She founded Table Union, a design studio also serving as a new creative platform, and joined like-minded curators and artists in operating the exhibition space Common Center as a way to actively share the work of young Korean artists and designers. She helped organise Typoanchi 2013 and an exhibition for the launch of the COS flagship store in Seoul. At the same time, she has continuously worked as a graphic designer collaborating with various artists and institutions, as an art director crafting spaces for different brands, and as a teacher of university students. Recently she has been presenting different variations with her 'SET' wall art series, taking as her reference the book *SET*, a collection of design elements from the artist's work. I met Na Kim in the secret work space where all these ideas were conceived: the workshop in Seoul that serves as her second home. Here, one can discover many insights into an artist who obsessively collects pretty things from the world around her, categorises them, and mixes them back together to build her own unique language.



What are your star sign and blood type?  
I'm a Libra, type A.

In Korea, people's star sign and blood type are often used to predict or explain their character. Do you believe in that kind of thing?

I wouldn't say I believe in it, but there are times when an analysis of my character through star sign and blood type seems to explain a lot about me. Which I sometimes don't like.

Could you give us an example that shows what kind of person Na Kim is?

I've just recently got around to organising the things I used when I was living in New York in 2015. I found a letter I'd written to myself on the plane back from New York to Seoul. I'd heard about this service that sends letters you write on the airplane, and I decided to try it out. That kind of thing happens sometimes, where I have a weird curiosity and put it into practice. I'd forgotten all about it, and then I found the letter. You know how when you write a letter to yourself, you tend to write some pretty embarrassing things, like in a diary? I thought it would be like that, and it wasn't.

What did it say?

It only had information about the time and position of the airplane. Just the most useless information! I saw that and thought, 'I really can't help myself'.

This seems to tie in with your work, in that you insist on finding things out once you become curious about them. But you were recently on a kind of European tour as well. I opened a solo exhibition called 'Red, Yellow, Blue' in April at Riot in Ghent, Belgium. It was my first solo exhibition in Europe.

Riot holds a designer exhibition once every year, and so mine was one of those. As with the exhibition title in the *SET* book, I had new murals using red, yellow, and blue design elements. I placed the previously shown 'Found Compositions' work inside on the walls and floor.

And you also released the second edition of *SET*. The white background from the first edition of *SET* that the designer Joris Kritis worked on was changed to black, and we added installation shots and the new text you wrote. Joris also worked on the second edition. I liked that he seemed to explain the *SET* project a bit better than in the first edition. If the earlier book was like a sourcebook for my work, then the latest book has a complete structure in and of itself.

How was the response to the new exhibition and book?

Audience reactions tend to vary a lot depending on where the exhibition is held. I first showed the book and 'SET' work in New York two years ago, and I got some very different questions from the audience. It may have been the American attitude. Whenever I'm at a gallery, people always ask me questions. Some of them are really pointless, and others have left me with food for thought.

Where did you go after Ghent?

I travelled to Germany for a while, and I did a book launch for *SET* at the bookstore San Serriffe in Amsterdam.

How were things in Amsterdam?

I unexpectedly had a short speech time set up at the

launch, which gave me a chance to explain to the audience the revised edition of *SET* and the series. It seemed like the audience understood more about my work after hearing me talk. In Ghent as well, I wondered what the response would be if I explained a bit about the context of my work. I went to school and lived there for a while, so quite a few of my old friends came.

The interesting thing was that even the friends who know a lot about my work seemed a bit surprised about my recent activities.

In what sense?

In their eyes, I think my work seemed more artistic than something a designer would do. They asked me things like, 'Are you only doing art projects now? What about design?' One of the reasons I decided to go to the Nether-







221

lands to study was because I found the undefined activities of the artists there appealing. I thought, 'OK, so now my work seems a bit different to them, too'.

You've now been involved in more exhibitions in the art field than any other Korean designer. You also became an exclusive Kukje Gallery artist recently. This is a pretty basic question, but do you enjoy doing art exhibitions?

I do. Having experienced the process a few times now, I've found myself thinking a lot about how art exhibitions really are 'show'. Before, I thought of art exhibitions in the same way as typesetting a book: I thought people

For artists, where you live and work seems to come up as a very important topic. What about for designers?

I definitely think the region where you're working is less important for a designer than for an artist. Although when I was in Amsterdam, I saw a lot of designers using '.nl' for their homepage addresses, even though they weren't Dutch. There were also designers using '.co.uk', even though they weren't British and they didn't have studios in Britain. I guess it's meant as a hip gesture? So it might also be true for the regions where designers work. I'm also planning to move to a studio in Berlin next year.



would look at exhibitions the way you do when you buy a book and look at which font they used or how they handled the spacing and footnotes. But the way exhibitions are consumed is more like a poster than a book: you take one quick look and that's it. I think that's part of an exhibition's appeal. I also often feel at some point that it seems kind of bigger, and I'm attracted to the richer potential for interpreting the artworks or the spaces where they're displayed.

So how long were you in Amsterdam?

Just a day! But it had been a while, so it was good. I hadn't been back to Amsterdam at all since coming back to Korea in 2012.

Really? What's your reason for going to Berlin?

To a foreigner, Korea is a country with a lot of really interesting and fascinating places—it looks like everything was produced artificially. But there are also times when all those aspects of Korea feel abusive. You know how when you live in Seoul for a long time, you lose your sense of leisure? It feels like a moment when I need some European languor.

How would you sum up your life in Seoul since 2012?

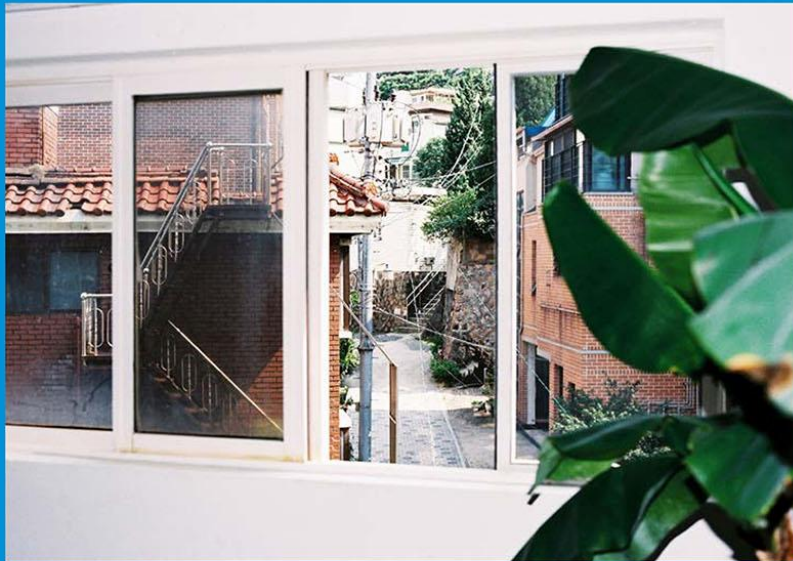
I did talk about how the artificial aspects seem abusive, but when I think about it, that kind of environment can also be a source of ideas for some people. I think my approach to work-

222

ing, which is closely connected to everyday conditions, tends to be pretty heavily affected by the flow of time, the method of working, and relationships with people. There are times when I can work really quickly and accomplish a lot. But in the longer term, I feel like living in Seoul hasn't really allowed me any time that I can completely direct.

Your work seems closely connected to the idea of migration. With 'Life A User's Manual', the exhibition you participated in when you were first becoming really active in Korea after living in Amsterdam, you set up a temporary studio in the gallery and presented that as your work.

part of the exhibition, what struck me was how there were unpredictable things happening every day, since there were elements of improvisational performance rather than it being a fully installed exhibition. Even though I put a lot of effort into the temporary studio structure, I also had to accept these ambiguous moments when the situation with the audience, or the public and private nature of the space overlapped. That was new to me, the way those situations were then influencing my behaviour and thoughts during my time in the temporary studio. Before that, I'd thought there were things I could completely control about the exhibition.



My work ended up broadening in scope because of that exhibition. I approached it with a methodology that sprang out of questions I'd had before, things like which of the two I should be showing, my design portfolio or my artistic work, and what attitude I should adopt. With the 'Life A User's Manual' exhibition, my idea was to do a 'sampling' of my life. I used more of the artistic language on the border between art and design. I discovered a lot of new things as I organised the studio in various ways during the exhibition.

What kinds of things did you discover? If you look at the 53-day-long experience as

Now you run a studio called Table Union in Seoul.

My hope is that people will see Table Union more as a kind of project space than as 'Na Kim's studio'.

Is there a reason you decided to set up a studio somewhat far away from central Seoul?

There's a relaxedness to the neighbourhood that isn't like Seoul. Transportation is a bit of a hassle, but a lot of people do come to visit. The first studio I got when I came to Korea was already pretty well set up, but with the place I'm at now, I had to start the basic interior construction myself.









227

**Do you have a set routine for the studio?**  
I aim to get to work by 10am and leave by 6.30pm, but that's tougher to do in practice.

**You can see bits and pieces of work from your past exhibitions all over the studio.**

Yes. This was installed in the window at the Hermès store in Seoul, and that's a ruler Joris Kritis made by applying work from 'SET'. And that's a bookcase I showed at my solo exhibition at Doosan Gallery. Behind it is the Common Center sign. I tend to make things that I want to have. I imagine how the work will look in my space. I make functional objects, where I think about how I can use them.

There weren't any real collaborations within that, but we would eat lunch together and talk about our work. When someone came by the studio for one of the designers, all of us would get together and show each other's work. Objects that carried real weight started accumulating in my life more and more, and when I came back to Korea, I became one of those people whose space is important—though you obviously can't compare it to an artist's studio.

**Is there any design studio you regard as a role model?**

I don't know. There aren't any particular studios that come to mind. Whenever I visit



**How about your home?**

I don't care so much about my home! For me, my home is a place to sleep. I haven't even put up curtains in the place where I've been living the past three years. I'm only there at night anyway. Right now I've got a blue fabric screen from my exhibition hanging in my house, since I felt bad throwing it away.

**People don't usually think of physical space as being all that important to a graphic designer, since you can work with just a laptop.**

I kept up that designer attitude when I was in Amsterdam, like I could work anywhere with just a laptop. I shared my studio with six other designers, all of us from different countries.

another designer's space, my first thought tends to be about the relationship between that person and the space, but I wouldn't assign that a 'role model' meaning. I do want to keep things as light as possible—although that seems like an ideal. And with my studio in Seoul, past experiences have accumulated uncontrollably over the years. As someone who produces printed matter and objects, an empty space always seems like a waste to me.

**What do you do to pass time when you're not working?**

I listen to music, I watch movies, I cook, I drink, I go for walks, I talk on the phone with my boyfriend. Sometimes I just sleep for a long time.

228

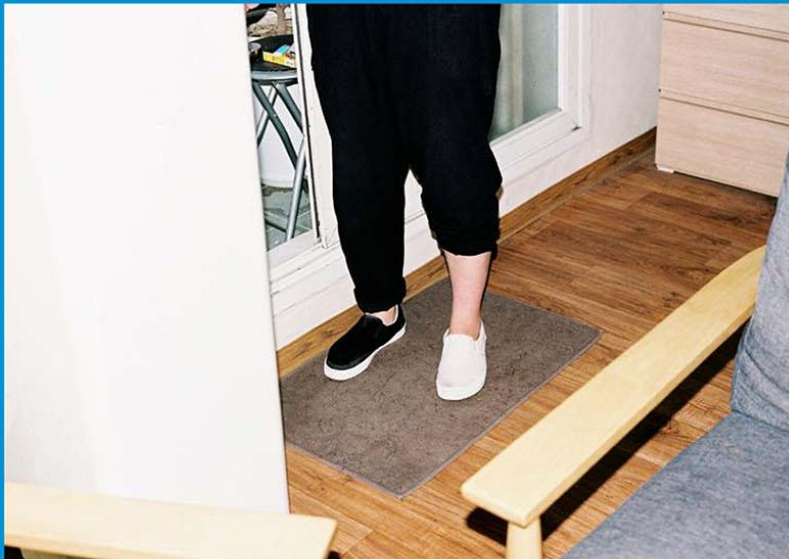
**So you make your own food at the studio?**

Sometimes. I'd like to cook more often, but I get takeout from a place nearby if the situation doesn't allow it. I'm not a very picky eater, but I'm also from Jeolla Province—which is famous for delicious food—so I've got some fairly strict standards for flavour. Lately I've been interested in cooking with eggplant.

**You're currently involved in a lot of different activities, including graphic design, lecturing, spatial direction, exhibition planning, and editing. Which is the most enjoyable for you? Recently I've been happier using my hands than my brain; I enjoy putting on and taking**

**I'm doing my work. When I made a table, a lot of people asked me, 'You're doing furniture design now, too?' But the medium per se isn't all that important to me.**

**What kind of teacher are you to your students? I think there are two main types of educator. First, there are the ones who see their own experience or knowledge as having paramount value, and they try to impart that to their students. I've had classes like that in Korea, and it wasn't so bad! I also got that master-apprentice education at my first job in Korea, at the design studio Ahn Graphics. The other kind never talks about things**



**off masking tape when I'm setting up work in a gallery. With graphic design, when I'm setting up all the guidelines in the first stage, I think to myself, 'Yeah, this is what I liked about graphic design'.**

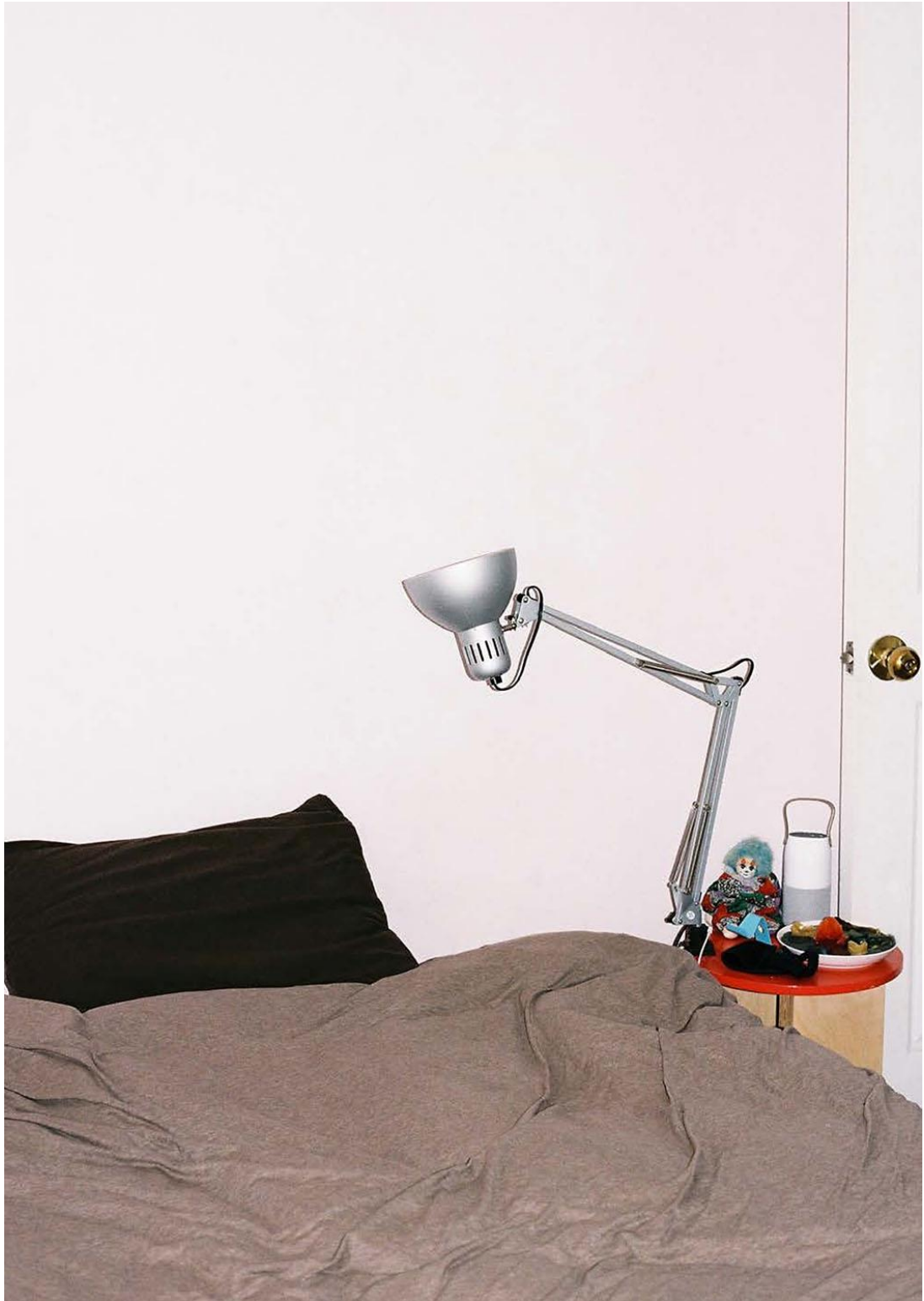
**Is your experience of studying industrial design at university helpful when you're making objects?**

That's stuff I learned a really long time ago. Recently I've been visiting my alma mater to give lectures, and I've seen how much the school's facilities have changed. But since I do have a bit of background knowledge about the characteristics of the materials, I rarely hesitate when

**like specific work techniques, but guides the students in finding their own methods. It's a very effective approach if you're a student with clear ideas. When you've ignored the teachers' critiques, insisted on doing your own work, and the results end up being right, you have a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. But if the students are too young, they'll struggle more with this kind of class. I go back and forth between the two types.**

**If you could go back to your student days when you were preparing to go abroad, where would you want to go?**





I'm not sure. Even when I decided to go to the Netherlands, I made the decision without too much thought, a few months after I learned about *Werkplaats Typografie*. I think that under different circumstances, I still would have made a spontaneous decision like that. I don't think I would have stayed in Korea, though. I definitely needed a new environment.

Your work has often been compared to that of your teacher, Karel Martens.

I've often heard that our work is similar. When I tell people I studied design at *Werkplaats Typografie*, they often say, 'Oh, Karel!' Like, 'That's what I thought!' Or others talk about designers they like, and mention both Karel and me. I respect him for the way he continues to work; his work is influential in that sense. And it's not just true of his work, it's also in the way he lives his life and talks.

So what would you describe as Na Kim's unique style?

I think it's about striking a balance. I haven't really created something directly; for me, the most important thing is that different rules are created and new combinations are formed. The work also has to be enjoyable. I often start by assembling things that already exist in some form, like with 'Found Compositions', where I was working with stickers. As mass-produced stickers, they were already more or less 'defined'. But I started because I was buying stickers, and I became fascinated with the idea of combining them in new ways and creating my own rules. Most of the clothes I like to wear are things I buy at second-hand shops; I like 'discovering' things that feel perfect for me.

What do you regard as the most important thing when you're working?

Sometimes it's hard to work without a logical approach. It's tough to work when you can't explain the thing you're working on. When I'm asked to do a new project, there's an image or a scene that comes to mind, and I tend to follow it more or less 100 percent. If it feels impossible, then I just change direction a bit.

There are still a lot of people who talk about the magazine *Graphic* when your name comes up. To think about it now, it's interesting that you developed a Korean magazine while you were in Amsterdam. Do you find

yourself looking back at *Graphic* from time to time?

I spent quite a bit of time on the project, and I was trying something new with every issue, so I do sometimes find myself looking back at it now for various reasons. I'm actually in the habit of keeping examples of past work and looking back through it pretty often.

What do you think is most interesting about the magazine now?

I think one of the reasons *Graphic* gained attention at the time is because the content was more like a book acting as an archive for some topic, rather than just providing information to be lightly consumed. Also, the design was flexible from one issue to the next, and I think that relationship between content and form is still valid today.

You also produced the magazine *umool umool* as a personal project. Have you ever considered making another magazine?

I've never really felt that great an affection for the magazine as a medium, although I've done quite a few projects over the years involving magazines. I've discovered in the process that the medium fits with my approach to projects pretty well. It's relatively fast paced, there's an emphasis on timeliness, and I like the way the content is circulated and the role of design in representing that appropriately. With *umool umool*, I was trying to carry the exhibition concept over into print, but I don't see this structure as being valid anymore. Although if I do end up making another magazine, I still would like to focus on that aspect in a different way.

What's the biggest project you're working on now?

The Korean retail shop Åland is preparing to open a flagship store in New York, and I've been working on a spatial design project for that. The clients said they wanted a store that was like a gallery, and we talked a lot about my exhibitions over the years. Two-dimensional things have to be presented in a three-dimensional way, and they have to play a functional role. I want to develop objects with large volumes, halfway between furnishings and objects. I'm still working on a more concrete plan. I think it's going to be a place where the space itself is an exhibition, with a platform for showing the work of other artists and designers.