

Practices | Nov 2018

Seoul Art Space GEUMCHEON. Ga Ram Kim: Public Opinion, Reconfigured by Anna Harsanyi



4ROSE (SOUND PROJECT), 2018. Sound wall, mixed media. Image courtesy of the artist

Overview

Since 2016, Residency Unlimited has been selecting three international curators to contribute with critical essays on the work of artists who participated in the **Seoul Art Space GEUMCHEON residency program** (Seoul, South Korea). The initiative, which runs on a yearly basis, is aimed to promote cultural exchange and support the development of young artists from South Korea by providing a valuable opportunity for conversation. Hereby, we present **Anna Harsanyi's Public Opinion, Reconfigured**, a critique on artist **Ga Ram Kim's** practice.

In a recent single titled <Roller Coaster> by 4ROSE, a cyber girl group created by artist Ga Ram Kim, dramatic violins play against a syncopated electro beat. The lyrics proclaim: “Thought it was going to end with loose ends but it’s worth watching / Is he/she bipolar.” Released in early June 2018, during the real-life roller coaster of puzzling exchanges between North Korea and the United States which were further ignited by the interruptions of the current US President, the song captures confusion and disappointment about the North and South peace negotiations racing through many people’s minds. For the past 4 years, Kim has been documenting online discussions in the country through her project 4ROSE, whose music is produced by Kim and whose lyrics are uttered by one of 4 automated female voices reading excerpts of comments sourced from popular online forums. Each month, the artist tracks widely discussed topics and then selects the most read and responded to comments. Conversations range from the government’s response to the 2015 MERS outbreak, Korea’s #MeToo movement, peace talks between North and South Korea, and the cryptocurrency bubble burst in the Korean market. Available on conventional music purchasing sites like iTunes and Melon Music, and released through Windmill Entertainment, the songs can be accessed alongside any other commercial music outlets. While the slick designs for each single and the intriguing description of 4ROSE as a “cyber girl group” is one way of drawing listeners in, they may be surprised when hearing the robotic voice that is overlaid onto the genre-spanning pop tracks (they range from slow-tempo ballads to peppy summer jams to steady techno pulses). Kim intentionally brings the work outside of an art or an exhibition context, in order to open up the possibility that most listeners will not understand the project as a work of art. Here, art serves the function of re-mixing and re-arranging the familiar while leaving

the audience to contemplate their own understanding of who 4ROSE is and how it fits within their own definitions of pop music. As evidenced in <Roller Coaster> ([link to online file](#)), the lyrics are not written by a professional producer or industry songwriter like most pop music – instead the song is composed by members of the general public. The thoughts communicated by ordinary citizens whose quotes form the poetry of each song’s lyrics extend beyond their personal state of mind to become reference points for the larger popular discourse. The rhythm of an online chatroom, with replies and likes punctuating the commentary left by a single user, is mimicked in the music, which puts commentators in dialogue with each other while syncing their statements to the beat.



Roller Coaster (by 4ROSE), 2018. Digital single (music)
Image courtesy of the artist

Instead of simply creating a portrait of a particular conversation thread, Kim re-arranges her selections in order to configure a nuanced, sometimes contradictory re-presentation of public dialogue. 4ROSE reminds us that public opinion is never monolithic. Often times perspectives clash and some people express their views through humor while others may share impassioned viewpoints. In the songs of 4ROSE, all of these types of expression are seamlessly strung together in a way that does not conceal differing statements while also not privileging one voice over another. 4ROSE will continue to produce one song per month for a total of 10 years, to be completed in 2024, with the group's musical anthology serving as an archive of the trajectory of public opinion and social commentary.



4ROSE (SOUND PROJECT), 2018. Sound wall, mixed media.
Image courtesy of the artist

Kim's interest in popular discourse is also captured through other forms of more direct engagement, inviting audiences to activate her projects and installations. In [#SELSTAR](#) ([link to online file](#)), the artist presents the exhibition space as a high-end photo studio, replete with makeup products and bright lights, perfectly set up for taking a stellar selfie. In response to the popularity of taking selfies in glamorous, picture-perfect art installations, #SELSTAR takes advantage of the trend by making it the sole intention of the artwork. In its 2016 iteration at SangsangMadang in Seoul, the popular YouTuber Yeondukong visited the exhibition, interviewed the artist, and took her viewers through her own process of applying makeup to achieve a fun and cute selfie, amassing over 240,000 views.



#SELSTAR X YEONDUKONG, 2016. HDV, 16:9, color, sound
Image courtesy of the artist

While digital media and online forums provide spaces for communication without physical interaction, engaging in protest void of the pressures or resulting assumptions that come with speaking one's mind on a public stage is more challenging. Inspired by recent hair cutting protests in Korea, where activists shaved their heads to signal civil dissent, Kim considered how a haircut might represent political opinion when it is less directly linked to activism but more representative of personal viewpoints. The artist trained as a professional hairstylist in order to develop *The Agenda Hair Salon*, a project that provided a space for political conversations to be embodied through one-on-one interactions. Taking place in public spaces such as markets, parks, train stations, and storefronts in Germany and Korea, Kim chose topics that headlined local news and developed statements that exemplified ranges of public opinion. For example, with Germany debating strategies for handling a large influx of refugees, the artist selected "Ein Pakt mit 1000 Fragezeichen (One pact with 1000 questions)." This referred to a pact made between Turkey and Germany aimed at quelling the influx of refugees, which raised several diverging questions related to issues of security, human rights, and the practicality of such an agreement, among others. In exchange for a free haircut, participants chose the length of their trim to scale in relation to their level of agreement or disagreement with the various statements. During the interaction, the artist discussed the political topic with the participant.



ACS#2: the AGENDA hair salon, 2016. Düsseldorf-Projekt (Hauptbahnhof in Düsseldorf), haircut performance. Image courtesy of the artist

While haircutting protests are a very public form of radical political opposition, the haircuts in *The Agenda Hair Salon* provided room for subtlety and nuance that are not always afforded in other forums for political debate. A person who chose to cut their hair much shorter or very little in relationship to the issue being discussed, or somewhere in between, ultimately made their own decision whether or not to publicly label their new look as a symbol of personal politics. Mirroring the conversational and friendly space of a hair salon, the experience offered a level of comfort for opinions to be discussed at length and with ample time for open dialogue, especially since each haircut lasted an average of 30 minutes. If haircutting protests serve as direct actions on behalf of a collective

movement, *The Agenda Hair Salon* transformed a commonplace activity into an indirect expression of an individual's beliefs.



ACS#2: the AGENDA hair salon, 2016. Düsseldorf-Projekt (Auf der Wiese), haircut performance. Image courtesy of the artist



ACS#2: the AGENDA hair salon, 2016. Düsseldorf-Projekt (Auf der Wiese), haircut performance. Image courtesy of the artist

Kim's work weaves daily conversations and popular discourse through the frames of all of her projects, inviting audiences to contribute their own thoughts and processes alongside her own. Rather than prescribe an outcome or line of questioning, Kim leaves her engagements open-ended, allowing for participants and viewers to draw their own conclusions. Whether through physical interactions with her work, as in #SELSTAR and The Agenda Hair Salon, or through immaterial experiences of projects like 4ROSE, the artist's role is to facilitate an active process of inquiry. Kim uses popular discourse as a medium through which to question broader notions of communication and public language – and who gets to disseminate the images, statements, and ideas that fill our world. Simple questions around the form of Kim's works reveal an opportunity to expand these contexts. What is a haircut when it moves beyond an aesthetic or utilitarian role, and instead embodies a personal political viewpoint? What is a pop song when the lyrics are composed by the general public? Can a selfie portray a work of art? Some individuals may simply appreciate a free haircut or bop along to a catchy beat without experiencing a process of critical self-interrogation about contemporary issues. On the other hand, participants may also pause to consider new perspectives or question their own viewpoints on social or cultural conventions. Both interactions are equally valid within the experiences that Kim engenders, and this open-ended framework allows for a multitude of connections. The result is an experiment that presents people with an alternative mode of approaching common experiences, perhaps inserting new value within their habitual relationships to the familiar.

Anna Harsanyi is a curator, educator and arts manager. Her participatory projects and exhibitions have taken place within public and alternative spaces, exploring themes of memory, cultural identity and collective experience. Since January 2015, she has been collaborating with Sheetal Prajapati on Game Night , a series of events centered around play that presents games made by artists. She co-curated Hot & Cold: Revolution in the Present Tense, a public art project in Timișoara and Cluj, Romania which presented three artist projects about the 25th anniversary of the Revolution that ended Communism. In 2014, she was part of the team of curators who organized No Longer Empty's exhibition Through the Parlor , in a former beauty salon in Chinatown. Anna has worked in education and public programming roles at the Museum of Modern Art, New York Arts Practicum, and A Blade of Grass. She is currently the Project Manager for the Guggenheim Social Practice Initiative at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and she teaches at The New School University.

The **Seoul Art Space Geumcheon** is a workspace exclusively dedicated to visual arts. The location is a former printing factory in Doksan-dong, Geumcheon-gu, which has been renovated following the guidelines of the current Seoul's culture-nomics urban strategy. Since its foundation, 397 artists from 48 countries across the globe have benefited from the programs offered at Seoul Art Space Geumcheon.

<http://geumcheon.blogspot.com/p/project.html>