

# KIM SOUN-GUI

by Olivia Sand

Biennales make a point not only to showcase young and up-and-coming artists, but also to highlight established artists who may have been overlooked so far. The latter is unquestionably the case for Korean artist Kim Soun-Gui (b 1946), who has only recently come to public attention with a major retrospective at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (NMMA) in Seoul. This exhibition is now on view at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany. Considering the importance of Kim Soun-Gui's oeuvre, it is no surprise to see her work also featured in such important exhibitions as the Carnegie International. Her work is a gift to any curator, as it is so diverse and challenging.

Kim Soun-Gui is a free spirit, which applies as much to her personal life as to her art. Brilliant, creative and innovative, she has gradually opened up her practices, based initially on calligraphy and painting, to photography, installation, participatory performance, sculpture, video, multi-media art, poetry, language, literature and philosophy – and is constantly taking it a step further. A pioneer in many disciplines, Kim Soun-Gui has always been and continues to be eager to take up the challenge to discuss art, society and politics with fellow artists, intellectuals, and philosophers. In the interview below, we revisit some key moments that led her to become the artist she is today.



Kim Soun-Gui © Kim Soun-Gui

## NEWS IN BRIEF

the island in October this year. Benesse Art Site Naoshima, which manages the art site, organised the replacement process that was overseen by Kusama herself. A new pumpkin was unveiled, bearing the same colour, size, and materials as its predecessor, but with a tougher structure to enable it to survive extreme weather conditions. The original work was located at an old pier on the art island of Naoshima in the Seto Inland Sea since 1994 and the bright yellow pumpkin has become a landmark in the area.

### GWANGJU BIENNALE, KOREA

The 14th Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, Soft and Weak Like Water, has announced the first participating artists and preliminary details on its curatorial themes, artist selection, artworks, venues and public program. Bringing together around 80 artists from different corners of the globe, the biennale will present over 40 commissioned projects and new works. The biennale is curated by artistic director Soek-Kyung Lee, alongside associate curator Kerry Greenberg, and assistant curators Sooyoung Learn and Harry C H Choi.

The title takes its inspiration from a chapter of *Dao De Jing*, a fundamental Daoist text, which speaks of water's capacity to embrace contradictions and paradoxes. The Biennale proposes to imagine our shared planet as a site of resistance, coexistence, solidarity, and care, by

thinking through the transformative and restorative potential of water as a metaphor, a force, and a method. It invites artists to engage with an alternative model of power that brings forth change, not with an immediate effect but with an endurance and pervasive gentleness that flows across structural divisions and differences. A list of the artists and further information can be found [ongwangjubiennale.org](http://ongwangjubiennale.org).

### BHUTAN REOPENS FOR TOURISM

The Tourism Council of Bhutan launched a new website in September to help Bhutan's tourism sector recover from pandemic. The new website, [bhutan.travel](http://bhutan.travel), will mainly act as an information portal for visitors to Bhutan, where cultural institutions and the 20 *dzongkhā* (regions) can post information, including information on visa fees and monument and sacred site fees.

A second website, [services.tourism.bh](http://services.tourism.bh), will offer information on cultural and tourist sites in the country.

### TOKYO NATIONAL MUSEUM

Tokyo National Museum's (TNM) 150th anniversary plans are underway with a newly developed show – TNM is the oldest and largest museum in Japan. The exhibition *Tokyo National Museum: In History and National Treasures* introduces the museum through its collections of masterpieces and historical records, including all 89

National Treasures that it looks after. Approximately 150 artworks and other objects are exhibited in two parts. This type of show has never been attempted before in the museum's 150-year history and promises to be a historic event worthy of their anniversary year.

Part One is called *The National Treasures of Tokyo National Museum* and is devoted to the National Treasures, with a rotation midway through the term of the exhibition. Part Two: *150 Years at Tokyo National Museum* presents the museum's history, which is synonymous with museum history in Japan, through artworks, records, reproduction of exhibitions, and videos from the past. This show will have two rotations midway.

In addition to displaying particularly important artworks, the exhibition aims to introduce the museum to the wider public by using multiple angles, such as its efforts to conserve and programme of exhibiting tangible cultural heritage. The exhibition runs until 11 December.

### ASIAN ART CONFERENCE, LISBON

From 24 to 26 November, *Asian Art in the World: Historical Influences on Culture and Society* will be held at three museums in Lisbon: Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Museu do Oriente, and Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga. The principal aim of this three-day conference is to highlight the important contribution made by Asia to world art and universal civilisation, from the

Asian Art Newspaper: The exhibition at the ZKM begins with highlights from our first years in France, back in the early 1970s. Surprisingly, it provides very thorough footage of a time when it was neither customary nor easy to film such undertakings. Do you agree?  
Kim Soun-Gui: Yes, indeed. A lot is documented, but a great deal also has got lost, which I deeply regret.

AAN: The exhibition was organised as a collaboration between the ZKM in Karlsruhe and the NMMA where it was first shown in 2019. Is the present exhibition the same as in Seoul?  
KSG: The exhibition in Karlsruhe is a little different. In Seoul, the show was even larger, featuring more works, but it was not possible to ship everything to Germany. It was just too complicated and we decided to leave the most fragile pieces behind. Then, with Covid, the project had to be postponed, shipping became even more expensive, and in the meantime, certain pieces had been acquired by institutions or collectors. We therefore decided to focus on a lesser amount of works.

AAN: In your case, it seems essential for institutions to grasp the full dimension of your work in order to collaborate towards an exhibition, as your practice is so diverse.  
KSG: Yes, a good understanding of my  
Continued on page 4

# MARCHANT

EST 1925

## CHINESE CERAMICS TANG TO SONG

24<sup>th</sup> October - 11<sup>th</sup> November



Chinese *sancai*, three-colour glazed pottery basin, *pen*, moulded in the centre with a six-petaled flowerhead encircled by six conjoined larger petals. 7 13/16 inches, 19.8 cm diameter, 1 7/8 inches, 4.8 cm high. Tang dynasty, Gongxian kilns, 7th – 8th century.

- From an American private collection, Connecticut. This collection was put together in the 1980's and 1990's.
- The dating of this piece is consistent with the result of a thermoluminescence test, Oxford Authentication Ltd., no. C199g26.

120 Kensington Church Street, London W8 4BH  
+44 (0) 20 7229 5319 / 3770  
[www.marchantasianart.com](http://www.marchantasianart.com)  
[galler@marchantasianart.com](mailto:galler@marchantasianart.com)

**BADA**  
A CENTURY OF THE EXCEPTIONAL

Catalogue available GBP £160 (inc. p&sp).

Looking for something to read?



Explore our extensive archives at [asianartnewspaper.com](http://asianartnewspaper.com)



Piano Préparé (Prepared Piano), 1985, 2-channel-video (16:9), 05:56 min



I-Hua (One Stroke of Painting), 1975-85, Photo: Noh Chi-Wook

approach is essential. Looking back to the show at the NMCA, although the curators did a wonderful job and did everything in their power to make that exhibition happen, the space meant that there was a lot of back and forth between curators, administration and financing. Ultimately, synchronising all these entities proved to be quite challenging. One needed approval on all steps for various undertakings with the result that, in my opinion, there was a huge loss of time and energy with the outcome still being uncertain. For an artist, this becomes a heavy burden. Also, in general, some curators pretend to understand my work, but ultimately they end up trying to apply a global-aesthetic criteria that currently rules the contemporary art world. I am very far from these criteria and I have always tried to avoid following any type of fashion.

Sometimes, following my experience in regards to exhibitions, curators sometimes tend to see what they want to see. They have their own pre-conceived ideas, determined to put me in the frame of an Asian female artist to tick all their criteria. As an artist, refusing these propositions, you are immediately labelled an anarchist, even more so as I am not a submissive woman, making it impossible for curators to control me. That is why I have not participated in many exhibitions in France, because if the curator's only goal is about finding an image that matches their needs, I say no. Even if I am offered an interesting project, I refuse. In such a context, participating in an exhibition is a complete no-go on my part.

**AAN: You are facing challenging circumstances. Today, many institutions are exhibiting and promoting female artists.**  
**KSG:** This is precisely the type of judgement I want to avoid.

**AAN: The curator of the NMCA exhibition referred to you as 'the missing link' between art in Korea from the 1950s/60s and contemporary artists. Do you agree?**

**KSG:** In Korea, there is an artistic structure that brings together the most important artists and, basically, they are world famous and established artists. In my case, I have been out of that circuit, never wanting to be part of it. When I was young, back in 1975, I was extremely

famous in Korea because I was avant-garde. I had conceptual discussions with many cutting-edge and avant-garde artists and our debates always ended in my favour. I was very noisy, defended my views and my ground, hoping for society to change when it came to art. I was not an easy artist to deal with and, looking back, I probably scared off some institutions. I think it was easier for people in Korea to accept me when I came back in the mid-1970s with an etching exhibition – more in tune with what a female artist was supposed to do as opposed to my earlier performances and installations. Then, in the following decades, as the Korean economy developed, a young generation prospered that also impacted the arts creating a new dynamic for artists, who were then also very active internationally. Within this impulse of movement and change, my name was completely forgotten. I have been going back to Korea on a regular basis, but so far, I have remained outside art circles.

**AAN: Ultimately, you found your way back into that circle, or rather the other way around, institutions reconnected with you.**  
**KSG:** In preparation for the exhibition at NMCA, for the first time, curators took ample time to look at my work. I have a very large studio in the outskirts of Paris and after thoroughly reviewing my work, they felt an exhibition was long overdue. As for myself, I was wondering why they suddenly felt the urge to exhibit my work. They were surprised to discover a female artist that was completely outside of their art circle, not only in Korea, but also in France – and who had a strong body of work, both in terms of quality and quantity.

**AAN: You have not chosen the easiest path since, commercially and career wise, you did everything that one should not do. Do you agree?**

**KSG:** Absolutely. Earlier in my career, I was crazy about the idea of making videos. After teaching for 10 years to keep me financially afloat at the Ecole Nationale d'Art Décoratif in Nice, the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Marseille, and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Art de Dijon, I acquired a camera in 1982. Around that time, I also received the first grant to be awarded for research

on video, which today would be the equivalent of approximately 100,000 euros. I bought a video camera with some of this money. Back in those days, the entire equipment amounted to the price of a small apartment! I nevertheless went for a video camera, but then came the question how to supply the camera with electricity? I ended up going to my neighbour asking for help. Then, I had no petrol to drive around, so I was up and about carrying my equipment on a cart. The years from 1980 to 1992 were very difficult, even more so as I was a single woman with financial uncertainties. It was complicated, but I nevertheless continued working and moving forward with my research. That was the most important to me, but at the same time, it was also a huge challenge, especially as my equipment broke down and I had no specific technological knowledge to fix it. I kept it at for the simple fact that I am extremely passionate about what I am doing. My practice is an essential pillar of my life.

**AAN: You created the multi-media art department at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Marseille. It is the department still working?**  
**KSG:** I was asked to teach drawing, which I accepted under the condition I could also create a multi-media department which included photography, video, cinema, sound and sculpture. I am not sure how things stand at this point, because starting in the early 1990s, the school began to change with students selecting their activities according to the needs of the galleries and the market. The commercial aspect has impacted the school and I am therefore not sure the spirit of the department I created was

“  
 By refusing work, I was immediately labelled an anarchist  
 ”



Concert by John Cage, 1986, video and multimedia, Sou-Gui Kim and her invitees at La Vieille Charité, Marseille, 1986. Photo: Guilaine Benjamin

maintained, as I stopped teaching around 2010.

**AAN: Looking at your trajectory, one wonders why you decided to stay in France instead of going to New York or Düsseldorf, cities that were most avant-garde when it came to experimentation in contemporary art? What motivated your choice?**

**KSG:** When I was a student at university, Korea was a very poor country and ruled by a military government. Back then, going abroad to study was simply out of the question. However, I always wanted to go to France: in my mind, the idea of art was linked to the city of Paris. As I graduated, there was the possibility of a scholarship to the US. Out of curiosity, I took the exam and got accepted. However, I had no intention of going to the US. Instead, I wanted to go to Paris, which in my opinion is where the birth of Western civilisation lies. I then took part in a competition for a scholarship by the French government inviting young artists to France. I won the scholarship and have stayed in France ever since.

Although I was extremely creative with regards to my practice, I was terrible at how to go about selling my work. Three years into my scholarship, I did not want to go back to Korea because I wanted to travel around the world. I took the exam to be certified to teach in France, allowing me to have a steady income and support myself. Looking back, I must admit that it was laziness on my part not to go and see dealers in view of a possible collaboration. However, I also did not want to become a gallery artist since the commercial aspect of it somehow scared me. I deliberately stayed in France, since in Germany there was a language barrier, although I did teach in Hamburg. In addition, I feel a deep connection to Western philosophy and I have always kept excellent relationships with the French philosophers, many of whom have become friends. It is a joy to exchange and take on new research together with them. That is basically why I stayed in France.

**AAN: You began deconstructing painting in Korea, even before you left France. What made you realise that you did not want to limit your practice to the size of a frame hanging on the wall?**

**KSG:** I think it is my nature. I have been painting since I was seven years old, evolving all sorts of painting. I managed to get into the National University in Seoul and started to look into poetry and sound. I also became involved with the French language department there and spoke French long before going to France. I realised that, as an artist, I was absolutely not made to work within a frame. In the third year of my art curriculum, I almost set the school on fire, because I wanted to achieve more depth with the colours I was using. I therefore added oil, determined to burn parts of

the surface, but that did not go well! I was intrigued, first by a black surface, later by a white surface and then, suddenly, I started to cut things out, hanging them on the wall, and hanging them outside. This is how I came to deconstruct paintings in what I called a situation created by the relations of time and space.

Before leaving Korea in 1971, I took part in an exhibition of young artists and an exhibition could not make sense or discover the meaning of these pieces hanging outdoors. Things were completely different when I arrived in France, where the movement 'Support Surface' was very strong. While I was part of an exhibition involving various international and French artists, people could not understand that an Asian artist, on top of it a woman, was behind these pieces that shared the same spirit as Support Surface. I had no specific exchanges and debates with the French artists involved in the movement. I tend to think it was slightly stronger, mainly because I had the advantage of having been so involved with Eastern and Western philosophy. I was able to defend my space.

**AAN: Were there any movements that were eager for you to join their undertaking?**  
**KSG:** I was asked on several occasions to join Fluxus, but I was too fond of my independence. Nam June Paik was looking for younger members, but I refused. In addition, various groups also asked me to be part of their endeavour, but I wanted to remain my own master, even at the risk of being forgotten.

**AAN: What impact did Nam June Paik (1932-2006) and John Cage (1912-1992) have on your practice? Perhaps, there was also an impact the other way around, something of interest to Nam June Paik and John Cage?**

**KSG:** Our relationship was based on numerous accidents. I met John Cage by accident in a lecture, asking him a question which led to three continuous hours of Q&A. Then, he asked me to work together with him and I spontaneously stayed for his entire endeavour, but I wanted to return to the US, he spoke about me to Nam June, and I subsequently met him a year later in Paris while he was creating a performance with Charlotte Moorman. As to John Cage, up until his death, I had a very long and fruitful collaboration with him. John Cage is clearly the artist I respect the most. I learned a great deal from him.

**AAN: You indicated that John Cage had been the most important artist for you. Why?**

**KSG:** When I met John Cage, I was very fond of the writings of Wittgenstein, whom I was studying at university. In addition, I am very passionate about Asian philosophy, especially Buddhism and Taoism. When I discovered John Cage was having a lecture, I immediately thought I had to meet him in order to



Lazy Clouds at ZKM, Karlsruhe, installation view. Photo: Olivia Sand

discuss Wittgenstein. I knew John Cage by name, but nothing further. We had a thorough discussion and it lasted a very long time. We had a fantastic conversation and, somehow, we were on the same wavelength. We had numerous things in common which made our exchange so rich. In addition, John Cage was an artist who really made his philosophy the leitmotif of his life. Some artists have their practice, but live a completely different life. John Cage was the opposite, as his thoughts and life were in complete harmony and his artistic approach was shared by many. In a way, he created an extraordinary community around him. As to Nam June Paik, I knew him less, since I did not have a chance to interact with him that much. Nevertheless, he was brilliant, a fantastic human being even though philosophically, I did not have the exchanges or share a common approach as I did with John Cage.

**AAN: In 1986, you organised a multi-media festival in France. What was the legacy of that festival? Did it set new milestones?**  
**KSG:** In Marseille, there is a cultural

building called La Vieille Charité. It is large and ideal as a contemporary art centre, and I was invited to do a solo show there. At the time, I was very passionate about creating exchanges with other people and I suggested to the organiser that I also stage an international festival. The shop where I had bought my camera sponsored me, and I managed to get a small budget. As to the logistics, I had to keep it simple with my guests spending the night in a tent I had rented on the beach. Some of my students had a limited amount of rooms for artists coming from abroad. I had booked an extraordinary community around him. As to Nam June Paik, I knew him less, since I did not have a chance to interact with him that much. Nevertheless, he was brilliant, a fantastic human being even though philosophically, I did not have the exchanges or share a common approach as I did with John Cage.

dynamic for the city which was far behind in terms of contemporary art.

**AAN: Throughout your career, you have been writing poetry which has consistently been at the centre of your practice. What is your approach?**  
**KSG:** I usually do not write any subjective poems, starting with 'I'. It is neither descriptive nor representative, but it has a lot to do with language – everything is important, every discovery is precious, every work or comma is meaningful. Therefore, poetry remains one of the pillars of my practice. In the 1980s, however, people did not think much of poetry, as everybody was out following a business-oriented mindset, determined to make money. Poetry was considered an anecdote in the greater scheme of things. However, I continued writing poetry, regardless of what trends were popular, or what people thought.

**AAN: How do you see the future of multi-media art? What is the next logical step in your practice?**

**KSG:** In the continuation of an earlier series called *Fotidia, Photography and Fashish Calligraphy*, I would like to create a piece based on a very advanced programme with the latest technology, but where ultimately nothing would work. Basically, it would be a piece at the fringe of stupidity, at the opposite of efficiency, but somehow still working. In French, I would call it *Poésie Digitale, or Digitale Poésie*. I have not decided yet. My problem is that I need to rely on a technician or an engineer. We are dealing with something rather complex and I am not able to create the programme by myself.



Robert Young Heen, 2019/2022, Lazy Clouds, at the ZKM, Karlsruhe. Photo: Olivia Sand

**AAN: Apart from your solo show at ZKM, your work can currently also be seen at Carnegie International. What are you showing?**

**KSG:** The piece included in the Carnegie exhibition, *Stock + Garden*, is from 2008, and revisits the earlier interactive installation *Stock Exchange*. I created *Stock + Garden* almost 20 years ago, but I have always brought it up to date, keeping the idea that the stock market has become the supreme value of our society, dictating the pace of our lives. In the future, beyond developing what I refer to as my 'stupid project', I also want to further investigate the qualities of sound, which I find fascinating. Sound has no frame, no limit. I need to work on its technical aspect first, as I am not familiar with it yet.

**AAN: Looking back at your journey since the 1970s, leaving Korea for France was a bold move at the time. Would you agree?**  
**KSG:** Absolutely. Back then, I did not fulfil what was expected of me. I was

supposed to stay in Korea, get married, and lead a normal life. The most I could have hoped for was to teach philosophy, but not much more. In Korea, as a young woman, I did not want to accept my family's money, therefore, I taught children in order to have a small income. I followed my path towards independence, passing the exam for university in order to be the best student, which would allow me not to have to pay for my studies. The only thing I took were the \$100 my mother gave me in order to pay for my cab ride once I reached Paris, to get from the airport into the city. I left Korea because I wanted to be like a cloud, floating free. I was longing to do what I wanted, and I had no intention of going back to a society that I considered closed. I think that as I left France, my family somehow realised that it was not just goodbye, it was farewell.

**AAN: You left Korea because you felt the environment was too traditional, not allowing you to fully express yourself artistically. Today, Seoul has become an attractive hub for the contemporary art world. Would you now reconsider spending time there?**  
**KSG:** Even today, Korea would not be my preferred environment. I find Korea presently rather scary as it is highly commercial, very business oriented, and booming economically. I would feel lost in that environment. I would rather be at the countryside, although much of the countryside has been taken over by an agricultural drive for export. The only place that is not affected by commercial activity is the Buddhist temple, the one place where the world is almost the same as it used to be.

# REACH YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE WITH ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER

Asian Art Newspaper has evolved its advertising choices to keep up to date with the advances in online opportunities, as well as continuing to support the print edition.

CLICK HERE to visit our home page

CLICK HERE to see more images

CLICK HERE to watch a video

Advertisers will be able to customise and choose unique links they would like readers to see and experience.

**DIGITAL INTERACTIVE**

Adverts placed in our print edition also appear in the interactive digital edition. This allows advertisers to add an extra layer to their advert in digital bringing a new dimension to their advert. Advertisers will be able to customise and choose unique links they would like readers to see and experience.

**WEBSITE**

Adverts on our website are flexible and timely and easily adapted for last-minute bookings, or ideal for a dedicated online campaign with other digital options. For all possibilities, take a look at our rate card online.

**NEWSLETTER**

Our newsletter goes out each month to a wide variety of collectors, dealers, curators and library heads, as well as students.

## asianartnewspaper.com/advertising

For more information contact our commercial director Kelvin McManus, +44(0)7877 866692 kelvin.mcmanus@cksmmedia.co.uk