

KOH Dongyeon

Independent scholar and critic

KIM Ayoung's In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept (2016): Archival Imagination

Artist: KIM Ayoung



What Is an Archive?

Michel Foucault, the author of The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972), once said that an archive is more than a physical trace left by history. Instead, the philosopher saw the archive as the antithesis of history, as he denied the common attitude toward historical materials as the most effective and reliable source of evidence for unveiling factual information and realities from the past.1 In other words, the remnants of the past tell us about the present as much as they do about the past. The fragmentary materials that have been passed down to us have been preserved, organized and structured in accordance with how we look back upon the past. By the same token, however, our historical knowledge has also been heavily influenced by what we have inherited from the past through books, museums and other archival institutions. Why have some vestiges from the past remained while others have faded away? Why should certain traces be valued more than others, and differently by various people?

KIM Ayoung's project touches on how our perception of history-as well as our present, for that matter-has been shaped by a myriad of historical materials, such as images, literature, news reports and lyrics. Kim's 2016 solo exhibition at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept, featured individually translated poems (or librettos) and other materials pasted on the venue's tall, mat-black walls. The exhibition drew the audience's attention to an artist-made-diagram in which fragmented materials from the past, including images and texts, were randomly pasted together. Here, the diagram was less a truthful account of the past than what Foucault described as "historical narrative," which, in his mind, was how one could get a glimpse of the epistemology of a given period.

While Kim takes a distinctive approach to history, most of her materials concentrate on the late 19th to early 20th century, when the colonization of Far East Asia was fully underway. From historic sites and architecture to steamships and railways, they all belong to the history of colonization and modernization, such as Korea's Geomundo Island (also known as Port Hamilton, when it was annexed by the British government in 1885), the Trans-Siberian Railroad of the Japanese imperial era (1868-1947), the Palais Garnier opera house in

Paris built by Napoleon III and the 2014 Sewol (or "世越," which translates to "beyond the world") ferry disaster, in which hundreds of people died when the vessel capsized in the Yellow Sea. All are closely related to the history of human tragedy and destruction, albeit in relation to the global expansion led by Western countries in the last century.

What is notable from these historical incidences is that ordinary people have been kept from accessing the core information of these tragedies, even after they have happened, Knowledge of the British annexation of Geomundo Island is restricted to most Koreans even today, while the British Library has preserved a collection of historical documents about the annexation in its public archives. The Trans-Siberian Railroad, built by the Japanese colonial government and stretching from Seoul to Siberia, was accessible only to Japanese colonizers who were passing the Korean peninsula to reach Manchuria during the 1920s and 1930s. The trains passing through the Korean peninsula remained closed to the public. except to a few member of the upper class close to the colonial government and the case of a massive migration of Koreans to Manchuria in the early 1930s by the Japanese Government. The old train station of Seoul (now renovated as a cultural center called "Culture Station Seoul 284") and the interior area of the railroad, therefore, used to be an "imaginary" space to most Koreans during the occupation era (1910-45).

How Kim has treated her materials, therefore, not only follows the Foucaultian sense of the archive—that is, that the archive is far from being a perfect window to the past—but also reveals her political stance toward the colonial history of Korea and elsewhere. The artist's diagram and lyrics comprise information from different historical periods, in areas such as politics, economics and the arts, but usually do not provide us with a clear understanding of the past; instead, it implies that our historical knowledge is always unsettled, imperfect and even ungraspable. Some historical documents have been restricted in what is shown, as was the case with Geomundo Island.

In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept (2016)

From November 2015 to June 2016, Kim

participated in a residency at Pavillon Neuflize OBC Research Lab of Palais de Tokyo as part of an exchange program between the Paris-based art space and the Seoul Museum of Art, Later in June, she collaborated with French singers, a choreographer and a Korean composer to premier a performance, In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept (2016), at Palais Garnier in Paris, The Garnier's architectural structure has much historical importance; above all, it points to the decline of the bygone exuberance of the Napoleonic era and empire. Its inner reservoir and ornate interiors, which date back to the 19th century, segregated from the rest of the modern world, may have inspired Kim to pursue the theme of human tragedy, as a reflection of the greed and violence that fueled the colonial era.

Completed in 1875, Palais Garnier, also known as the Opera House, is a Neo-Baroque structure built by Napoleon III. At the time of its construction, the Garnier was less a performance venue and more of a gathering place for the bourgeoisie. In terms of spatial arrangement, the social space within its structure is disproportionately large in comparison to its stage and concert hall. As the Garnier was being built, it was discovered that the foundation of the building was too weak and prone flooding, so a decision was ultimately made to create a double foundation and to turn the basement space into a reservoir. This same reservoir served as the famous backdrop for the 1910 novel The Phantom of the Opera. According to Kim, the underground reservoir, located approximately below the theater stage, presses down the unstable foundation of the building, much like a ship's ballast tank. Interestingly, many technical names ascribed to the fixtures and structure of the opera house and concert hall-such as battens and blocks-have nautical origins.

Kim compares the Garnier's architectural structure to that of a ship, because the building has an underground reservoir. The Garnier's questionable structure is also comparable to the unstable political circumstances of the Napoleonic Empire and 19th-century European aristocrats during the time it was made, as the latter parties' destiny was about to sink. On a totally different but related note, during Kim's sojourn in Paris, the images of refugees escaping on boats from Syria and Iraq were televised every day. Many of the boats unfortunately capsized and became wrecked in the Mediterranean Sea.

In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept depicts a choir singing verses taken from the Epic of Gilgamesh and Noah's Ark. Such excerpts include: "Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood; you shall make the ark with rooms, and shall cover it inside and out with pitch." According to Abrahamic religions, Noah's Ark is the first incident of human salvation by God, yet it is also one of the most well-known and thoroughly recorded narratives of human tragedy in religious or mythological texts.

During the preparation, what stuck Kim most was not just the recent reports about the refugee boats. According to her French colleagues, working for the Garnier, the dancers heard the news of the terrorist attack on Paris occurred [in November 2015] quite later than the actual accident had happened. In addition, a staff member shared with Kim an incredible account, "We are at Palais Garnier from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., every day and on most weekends. We enter the Paris Opera Ballet as children and retire at 42. Living within this space, we are sometimes unaware of what is going on in this world—even what day it is, or what time."

The Garnier seeks the elegance and sophistication of the past. However, as an institution and as a building, the world within the Garnier is totally separated from the outside, like a remote island. It is a theatrical space, where performing troupes face intense competition and are subjected to rigorous training. As Kim explains, the Garnier, as the pantheon of cultural heritage and fine arts in France, is both physically and symbolically removed from any ongoing social and political realities. The Garnier, in that respect, can also be conceived as both a positive and negative entity reminiscent of *Noah's Ark*, which kept humans and animals away from the outside flood, but helpless to stop the devastation.

Also part of In This Vessel is Kim's musical collaboration with the Korean composer Hyun-Hwa Cho. Against Cho's music Kim puts haunting lyrics, which are actually words quoted from safety announcements that were made on the Sewol as it sank. This, again, reflects Kim's intention to relocate past epics, architectural structures and narratives into a modern context. The audience can hear the performers chant "stay there, keep still, lie motionless, sit still," in a

similar manner to the announcement made by the ferry's crew on the day of the disaster. On April 16, 2014, the Sewol capsized on its way from Incheon to Jeju Island—its slow, inescapable sinking horrifically broadcast across live television. Following the incident, a large portion of the Korean public, which could only watch helplessly as the tragic disaster unfolded, became enraged. What angered Koreans the most were the ferry captain's orders for the passengers to "stay there" on the vessel, while he, himself, abandoned ship—an act that led to the deaths of many who obeyed him. When the Sewol sank, it took more than 300 lives; most of the passengers were high school students heading to the island for a field trip.

Archives on(off) Site

Kim's reorganization and critical exploration of existing historical narratives are drawn from her own experiences abroad. The artist graduated from London's Chelsea College of Arts in 2010 and had a residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin in 2012. During her time in Europe, which spanned seven years, she developed a critical attitude toward the Eurocentric worldview. Her interest in the late-19th to early-20th-century history of Europe was particularly intensified as she studied in Europe, where in 2011 she came across old newspaper documents stored at the British Library website.

Kim's video work *PH Express* (2012) was created as a culmination of what she discovered from the British Library website which included newspaper articles as well as telegrams by the British Foreign Office, the Royal Navy and British diplomats in East Asia from the turn of the century. In *PH Express*, the British annexation of Geomundo is reconstructed from the perspective of a British captain, a journalist and politicians. The voice of the native Joseon people is, of course, absent, as they even seem to be ignorant about why the British Army invaded their land in the first place. Indeed, records of history—how it is written, preserved and spread around with particular political purposes—are usually supervised by its victors.

By contrast, Kim's presentation at the 56th Venice Biennale, Zepheth, Whale Oil from the Hanging Gardens to You (2015), grew out of her findings of personal interviews and stories, rather than from archival documents. In it, she takes a more individual approach toward how the oil industry had been developed in the Middle East, yet subsequently became part of a larger diplomatic feud surrounding issues of exploitation. The artist used excerpts from the autobiography of Violet Penelope Dickson, wife of a British colonial administrator in the 1920s, to create sound pieces combining Dickson's voice with that of Kim's own father, who had worked in the Middle East during the 1980s. Here, the audiences can hear a Korean worker's unusual anecdotes and viewpoints related to the petroleum industry.

By mixing materials drawn from both archival documents and personal interviews, Kim discourages the viewer to come up with a relatively homogenized interpretation of her work, Zepheth, Whale Oil from the Hanging Gardens to You 1, for instance, the artist arranges various verves, interviews and keywords, in accordance with a style reminiscent of Guillaume Apollinaire's modernist poems, which undermine cognitive and textural signification of words, A vocalized version is performed by a 12-person choir, In this work, Kim uses an algorithm, similar to that used by Google's linguists, to categorize her own collected data, but also to incorporate a random way of gathering and associating information. The artist, in fact, created Deus ex Machina program that consistently rearrange words selected by the artist from major internet portal sites, such as Google, to be used as the aural content of the performance installation. The absurdity of the work's title, Zepheth, Whale Oil from the Hanging Gardens to You, is due to the fact that it is computer-generated, drawing from a pool of vocabulary in accordance with specifically programmed rules.

In addition to visual and aural elements, Kim also utilizes the unique tactile impression of a given site. For instance, Palais de Garnier is in perfect condition, in comparison with the basement of the Palais de Tokyo, where one can find mold, decay and stains. In a way, the sense-numbingly plain and almost depressing atmosphere of the Palais de Tokyo basement, the site for Kim's installation-based exhibition *In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept*, allowed for greater dramatic effect. Upon entering the basement, the audience was surrounded by a dilapidated atmosphere. Coupled with primordial sounds, gestures and textures, the overall exhibition provoked an eerie feeling on

the part of the viewer.

The chant is also added with an aim of appeasing the dead; it is made up of excerpts from the Epic of Gilgamesh, as well as the tale of Noah's Ark and stories from Greek mythology, whose respective texts were put on walls installed at the site of the Palais de Tokyo, Kim again chose a nonlinear structure over a more orderly one to arrange the words and images on the walls. Therefore, audiences had to make mental connections between keywords and concepts-ship, disaster, pitch oil, natural resources, colonization-rather than be informed about definite "facts," More important, as linguistic information became obscured, the sound and visceral tactility of the installation became amplified. The viewers were also keenly aware of their physicality, being situated in the middle of the Palais de Tokyo's basement, which was part of the venue's original construction when it was built in 1937. The mold on the cement wall helped viewers to experience an uncanny moment in which the early 20th-century structure of the Palais de Tokyo served as the backdrop for the ancient tales of Noah's Ark, as well as the chants for the victims of the Sewol ferry disaster and the refugee crisis. Here, the message seemed to be that, even if it is impossible for viewers to get an overall picture of the historical past, it is still possible for them to empathize with victims whose stories have not been fully told.

KOH Dongyeon Interview

Your background and graduate degree are in film theory as well as postwar art history. How did you become interested in those two fields?

I interned at the Guggenheim Museum in New York from 1998 to 1999, with Nancy Spector, who was then one of the most promising curators of her generation. I also worked with Joan Young, now the Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Guggenheim, [who] was then preparing exhibitions on video art, which later became Nam June Paik's retrospective in 2000, as well as Matthew Barney's show. While doing research for Ms. Spector and Ms. Young, I realized that a huge portion of materials that they asked me to make copies for were in the field of film theory. This is one of the reasons why I chose to pursue a double major in film theory and art history at CUNY [the City University of New York], Graduate Center in the fall of 1999.

What, specifically, did you study at CUNY, and what was your thesis about?

After I got into the PhD program of art history at the Graduate Center, I became less interested in media arts, per se, than cultural studies and interdisciplinary approaches. I took courses on avant-garde films, literature—in addition to art history—with a focus on inter-genre approaches and cultural studies. My dissertation was about the collaboration between artists and writers, such as Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara, especially in relation to the social structure of the New York art world in the 1950s and early 1960s, as well as gay cultures. This was also the time when the earliest avant-garde films in the US, such as Pull My Daisy (1959), were made. Rivers and his writer friends also appeared in that film.

decade in New York, what had changed?

Things had changed since I studied art history at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, from 1993 until 1996. There were a few galleries and museums on contemporary art in the early 1990s in South Korea; but when I returned in 2007, "alternative spaces," or artist-run galleries, nonprofit spaces and governmentfunded spaces, had been very active, even compared to the New York art world. Young artists seemed no longer to obsess with traditional genres and institutions

You worked as co-director for Art 2021—what did that experience entail and where did it lead you?

The art market was thriving in Seoul during the mid-2000s, and galleries needed new personnel that had both linguistic and critical knowledge on contemporary arts abroad. Therefore, as soon as I returned to Korea, I became involved with several commercial art galleries and got an offer to run a small branch gallery, named "Art 2021," of a wellestablished gallery in Seoul, I had to research young and relatively experimental artists for both Art 2021 and the original mother gallery. As I look back, that experience enabled me to have concrete ideas about how young artists survive and the differences between the art worlds in New York and Seoul. Located in Manhattan, the curriculum at the Graduate Center underscored more pragmatic ways of utilizing art historical knowledge in contemporary art scenes in New York, both for critics and curators.

How did you get involved with artist residencies in Seoul?

When you returned to Seoul in 2007, after more than a I had never performed any administrative roles in

alternative spaces or artist residencies in Seoul. My role has primarily been the researcher and critic of young artists, or the jury for programs and art prizes. My first experience with art residencies and nonprofit art institutions in Seoul happened in 2009. Kim Hong-hee, then the director of the Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, offered for me to serve as the organizer of ResArtis Meeting, the international organization for artist residencies. Kim had run SSamzie Space for a decade, from 1998 until 2008, and was about to open the Gyeonggi Creation Center in 2009. The conference or the meeting itself was not that impressive, yet I learned a lot about how curators had established their personal and professional network.

You've been involved with the Sindoh Artist Support Program, along with a number of government-funded artist studios and residencies in South Korea. What kind of experiences did you have with them?

For the Sindoh Artist Support Program (SINAP), from 2011 through 2014, I was on the jury with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the artistic director at the Serpentine Galleries, and Beatrix Ruf, the director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The Korean company, called Sindoricoh. or "Sindoh" for short, was making fax machines and 3-D printers, From the beginning, my purpose of being involved with SINAP was clear and focused, as I wanted to provide young contemporary Korean artists with chances to present their works to experienced curators in more professional settings. Most artists' presentations in South Korea last less than ten minutes, and unfortunately, Korean artists are used to that type of very superficial and perfunctory presentation. In addition, I undertook an in-depth interview before the final jury meeting, and translated written interviews, as I found that most materials about contemporary Korean artists in English were often near-unreadable because of the language as well as different critical focus.

One of your recent projects is the artist interview book, <u>Respond Artists!</u>: <u>How do Artists of Our Era Live?</u> (2015). What does it cover and what were your motivations for writing it?

After serving as a jury [member] for SINAP for four

years, I kept writing about artists—usually young artists in their mid- to late 30. Through my interviews, I also found that a lot of artists in their 30s became very anxious about their futures, with the lack of sustainable economic support. Most grants for young artists can no longer be given to the artists when they get older. Korean art museums and government officials often tend to mechanically group artists by their ages. After the collapse of the booming art market in South Korea in the late 2000s, the state of art galleries for young artists was far from helpful.

With the intention of writing a book based on vivid and frank artists' stories, I began interviewing more than 50 Korean artists, from their late 20s to their early 40s, and organizing the book [based on] interviews of 17 artists and three curators. Some of the topics covered in the book are: how they became artists; how the grants and residencies were indispensible; social and personal networks; second jobs; marriage; psychological aspects, such as jealousy and competition among artists; and, finally, hot issues related to artists' social status in the Korean art world.

How would you describe the kind of art historical or intellectual conversation that's happening in Korea today?

This year, I was questioned about a place where one could learn about hot issues on contemporary Korean arts from Bartomeu Marí, the newly appointed director of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea, I ended up listing important events in Korean contemporary arts from the last two decades, and advised him to visit Facebook, At the same time, I remained unsure if he could find anything productive. Some members of the younger generation are interested in attacking neoliberalism, yet the argument seems to be less original; their tones are aggressive, yet works themselves are far from being either sophisticated or humorous. In terms of artistic experimentations and debates, young artists and curators seem to be exposed to so much news and [so many] theories before they can find their own voices. Artist-run galleries, led by the younger generation, brought out

their marketable items and statements at Seoul Babel (2016), held at the Seoul Museum of Art; they describe themselves as the generation that belongs to a certain kind of game-type, rather than art-related -isms. With so much focus on laissez-faire attitudes and issues of the economic status of artists, it is hard to make any critical judgment at the moment.

Based on your conversations with young artists in Korea, what do you think they really need today?

I guess it is a matter of balancing oneself among private circumstances and public issues in order to present their ideas about current aesthetic and political issues, in more personal and unexpected ways. Even among the artists who may seem to work with interesting political themes at the *Mediacity Seoul 2016*, their approach is still very dogmatic and repetitive, in a way, and reflects the highly polarized ideological condition in South Korea.

I published an artist interview book because I wanted to encourage young artists by introducing them to stories about experienced artists working through their formative years. [My] book on historic exhibitions utilizing nonartistic spaces in Japan, China and Korea after the 1990s and onwards will also be published soon. At this point, my goal is to continue to write about young artists and consistently support them—not only theoretically, but also psychologically.

KIM Ayoung



b. 1979

Education

2009-2010 M.A. Fine Art, Chelsea College of Arts, London, UK

2005-2007 B.A. (Honours) Photography, London College of Communication, London, UK (1st Class in Dissertation) 1997-2002 B.A. Visual Communication Design, Kookmin University, Seoul, Korea

Selected Solo Exhibitions/Events

2016 In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept, Salle 37, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France

2015 Zepheth, Whale Oil, Hanging Gardens, Shell (Lecture performance accompanied by a publication), The Book Society, Seoul, Korea

2015 Zepheth, Whale Oil from the Hanging Gardens to You, Shell 2 (Music Theater), Box Theater, Seoul Art Space Mullae, Seoul, Korea

2014 The Railway Traveler's Handbook, RTO Performance Hall, Culture Station Seoul 284, Seoul, Korea

2013 The Railway Traveler's Handbook, Box Theater, Seoul Art Space Mullae, Seoul, Korea

2012 Crossings, 16 Bungee, Seoul, Korea

2012 PH Express, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany

2010 Minima Memoria, Street Level, Glasgow, UK

Selected Group Exhibitions/Screenings

2016 Fraud Tectonics (Performance) in 30 Years 1986-2016: As the Moon Waxes and Wanes, MMCA Gwacheon National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art), Gwacheon, Korea

2016 La rumeur des naufrages, Palais Garnier, Paris, France (Group performance event)

2016 Please Return to Busan Port, Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium, Vestfossen, Norway

2016 Urban Legends, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea

2016 Living on the Border (Group Screening, 29 Mar 2016), Club Silencio, Paris, France

2016 Harsh Landscape: Sonic Cartography, Mcaulay Studio Foyer, Hong Kong Art Center, Hong Kong (Co-presented by CMHK: Contemporary Musiking Hong Kong)

2015 Secret Cinema (Group Screening), A4 Space, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, UAE

2015 Ana: Please keep your eyes closed for a moment, Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah, UAE

2015 All the World's Futures, La Biennale di Venezia: 56th International Art Exhibition, Venice, Italy

2015 Film Montage, Coreana Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea

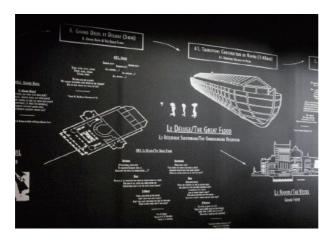
2015 Media Salon de SeMA, Buk Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea

2014 Malfunction Library, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea





Photography: Aurélien Mole





Project by Ayoung Kim Curator: Chloé Fricout Producer: Pauline-Alexandrine Deforge

Composer: Hyun-Hwa Cho Choirmaster: Morel Christine Singers: Charles Barbier (Tenor), Violaine Barthélemy (Alto), Alessia Thais Berardi (Soprano), Renaud Bres (bass), Romain Dayez (Baritone) and Lucie Louvrier (Mezzo)

Sound mixing: Daewoong Lim, Sisu Park and Ayoung Kim 6-channel surround mixing: Salomé Damien from GRM (Groupe de recherches musicales) On location sound mixing and mastering: Guillaume Couturier

The project was realized under Pavillon Neuflize OBC program, research lab of the Palais de Tokyo 2015/2016 during its collaboration with the Opera national de Paris, the Institut national de l'audiovisuel and the Groupe de recherches musicales (INA-GRM).

List of Works Displayed

In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept 6-Channel Sound Installation, 13minutes, 2016

Map for "In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept" Vinyl-Cut Graphics, 530x225cm, 2016

Grand deuil (Deep Mourning) Digital Print, 570x285cm, 2016



In This Vessel We Shall Be Kept_Performance, Palais Garnier 2016 Photography: Christophe Pelé



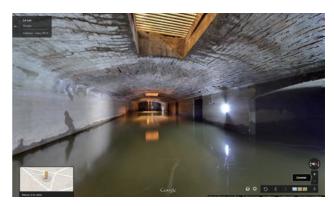
Project by Ayoung Kim & Sébastien Bertaud

Music Composition: Hyun-Hwa Cho Choirmaster: Christine Morel

Singers: Charles Barbier (Tenor) Violaine Barthélemy (Alto) Alessia Thais Berardi (Soprano) Maxime Cohen (bass) Romain Dayez (Baritone) Lucie Louvrier (Mezzo)

Dancers: Héloïse Bourdon Germain Louvet Hugo Marchand Jeremy Loup Quer Charlotte Ranson Roxane Stojanov

The project was realized under Pavillon Neuflize OBC program, research lab of the Palais de Tokyo 2015/2016 during its collaboration with the Opéra national de Paris, the Institut national de l'audiovisuel and the Groupe de recherches musicales (INA- GRM).



Underground lake at Palais Garnier, Image captured from Google map









KIM Ayoung



PH Express 2011 2-channel video, approx 31 minutes











Zepheth, Whale Oil from the Hanging Gardens to You, Shell 2 2015 Music theater with 3 actors and 7 voice performers, 50 minutes (Music composition: Heera Kim)





Zepheth, Whale Oil from the Hanging Gardens to You, Shell 3 2015 6-channel sound installation, 40 minutes Wall diagram, digital print, 5x4m Voice performance, 20 minutes (Music composition: Heera Kim)

