

AYOUNG KIM

A Latent Promise

BY LOUIS LU

Portrait of AYOUNG KIM.
Photo by June Lin for
ArtAsiaPacific.



In an abandoned Asian shopping mall—labyrinthine, ruinous—three figures are chasing each other. The space feels at once desolate and frenetic: motorbikes drift mid-air, consumer goods float around, and a massive golden clock dominates a wall. The figures, identical except for their movements, wear helmets that hide their faces. At one point, when they leap onto the clock's hour hands mid-battle, it is unclear whether they are engaged in heated combat or choreography. This is a scene in Korean artist Ayoung Kim's latest M+ façade commission, *Dancer in the Mirror Field* (2025), which screens from October 3 to December 28 in Hong Kong. The story features Ernst Mo (her name an anagram of "monster"), who has split into three versions of herself, all vying for the coveted title "Dancer of the Year" in a mysterious delivery platform's annual contest. Ernst Mo has been the protagonist in Kim's work for three years, moving through semi-virtual Seoul streets and now into this iteration inspired by Hong Kong's urban memory and neon-lit action cinema of the 1980s and '90s.

2025 has been a remarkable year for Kim. Following last year's ACC Future Prize, she received the LG Guggenheim Award in February, opened her first European solo exhibition at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof in the same month, and is currently

preparing for her upcoming show at MoMA PSI in New York, while also participating in this year's Performa Biennial. I met Kim in the screening room of M+ museum, just ahead of the unveiling of her façade commission.

As the latest addition to her delivery dancer universe, *Dancer in the Mirror Field* showcases how Kim's world-building continues to expand across various formats. Unlike her previous works, which incorporated live footage, this new project was created entirely through game engines, using AI-generated sequences that transform motion capture from stunt actors into digital imagery. While some may view this erasure of live action as a loss of bodily presence in an increasingly virtual landscape, Kim sees it as a reflection of our reality, in which different modes of image-making have already become inseparable.

"The idea that there is a pipeline of pre-production, production, and the post-production of editing and VFX (visual effects) has been dismantled," she explained. "The game engine world-building has to precede even the actual production." This embrace of automation and artificial intelligence, however, doesn't convey technological pessimism or blind optimism. Instead, Kim is drawn to what she calls a "latent mode" of emerging technologies—the unexplored possibilities

that arise before a tool's purpose becomes fixed. "I think the artist's role is to break the single definition or utility of a technology and give it new directions," she said. "Sometimes it may seem meaningless in utilitarian terms, but it always paves the way for capacities that technology may hold or conceal."

It is tempting to generalize Kim's work as being primarily about "technology," but she sees it otherwise. "I don't think technology, per se, is a theme in my practice. It's about its effect, and how it reshapes our daily lives," she said. "I would say that 'techno-precarity' is the prevailing theme in my recent projects, which focuses on its general impact and side effects."

This techno-precarity is embodied in the survival struggles of two young Asian women delivery riders. Ernst Mo and her double, En Storm, first appeared in the short film *Delivery Dancer's Sphere* (2022), in which the two couriers, enslaved by algorithmic control and platform metrics, engaged in a passionate, love-hate-fueled battle across a sci-fi vision of Seoul. Kim meticulously crafted this world by fusing live-action cityscapes with computer-generated imagery, creating a universe where multiple temporalities and realities overlapped. These spatiotemporal ruptures mimic the fractured daily experiences of actual delivery workers. "The app

AYOUNG KIM, *Dancer in the Mirror Field*, 2025, still image of video. Commissioned by M+, Hong Kong, and Powerhouse, Sydney, presented by Julius Baer, 2025. Courtesy the artist.



constantly sends signals and alarms—there’s this offer, this call. Would you accept or not? You have to interact with that while monitoring another phone for navigation, and simultaneously pay attention to the physical road,” Kim explained. “For me, this condition bifurcates or multiplies realities.”

Her work, *Delivery Dancer’s Arc: Inverse* (2024), presented last year in the expansive underground space of National Asian Culture Center in Gwangju, further explores this coexistence of multiple temporalities. The three-channel video installation, accompanied by sound, lighting, and suspended circular screens alongside a monumental sundial sculpture, transported Ernst Mo and En Storm from Seoul to Novaria, a fictional future city. Here, the protagonists find themselves caught between different eras and conflicting worlds. The work’s title points to these

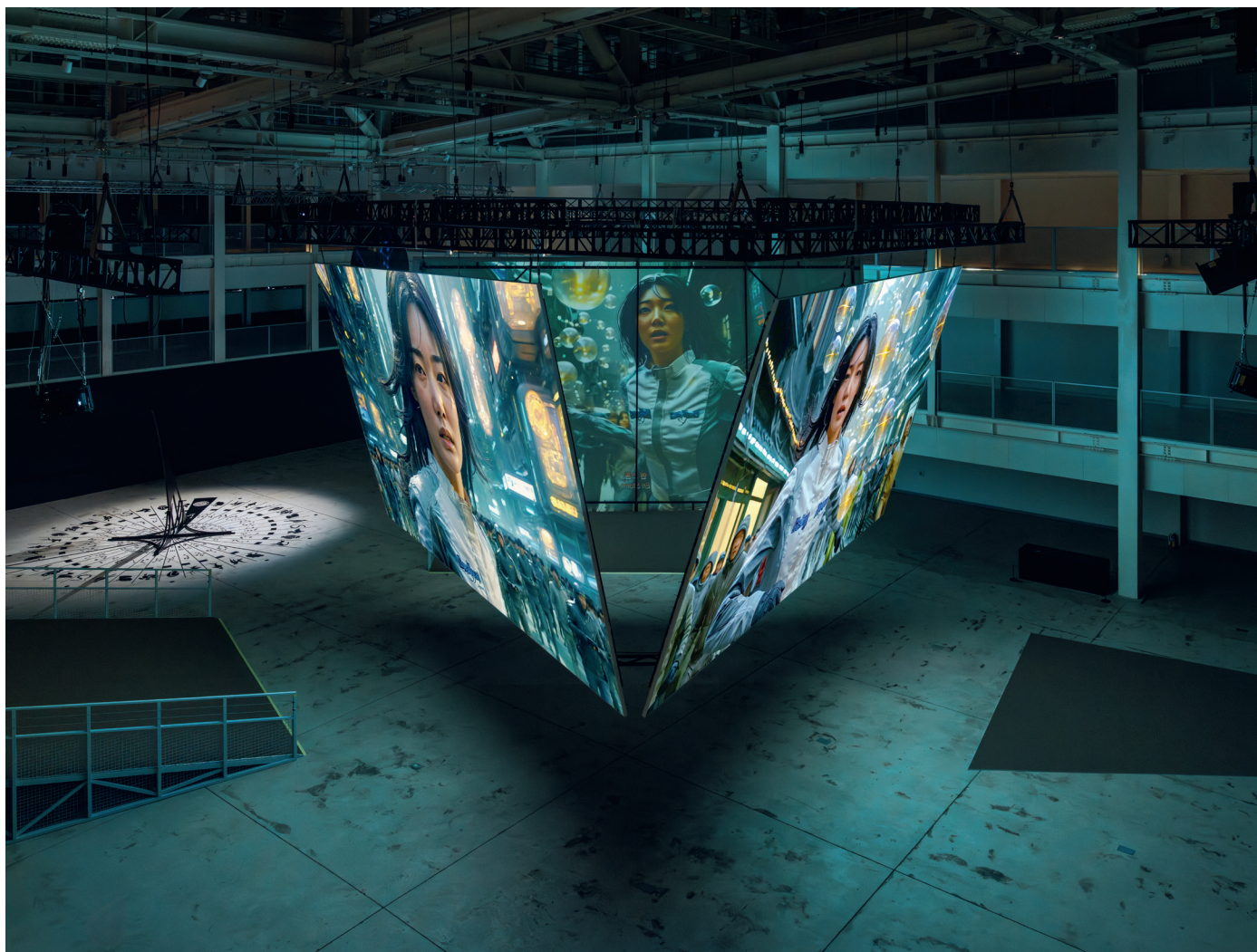
temporal complexities: “arc” refers to the curves of sundials and calendar disks that symbolize timelines, while “inverse” suggests reciprocal relationships, perhaps alluding to the inverse relationship with velocity in physics. Across the three massive screens, a 90-second segment uses artificial intelligence to continuously recombine thousands of discarded production images and footage, presenting different combinations with each viewing. The work moves beyond the specific experience of the gig economy in Korea, offering a broader commentary on the accelerative nature of capitalism and the fragmented consciousness it produces in those who navigate its demands.

Within this efficiency-driven worldview, Kim splits her female characters into multiple versions of themselves, infusing them with complex emotional tensions:

conflict, love-hate entanglements, and even undercurrents of intimate desire. “Contemporary society wants human beings to be logical and emotionally tidy in order to be utilitarian,” she said. “But human emotion is not like that. It’s abrupt, illogical, and incoherent. In portraying the relationship between these two female protagonists—their urge to love alongside their antagonism toward one another—I aim to capture this multilayered spectrum. Their feelings aren’t neat. They are not ‘sterile.’ Many aspects of our society require us to be hygienic and functional, but we are not that kind of being. I wanted to deal with all those emotions.”

Her emphasis on the “unhygienic” nature of emotion recalls British anthropologist Mary Douglas’s analysis in *Purity and Danger* (1966), which critiques how concepts of purity and cleanliness serve

Installation view of **AYOUNG KIM’s** *Delivery Dancer’s Arc: Inverse*, 2024, at the National Asian Cultural Center (ACC), Gwangju, 2024. Photo by Cheolki Hong. Courtesy the artist and ACC.





Installation view of **AYOUNG KIM**'s "Many Worlds Over" at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2025. Photo by Jacopo LaForgia. Courtesy the artist; Gallery Hyundai, Seoul; and the National Museums in Berlin.

as patriarchal constructs of moral order. Kim extends this framework to address capitalism's elimination of any human "impurities" deemed irrelevant to efficiency.

In her exhibition "Many Worlds Over" at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin earlier this year, *Ghost Dancers B* (2022) featured two life-sized delivery dancers frozen mid-struggle, surrounded by shattered glass on the floor. The figures appear locked in a wrestle or embrace. Its counterpart, *Ghost Dancers A* (2022), displayed two disembodied helmets suspended in space, with cables trailing like severed spines across the floor. Inside the helmets, footage of high-speed delivery routes played endlessly, portraying a bleak image in which the dancers' autonomous consciousness vanished along with their bodies, forever advancing toward the next algorithmic target. Nearby, a large wallpaper installation titled *Evening Peak Time Is Back* (2022) depicted the two riders in manga style, without their helmets, embracing with subtly erotic overtones. Against the gallery space's blue carpets, mirrored walls, metal frames, and grid-like fluorescent lights,

their intimate touch seemed to assert the very physical contact and "unclean" emotions that are becoming increasingly scarce in this highly optimized dystopia.

German artist and theorist Hito Steyerl introduced the concept of the "poor image" in her essay *In Defense of the Poor Image* (2009), describing images degraded through endless digital compression, copying, and circulation, along with their democratic potential. In her recent book *Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat* (2025), she presents the idea of the "mean image," which refers to how AI-generated imagery statistically averages vast amounts of online data, resulting in images that tend toward mediocrity, homogenization, and stereotypes. If Steyerl articulates a widespread anxiety about technology's unsettling potential, Kim's practice appears to offer a contrasting response: dazzling, pristine, and heavily reliant on artificial intelligence. Yet looking back at Kim's earlier works, from *Ephemeral Ephemera* (2007–09), composed of images from news headlines in the UK and Korea, to the series *Zepheth, Whale Oil from the Hanging*

Gardens to You (2014–15), which intertwines petroleum politics with her own personal memories, we see an artist consistently excavating the "crack" within seemingly closed histories, attempting to construct alternatives narratives within fixed events.

Growing up, Kim was fascinated by Hollywood's depiction of Asian cities in sci-fi cinema, but that fascination eventually gave way to a question: "Where were the actual Asian people?" This inquiry ultimately led her to develop her understanding of ethno-futurism. She notes: "Almost every version—Afrofuturism, Gulf Futurism, Sinofuturism—deals with the past. It's not only about the future; it involves reconsidering and embracing the past, reconciling with it, understanding ourselves as we are, and envisioning our future with autonomy and embedded agency." It seems, then, that Kim is less a technological enthusiast than a keen observer of its potential to illuminate the very mechanisms of society—its latent promise in negotiating the space between what has already happened and what might still be imagined.