Performance: The multidisciplinary practice of Ayoung Kim projects possible worlds and queers conceptions of time *by Cassie Packard*

Warped Speed

Ayoung Kim, *Delivery Dancer's Sphere*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist

CALL IT A GLITCH, a leak or a snag: what's clear is that Ernst Mo has a problem. A gig labourer known as a 'delivery dancer', she traverses the pinched alleys and endless expressways of a speculative Seoul by motorbike. Making delivery after delivery, she adroitly executes the punishing choreographies invoked by platform capitalism's algorithmic and logistical flows. Dancemaster, the artificial intelligence behind the chirpy courier app, sets her optimized routes, which range from impractical to impossible. Fortunately, she is a Ghost Dancer, capable of zipping from point A to point B at light speed.

But lately, she keeps running across her doppelganger, a delivery dancer from another possible world. 'Every time you appear, time slows down, En Storm,' Ernst Mo says. And it's true: space-time is out of joint. Ernst Mo's deliveries lag; her rating plummets; her account is suspended. The two spar – fighting, dancing – between boxes at a logistics centre, atop a rainy rooftop, on the asphalt of an open road, in a narrative that runs back over its own grooves. After Ernst Mo kills En Storm in combat, the duo momentarily appears astride a single bike; the plot keeps falling apart, breaking off, glitching.

Seoul-based artist Ayoung Kim created *Delivery Dancer's Sphere*, a single-channel video combining live-action sequences and game engine simulation, in 2022 as food delivery services ballooned amid the COVID-19 pandemic. (The same year, she also released a game version, *Delivery Dancer Simulation*.) Since then, additional 'Delivery Dancer' universes have branched off in the form of interlinked projects: 'I'm interested in the possibilities of transmedia storytelling. Different media offer different senses of agency,' Kim told me when we spoke this summer. She compares her video about a futuristic Busan-turned-algal

Ayoung Kim, *Surisol Underwater Lab Guided Tour*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist

biofuel hub, *At the Surisol Underwater Lab* (2020), to a VRChat version, *Surisol Underwater Lab Guided Tour* (2022), in which Kim, in the guise of a giant cephalopod, leads around an audience of avatars.

We met near the Guggenheim Museum, where, the evening prior, Kim held a performance lecture as part of the 2025 LG Guggenheim Award, granted annually to an artist working with technology. In November, she'll return to New York to premiere a new 'Delivery Dancer' performance for the 2025 Performa Biennial, and to mount a solo show at MoMA PS1 that marks the US debut of her videos *Delivery Dancer's Sphere*, *Delivery Dancer's Arc: 0° Receiver* (2024) and *Delivery Dancer's Arc: Inverse* (2024). Scenes, sequences and motifs are directly transposed or repeat with variation across these concatenated speculative fictions. Yet each iteration from the ongoing series has its own lore and subplots, almost as if Kim were producing fan fiction about her own work, or bootleg versions that degrade the authority of the so-called original.

Take her as-yet-untitled performance, slated to unfold at a New York venue resembling a logistics facility. Kim drew inspiration from the pseudonymous Korean sci-fi writer Djuna (after Djuna Barnes, author of the 1936 lesbian novel *Nightwood*), whose short story 'Square Dance' (1997) follows human archaeologists who encounter a spaceship and, as if remotely puppeteered, are made to re-enact an alien trauma. 'They perform the aliens' actions even though their bone structures are incompatible – like a live motion-caption theatre,' the artist tells me. In her piece, two Korean stuntwomen wearing motion-capture suits will perform as delivery dancers; their movements will also materialize on video screens, sometimes mapped onto non-human objects. The violent, intimate choreography was conceived with Cha-i Kim, a stunt coordinator for the Korean Netflix show *Squid Game* (2021–25), in which a wealthy elite orchestrates the gruesome murder of debtors as entertainment.

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Ayoung Kim

Ayoung Kim, *Al-Mather Plot 1991*, 2025. Courtesy: the artist

Video backdrops to the performance will draw on settings from other 'Delivery Dancer' iterations, including *Delivery Dancer's Arc: 0° Receiver*, whose live-action scenes were conceived with the same stunt coordinator. In the three-channel video, the Delivery Dancer platform is a time-control device used by mysterious adversaries called Timekeepers to subjugate distant worlds. Ernst Mo is part of a resistance movement that hopes to stop the Timekeepers from 'constantly reordering time on their own terms', though En Storm – who has insider knowledge as a double agent – warns her that her efforts may ultimately be coopted. Set between an ultra-modern Seoul and a fretted terrain of craggy canyons, floating rock formations, M.C. Escher-style staircases and architecture inspired by the 18th-century Jantar Mantar observatory in New Delhi, the video flickers between live action, game engine simulation, 3D animation and video-to-video AI generation. Changing at breakneck speed, it conveys the possibility of other worlds – a 'multiverse mythos', as philosopher Reza Negarestani characterized another project by Kim in 'Fragments on Cosmological Politics of Many Worlds' (2018) – not only narratively but also aesthetically. Here, the two dancers' gestures are aggregated from the movements of many performers; Kim, in her Guggenheim lecture, noted that 'the geometric scan of the body became a dwelling for many bodies, as if too many inhabitants were living in a single subject', akin to the way an individual may be represented by myriad virtual avatars.

Each 'Delivery Dancer' work revolves around the doppelgangers, whose names are anagrams of 'monster'. In sapphic speculative fiction, it is not uncommon for stories about monsters or doppelgangers – transgressive creatures conventionally viewed as ill omens – to allegorize queer romance. Perhaps the frequent non-recognition of such queer subtext in readings of Kim's work is attributable to – as Terry Castle put it in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1995) – lesbians being 'ghosted … by culture itself'. Yet Kim's wallpaper installation *Evening Peak Time Is Back* (2022), produced with webtoon artist 1172, affirms such a reading: it depicts the delivery dancers in the style of the Korean 'girls' love' genre, which deploys amateur forms like digital comics and slash fiction as tools for queer world-building.

Time's tendency to skip, slow down or otherwise misbehave when the doppelgangers are together has resonances with 'queer time', a framework concerned with unyoking from the forward march of a 'straight' temporality. But more explicitly, the works reckon with time's capitalist and imperialist dimensions. Consider *Delivery Dancer's Arc: Inverse*, an installation featuring a massive sundial sculpture and a three-channel video with computationally randomized playback, first displayed on a jumbotron at the Asia Culture Center's 2024 ACC Future Prize exhibition in Gwangju. The video is set in Timekeeper-controlled Novaria, a futuristic city-state with neither day nor night. When an ancient calendar is rediscovered, it seems that another time system could be reclaimed. A voice laments a 'world that skips the leap months [where] time keeps moving faster and faster', alluding to the widespread imposition of the 'international standard' Gregorian calendar, which opts for a leap day. It whispers, instead, of the intercalary month that keeps lunisolar calendars (like the Korean Dangun calendar) harmonized with the seasons.

'I was interested in the culturally diverse ways that people have calculated time and the plural sense of temporality that comes with that,' Kim says, adding that she researched pre-modern Maya, Polynesian and South Korean calendrical systems, among others. As artist Rasheedah Phillips explains in 'Lines of Control: Navigating Tangled Timelines and Colonial Cartographies' (2025), 'the growth of global capitalism and the maintenance of global colonization by European nations over their colonized territories increasingly required clock and calendar time standardization'; she highlights that conferring global prime meridian status on Greenwich, London, in 1884 made Britain 'the center of a global timekeeping system … reinforcing the notion that British customs and laws should be adopted by other countries'. Made using AI tools more often encoded with neocolonial mindsets, Kim's combinations of speculative fiction and Asian futurism contest Western hegemony and the temporalities that underpin it – putting her in the company of such artists as Sophia Al-Maria (Gulf Futurism), Lawrence Lek (Sinofuturism) and Phillips with Camae Ayewa (Black Quantum Futurism). When the delivery dancers slow down time or turn to alternative calendars, their gestures throw sand into an imperialist clockwork. Put another way: they assert that other worlds are possible ●

Above
Ayoung Kim, *Evening Peak Time Is Back (feat. 1172, Character Illustration)*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Youngmin Lee, Gallery Hyundai

Middle and below
Ayoung Kim, *Delivery Dancer's Arc: 0° Receiver*, 2024. Courtesy: the artist and ACMI

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