

## At the Margins of Geometry: Works by Three Women Artists

Yun, Nanjie

For some years now, I've been interested in a number of Korean women artists, Hong Seunghye, Ham Yeonju, Kim Joohyun, working with geometric forms. Foremost among the reasons for my interest is the way in which these artists choose to use the geometric form, a form which has been relatively marginalized within contemporary Korean art. I've been thinking about these artists and their separation from the mainstream in using the geometric form as something that's probably connected with gender. In addition, their use of geometric forms differs both from the geometric abstraction within the mainstream of Western modernism and from the similar experimentation undertaken by a handful of artists during the period of Korean modernism. And their works also differ from the more recent sort of postmodern geometry based on the deconstruction of its modern predecessors. As a result, one might say that the use of geometry by these women artists constitutes a process of gendering. Here I look at how various women artists treat the geometric form and in doing so, I examine whether their works can recuperate their position from its current status outside of patriarchal lineage of geometry in art history. Can their works be gendered as a 'feminine geometry'? And if so, how ?

### *The Patrilineage of Geometry*

"The grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."<sup>1</sup>

As Rosalind Krauss's assertion denotes, the geometric form as the protector of an exclusive opticality, has always exercised a certain kind of power within contemporary art. In its tendency

---

<sup>1</sup>Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, 1985, 9.

towards a purity of form visible only to retina, the geometric form expresses the polarizing will of abstraction in its systematic attempt to exclude the concreteness of life. The geometric form which devours other living voices different from it constitutes an impartial and inexorable frame. It demonstrates the modernity of modern art by exercising the power of "showing" without speaking. Such power already began to manifest itself when linear perspective was introduced some five hundred years ago. In their attempts to transpose the perceived three-dimensional world to a two-dimensional surface, artists reconceived the work into the structure of the grid which seemed to permit all things to become visible, but in actuality had the effect of erasure. Diagrammed according to the grid, the optical distance between subject and object permitted the unseen affects and stories to fall through the cracks of the grid. Even the traces of the unseen were concealed. The grid once latent within the picture emerged out onto the surface to become the modern geometry of Mondrian and others like him. This structure – obtained through a perception of perspectival grid from a very high point - is a positive exemplar of a rationalistic worldview that conspires to have all phenomena seen through the frame of logic. All voices within the picture field are stilled and the geometric form wields a power as great and distant as the heavens.

This silence of form is the emblem of art's ground zero and the sign of its originality. From this space of absolute silence, artists believed that they could see art's beginnings, its origins. The grid itself was a symbol of absolute creation from absolute nothingness. Here, "creation" refers to the operations of the mind. The flat surface from which the traces of material things have disappeared becomes pure manifestation of the spiritual. As Malevich proclaimed, "a black square on a white background was the first form used to emblemize the absence of the object."<sup>2</sup> Modern geometry eventually became a pure form, excavated from the depths of nothingness by the artist's genius and *his* capacity for creation; the geometric form thus became something of a fortress, protecting the realm of art from the vagaries of life.

With its appearance of objectivity as a pure form deprived of language, abstract geometric art has been circulated as a universal style standing for universal principles; on the other hand, it acts as a foil for the logic of the mainstream that claims universality. Modern geometry may be seen as "masculine" not because it was disseminated by male artists, but because of its internalized, patriarchal logic. It is a logic of exclusion, casting away concrete narratives and affects in order to

protect the purity of modernism's lineage as signified by the artistic concept of modern geometry. It is also a logic of power, willingly sacrificing anything discrepant from the myth of geometry's consistent, formal purity.

Not until the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did any real challenge face modern geometry. No longer believing in the modernist myths surrounding geometry, artists actually used geometry to scuttle these very myths. Under the rubric of "neo-geo," this "crisis of geometry," to borrow Peter Halley's phrase, attempted to undermine modern geometry in an extremely analytic way.<sup>3</sup> But this attempt, whose logic was based on direct challenge, only sought a place in the mainstream; it eventually replicated the very logic that it purported to refuse.

In contemporary Korean art where 'Informel' and monochrome painting were the dominant forces, geometry has been a comparatively isolated phenomenon contrary to the situation in the West. Only a small number of artists have experimented with it, a likely reason being that geometry was something relatively alien to mainstream philosophies of art in Korea.<sup>4</sup> The calculated nature of geometric form was a far cry from intuition-based, traditional Korean philosophies of art. Contemporary artists in Korea tended to be more readily accepting of those foreign artistic principles that espoused the unfixed, the irregular; to wit, principles that reinforced what was already embedded in the traditional mainstream. One might see this kind of selective cultural expropriation as an example of how patriarchal values, here manifested as the attempt to preserve the dominant mainstream lineage, have come to exercise the absolute power.

But if one examines the geometric tendency which lay outside of the mainstream of contemporary Korean art more closely, one discerns a subtle structure of gender. Experimentation with geometric abstraction tended to center around the geometric form as a pure, modernist form, particularly in the efforts of the group called 'Origin' in the late 1960s. Put otherwise, while the geometric form resided in the outskirts of contemporary Korean art, the 'Origin' group's efforts reproduced mainstream geometry in the world art. Seeking to join a much larger mainstream, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Kasimir Malevich, " *Die Gegenstandslose Welt*," *Bauhausbuch*, 11, 1927, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Halley, " The Crisis of Geometry," *Peter Halley Collected Essays, 1981-1987*, Bischofberger/Sonnabend Gallery, 1988, 74-105

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Asian philosophies of art in relation to Informel painting, see Yun Nanjie, " The Formation of Korean Abstract Art and Informel Art," *Misul Pyeongdan*, 46, 1997, 51-60.

efforts of 'Origin' were motivated by patriarchal values from which these three women artists remained relatively immune.

The latter employed a different kind of logic, replacing mainstream geometry's rhetoric of exclusion with one of inclusion. Their works allowed for factors of difference and heterogeneity, especially those factors otherwise suppressed in the mainstream geometry in order to sustain the logic of consistency.

### *The Geometry of Three Women Artists*

As the phrase denotes, Hong Seunghye's "organic geometry" concerns geometry that lives, breathes, and reproduces. Square-shaped cells multiply on the wall, in the window, along the stairs, and into the home. These cells are both geometric units comprising a pure form and images reviving the space of life and its concreteness. From a grid arising out of a mode of perspective that traces an abstract structure which transcends the world of the visible, Hong Seunghye's geometry chooses to allude to the concrete thing. Her geometry notes how the square grid can actually be used in either abstract or figurative terms; for instance, the units comprising her recent wall paintings both assume the forms of a square divided into a cross-like formation, as well as that of a window. Repeating throughout the work, these square units suggest either a structure allusive of a perspectival reduction or an array of windows in a built structure.

Hong embraces what initially appears to be a contradiction in terms - the concurrence of the abstract and the figurative - a situation which also appears in the making of the work. Formal units are a compound of the square, that form so privileged within the myth of artistic creation, and the pixel, which endlessly repeats itself on the screen of a computer. In its unforeseen union with the shallow computer screen, the square cedes its status as an exemplar of originality defined as a function of a creative spirit coming from within an artist's innermost depths. In digitized form, the image speaks of both uniqueness and anonymity, of a discourse of creation and replication. Hong freely travels between the interior and exterior of the myth of artistic creation and her attitude continues in the recent works she calls readymade sculptures. The works' ties to the concept of readymade stem from the process of their manufacture: in a pre-existing architectural structure, Hong

colors a part of the wall and presents it as a sculpture. The work is not created, but is instead an outcome of *choices*.

Such works also confirm the geometric form as a material presence, in this case, a wall. In Hong's works, geometry that once existed as a conceptual structure transcendent of the material world is transformed into concrete materiality. Her geometric forms find new life, not only on walls, but on tiles, desks, even on cookies. For Hong, the spiritual and the material, or pure art and everyday life are not different from each other. She directly erases the boundaries between the two, with her installations that "grow out of a red table made from a part falling from a blue wall painting."<sup>5</sup> Additionally, by allowing geometry to become a part of one's daily surroundings, Hong renders the greatest nightmare of the modernist - the fear of sacred art's dissolution "into mere decoration" - into a beautiful reality.<sup>6</sup>

In this way, Hong Seunghye warms the iciness of modern geometry with the warmth of life by ceaselessly restoring the context known as the concreteness of living. For this reason, one feels a certain visual sensibility in her works, particularly those works featuring pixels made to dance to the strains of lyrical music. Despite the fact that her forms are but cold digital images, their spontaneity and delicate blending of colors facilitates a perception of palpable warmth. Like her earlier, handmade works, this work concerns a warmer geometry, implied by the sense of the artist's touch of clicking.

Putting this touch into handwork is Ham Younjoo's. Made out of small spring(used in ball-point pen) pieced together with great precision to form geometric shapes, the works are fragile structures based on the interdependencies of its constituent parts. Susceptible to even the slightest disturbance, these structures are geometries which throw away the power of linear structure that strictly defines the world as an eternal being. Always hovering on the verge of disappearance or implosion, the work embodies the ever-changing nature of life with its coincidences. The dynamic of tension generated by the forces of push-and-pull concurrently imparts a corporeal dimension to the work. This not only serves as a metaphor for the body that alludes to reflexive energy, but also as an evocation of, and stimulant for, tactility felt by the body.

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the artist, September 2004.

<sup>6</sup>T.J. Clark, " Jackson Pollock' s Abstraction," *Reconstructing Modernism,*@ ed. Serge Guilbaut, MIT Press, 1990, 178.

On this point, her hair-woven works are not all that different from wire works. The artist sources her own body for material, using hair to create cube-like forms. She consequently escapes the kind of modernist geometry that exemplifies the absolute mind's capacity to transcend the physical body. The hair-cube, which absorbs the warmth emanating from the living, physical body, is an index to the warm, animated body, as opposed to a cold model of logic. The work also presents a soft geometry embracing fortuities of life, rather than a hard geometry refusing the aberrant. Lastly, Ham's fragile web allows a clear view of all surrounding objects, thus recalling the concrete guises of the world otherwise erased by the modernist grid.

Through this aesthetics of inclusion, Ham's geometry seeks to rid itself of modern geometry's constraints. It signifies how geometry made its descent from the hallowed realm of art in which it was once installed, to the realm of the secular. Made of sequins, another version of Ham's cubes whimsically shed the burdensome gravity of the notion of pure art to become a secularized geometry. Convincing us to settle our gaze on the surface by way of saccharine colors and dizzying sparkle, the cube blocks the internal eye that hungers for depth of meaning. Reminiscent of Victor Vasarely and other op artists' works, Ham's pattern actually manages to disown the gravitas of meaning with greater force so as to become even more secularized. Internalizing the sensibility of kitsch, such geometry proves kitsch to be the adversary of art no longer.

Like Hong Seunghye who repeats the units to make a form, Ham's method of repetition also resembles that of the Minimalists in their efforts to escape the kind of 'relational composition' pursued by modernists. But Ham's is something markedly different from the mechanical repetition of the Minimalists; hers, she observes, can be compared to a process of growth whereby small seeds accumulate to form something bigger than them.<sup>7</sup> As with Hong's "organic geometry," Ham's geometry alludes to meanings pertaining to life, growth, and other organic phenomena. She ensures even greater distance away from mechanical repetition by directly making the works with her own hand. Her geometry subverts the Minimalists' mechanical process that attempted to resist the modernist myth of art-making predicated on the notion of instantaneous, un-mediated creation.

Made by successively placing square-shaped sheets of paper or fabric on top of each other to form a volumetric body, Kim Joohyun's work may be viewed in the same context as that of Ham's delicate, handmade works which have much in common with traditional craft. Kim produces

---

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the artist, September 2004.

the geometric form out of soft, light, and “worthless” materials.<sup>8</sup> Supplemented by the movement of her hands, these materials repeatedly become volumetric only to retreat back into flat sheets. More recent works featuring the pouring of cement and the joining of wooden sticks also involve simple acts of labor, of folding, pouring, joining, and the like. In this way, they are not dissimilar to Kim’s earlier works. For her, geometry is no longer an inexorable “power of the image.” Geometry is not something that already ‘exists’ but that which is being ‘made’, for it is also not a subject for cognition, but a process of palpitation. Kim’s geometry arrests its will to be an absolute frame through which to judge the world, becoming instead a part of an unbearable lightness of being.

The openness of this geometry is due to its indeterminacy, something that should be understood as the exposure of geometry’s irregularity rather than as a refusal of geometric order. In the artist’s words, her works are “simply complex,”<sup>9</sup> amounting to a sculptural version of a fractal system liberated from the grasp of modern science.<sup>10</sup> Visual proof lies in the surface’s spontaneous texture that results from the careful accumulation of thin layers of cloth, the complicated structure of cubes made by cement poured into a frame constructed from a precise blueprint, and finally, the irregular contours of wooden sticks arranged in simple order to connect three points together. In spite of her quasi-scientific methods, variations arise due to certain subtle deflections that intervene in the process of creation. The employment of simple principles, which produce complex outcomes in Kim’s work reveal binary opposition between logic and spontaneity, repetition and variation, and the like to be symbiotic rather than mutually invalidating.

No longer do the countless variables generated in the course of elements forging relationships with each other remain under the artist’s control. Her works follow a process of self growing - Kim acts not as the master of this process but only as its “faithful servant.”<sup>11</sup> She is utterly foreign to the modernist ideal of the artist-as-creator and it is a wonder that this artist like technician makes unpredictable forms. With her simple aid, the mystery obscured at the very margins of logic is revealed. The result is the birth of works that are both models of simple principles and of wonder. Quietly and unobtrusively, they subvert rationalism - geometry’s grand discourse - by way of small, yet complex interventions.

---

<sup>8</sup> Artist’ s statement, *Accumulation*, exhibition catalogue, Project Space Sarubia, Seoul, 2001, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> “ Simply Complex” was the title of Kim’ s solo exhibition at Gallery Fish, 2004. (Translator’ s note: although I use the artist’ s own English translation, a more accurate translation of the original Korean phrase is “ complexity as a function of simplicity” .)

<sup>10</sup>Kang Sumi, *Simply Complex*, exhibition catalogue, Gallery Fish, Seoul, 2004, n.p.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., n.p.

### *Feminine Geometry, Its Possibility*

All three artists share in common a removal from both modern and postmodern geometry in the West, as well as modern geometry in Korea. In their works, the form of silence speaks and the symbol of creativity is a reproducible unit. The expression of the mind is undertaken by the hand-made and the protector of the sacred realm known as art must engage with the decorative sensibilities of the secular. The simple, clear logic of the system gives way to coincidence and indeterminacy.

Simply put, the geometry of these three artists is filled with the concreteness of life. Infused with the warmth of the physical body, such geometry inevitably resides at the outer reaches of mainstream geometry. If one can gender their works as "feminine", it is in the sense that their cultural geographic position is outside of a patriarchal lineage.

Certainly not all three artists identify themselves as feminists. Yet neither do they disclaim the presence of feminine nature in their works.<sup>12</sup> This, however, must not be understood via an essentialist understanding of femininity as simply a matter of biology. In the gendering of their works the biological fact of their womanness is undoubtedly important. Its manifestation in a work, however, is not direct but filtered through the socio-historical positioning of this fact. Biological sex becomes a variable that constructs socio-historical positions while the work - itself a form of social action - becomes involved in this process. In other words, the gender as a social representation of the artist's biological sex allows for the gendering of the work. It is an extremely complex process, but one of the real significance.

Therefore the artists' characterization of, and approach to, geometric forms in ways divergent from that undertaken by the mainstream should be understood neither as a natural manifestation of their biological sex nor as a result of antagonistic intent to dissemble the mainstream. It is rather a reflection of their position at which one can retain relative distance from mainstream. They enjoy relative freedom from having to perpetuate geometry's patriarchal lineage. In other words, their marginal position makes them freer than their male counterparts when it comes to the complex of heroism so endemic in the mainstream.

On the other hand, despite the fact that all three artists are commonly separated from the

---

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the artists, September 2004.

mainstream, their works possess an extremely diverse number of strategies. Characteristics different from, and in contradiction with each other necessarily intersect one another within each work. Their works choose not to pledge allegiance to any one side, but oscillate between two or more as in the words of Hong Seunghye, who comments that "to accept, rather than overcome contradiction is the most effective means of negotiation."<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, this multiplicity puts an even greater distance between the works and the mainstream's pursuit of consistency. In their efforts to incorporate those otherwise isolated realms, the geometries of these women artists may be seen as eternally alternative paradigms.

Refusing to subscribe to the weighty and rigid geometry of the mainstream, these light and flexible alternative geometries float outside the modernist grid. All three artists linger at the margins of geometry, neither absorbed to nor alienated from it. With their unfaithfulness to either the inside or the outside of geometry, they are free. Moreover, their lack of certainty as to the very boundaries of the inside and outside confirms their truthfulness. In the repetition of writing and erasure, in the endless 'deferment (differance in Derrida's word)' and in the perilous tension that sustains their state of limbo, their works take a new breath at every moment.

---

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the artist, September 2004.