

## A System

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This text is more like a type of product manual that concisely states the features of Kim Byoung-ho's artwork/products. The intention of this text is to propose a rough blueprint that takes a glance over the artist's works as a whole, keeping in tune with the objective of *A System*, an exhibition which organizes Kim's oeuvre up to this point. As major key words that consistently penetrate Kim's works, each chapter of this manual is more like nodes, where many intersecting elements come to a focus and disperse.

### 0. Product / Object

Most of Kim's works are large shiny metallic sculptures with a perfect finish. First impression of his works is that they're typical high art objects that suit the museum or gallery space. However, the artist's statement, "The outcome in my work are basically products", betrays the viewer's expectations and brings the audience to question what exactly his work is.

Kim's works are close to being 'products' if we see the way they are produced. The work's design plan is as elaborate and thorough as if to suggest an architectural blueprint. From idea sketching to design drawing, overall structure map and details, every part of process is given a numerical figure, measurements and is standardized like a product manual. This blueprint includes all things that compose the work, from the sculptural design to wiring the sound components to weight arrangement for installation.

The actual production is also carried out in a factory rather than through the manual hand labor of the artist. The components designed by the artist are exquisitely processed following the blueprint by an engineer, complying with industry standards. In cases where the work needs to be painted, it goes through a process of commercial anodizing. The completed components are then installed according to the manual, a process where sound is assembled into the work like a component.

The way of working in which the artist designs the work but the actual production is done at a factory, was the Minimalists' strategy that was employed in the 1960s. The dualism between conceptualization and production has already been explored in early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Marcel Duchamp through bicycle wheel, wine rack and toilet. Kim's works have closer ties to the Minimalists than to the ready-mades. As opposed to Duchamp, who raised questions purely at the conceptual level by 'selecting' and 'naming' manufactured goods and elevating them to works of art, the Minimalists chose a much more concrete and practical method. Here, the artist is neither a maker who directly brings the work into form, nor a namer who designates given objects as works of art; he is a director in charge who produces the idea and conducts the production process. This is precisely what Kim Byoung-ho does, only that in his case, his works, in terms of both appearance and approach, seem much more like factory produced goods than that of the Minimalists who factory-commissioned simply just the production. Unlike Donald Judd's simple square cubes, Kim's works not only express the beauty of industrial design with their elegantly flowing lines and smooth finishing, they are also machines that work and produce sound. This difference is made clear in the photographs that capture his work as a product rather than an art work, minimizing shadows and emphasizing the materiality of the product surface in order to present the perfect state of the product.

However, besides the institutional dimension of being exhibited in a gallery, a few attributes of his artworks make it hard for us to define them completely as products. First of all, Kim's works are inadequate as products in the sense that the primary condition of products is their practicality. In contrast to industrial products having a sense of functionality in its form, Kim's products, which cannot be found anywhere in the world, are forms without functionality or practicality. Furthermore, unlike ordinary industrial products with a closed form complete within itself, Kim's sculptures draw the surrounding space into the work through the installation. The optical illusion created through the surface of diffused reflection provokes a physically and emotionally heightened feeling. This kind of experience which belongs to the realm of art than to industrial realm demonstrates that Kim's works hover above the boundaries between product and art.

#### 1. Machine / Non-machine

Kim Byoung-ho's works are machines at the same time non-machines, if one defines machines as a kinetic apparatus that consists of many components and conducts given movements to deliver a useful function. First of all, Kim's sculptural works are machines in the sense that they do a special job and are made of industrially produced goods. This applies not only to the exterior look of the work but also to the way they're produced and the artist's artistic perspective. His machines deliver a function in the aural sphere, where human intervention is minimized and sound is produced according to the engineering capability of the machine itself. The *Arduino* platform takes the artist's programming to create sounds of different tempo, length and frequency, which are then channeled out through *piezo* speakers. The texture of the electrical sound changes depending on the medium of what it comes to contact with. Meanwhile, the physical exterior which functions as the medium that delivers the electronic vibration (sound), is also produced as a mechanical mechanism. All of Kim's sculptural works are

created through an assemblage, rather than welding, of individual components. Components cut precisely with a machine are put together according to the design plan. When the exhibition is over, they are dismantled in reverse order and kept.

The artist's attitude that promotes a logical system of production, shipment and storage of the work, does not only remain confined to the physical realm, but is also reflected in the aesthetic dimension of his work. One of Kim's major works, the morning glory-shaped sculpture, came to be its present form, not due to aesthetic consideration but as a consequence of technological development. The form became much more refined and neat through the use of Arduino board which directly controls sound, instead of using a separate computer to generate sound. Following his 2007 work *Silent Pollen-Sowing*, the circular center of works in which flower stalks or sticks converge, neatly fulfills the binary function of a formative center and a control apparatus that generates sound. The successful union of technology and aesthetics reflects the artist's artistic belief that art should not be separate from today's technological development. Kim's belief, that the search for new sculptural language is no different from the development of technology as its method, is realized by the emphasis on cooperation with engineers and the continuous development of new expressive language (technology).

It is where the fascinating point lies in Kim's work: that although they match the concept of a machine in many ways, they can never be perfect machines. Besides the fact that his works function but don't serve any practical purpose, this dualism in his work is especially visible in the external appearance of the work. The clash of what's atypical and typical, and organic forms and metallic material, is an imperative characteristic that defines the overall art practice of the artist. In particular, the analogy to biology is an easily recognizable element, and has been repeated in his famous flower series. Works in this exhibition are also such examples: *Soft Crash* (2011) implies a giant sea urchin with spread out needles, *A Memory of the Rule* (2011) suggests a flower with beautifully unfolded petals or stamens, and *Irreversible Damage* (2011) proposes a person with two arms stretched out. The harmony between two contrasting elements like the smooth curves of living organism and mechanical feel of metal reminds one of the photographs

of New Objectivity by Karl Blossfeldt or Albert Renger-Patzsch. The two German artists captured things like balsam fir, flower petals and snake skin through a gaze of cold realism, magnifying their formative ornamental patterns to bring to light their inherent essence and laws. Kim Byoung-ho has many points in common with Blossfeldt and Renger-Patzsch in terms of form and intension, particularly in the sense that he tries to portray an invisible dimension through a visible form.

## 2. Visual / Aural

Sound art or media art has been an area mostly dealt with when talking about Kim's work. The fact that the artist majored in Technology Art, or that his work utilizes sound might categorize his work as 'media art', but it's actually quite far from conventional media art works that concerns mainly video or sound.

First of all, the tendency to introduce sound in his work has consistently been apparent since his early work *Floating Space* (2005), which suggests the sound of iron plate and pendulum coming together and falling off again, with the viewer's control of the button. However, what's worth special mention about his work is that it utilizes sound to the most minimal degree. It requires controlling the scale, speed and simplicity of sound concerned, and the artist generates sound as low, slow and simple as possible. It's a format to prevent the work from becoming overly stimulating and easily consumed, as sound can overpower the visual aspect, and diminish the work's formative element. Like the sounds of birds in the woods, the sound is clearly perceived only when one approaches close to the work, and it's carefully and delicately placed as to not interfere with the visual meditation of the work. In the same realm, the generated sound is not composed at all: it's made as simple as possible, as not to have any melody or harmony by dynamics, pitch and tone.

In Kim's work, visual element is much more overwhelming than aural element. The materiality chosen in particular plays the key element, as the shiny surface specific to metal creates visual pleasure along with the curvy lines of the sculpture. The most powerful effect in this exhibition is produced from the reflective surface of the metal. Each of the 1006 sticks in *Soft Crash* radiates in front of the viewer, reflecting each other, momentarily paralyzing the sense of distance and producing an overlapping of figures. This surrealistic effect of illusion is enforced through shadows and movement. In contrast to the photographs of the work which eliminate the shadow intentionally to emphasize the object, light and shadow play an enormous role in the actual exhibition space. The shadows, along with the mirror-like reflective surface of the metal, create an immersive environment in which the number of the sticks seems multiplied many times and thus the work seems much greater in scale than it actually is. The optical illusion becomes greater when the viewer moves in front of the work. The moving and changing perspective makes the confusing visual perception much more complex. A work intended to have a mirror-effect, *A Memory of the Rule* takes to the extreme the play of magical optical illusion which produces powerful delusion if only for a moment. Moving in front of the work engaging in a game of illusion with red sticks and shadows, the viewer comes to face the reflection of sticks and their own face in the central metallic part, and experience an inversion in the sense of reality as if to sink into another world on the other side.

Sound, however, is still crucial in Kim's work. It may seem insignificant in terms of relative weight, but the presence and absence of sound greatly influences the personality of the work. Without sound, Kim's work would just be abstract sculpture. It would be missing the element as a working machine that has been assembled with a circuit diagram and blueprint. Moreover, in works surrounded by countless sound pillars as in *Soft Crash* and *A Memory of the Rule*, the presence of sound produces a surround

effect and intensifies the space of illusion originated from visual dimension of the work. In this space, the viewer experiences Hal Foster's 'Baroque Effect' where "space is subjectively transformed and subject is spatially overwhelmed."

### 3. Material / Non-material

The presence of sound plays a focal role in the artist's main idea of expressing the immaterial through material. Sound exists momentarily without form, as a movement of invisible energy. In physical terms, sound is perceived when the waves from sound source push air particles, and the changes in density and pressure of particles are transformed into vibration energy that is delivered to the acoustic nerves in the ear. As an element that reveals energy transformation and microscopic power, sound breathes in immaterial qualities to material work.

The artist's interests in invisible power, energy, structure and laws in systems, have always been consistent since the beginning. The early work *Floating Space* materializes magnetic energy to sound and light through electromagnet, *Their Flowers* series (2006) and *Silent Pollen* (2007-2010) are visualization of the powerful proliferation of flowers quietly breeding. The exchanges of short waves of *Silent Pollen-Sowing* and long waves of *Silent Pollen-Gathering* suggest the delivering of pollen and flow of energy. The artist's intention to visualize what's invisible is implicitly manifested in the title of his works named through abstract concepts like silence, eternity, accumulation and system.

The intention to visualize immaterial to material is reflected in the specificity of production and formation. At a practical level, the interests in institution, structure and system are revealed in the form of mechanical mechanism that embodies regulation and standardization in the process of making the work. In formative language, it's expressed through geometric simplicity and abstraction. In particular, the artist's

fascination with structure is clearly visible in his drawings. The beauty of simple geometric form created through the organic combination of straight lines and curvy lines reflects the artist's desire to capture the abstract structures of the world, starting with the most fundamental measures of the point, line, plane and form. As a vector with a sense of directivity and scale, the flow of energy becomes especially more pronounced when a work takes on an angular form like *Irreversible Damage*, or when the sense of directivity is clearer like in *An Interface* (2010). The narrowly maintained balance of force in *Triffid* (2010) and *Horizontal Intervention* (2010) suggests the presence of hidden gravity field.

Curiosity about the drifting force is transformed into recognition of physical laws in the material world, and eventually into an interest in social standards and principles of the world. *A System* (2010), a work with the same name as the title of the exhibition, clearly demonstrates such philosophy of the artist. The urethane hose with different lengths are connected by T-connectors that function as nodes, and are vaguely reduced into a grid. The way of constructing system in which different lengths make similar distances roughly seems to go against in idea with Duchamp's famous work, *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14). Here, the three rulers with different lengths, made of three 1m threads dropped, signify the fact that the social criterion and standards regarded as absolute are variable to the age and society. Kim Byoung-ho's products/objects, or machines/non-machines that cross between things visual and aural, material and non-material, and visible and invisible, are a momentary realization of the eternally changing force, energy and laws. On the other hand, however, Kim's works can at any time transfigure into a different form as the non-material being temporary and impermanent by nature. After all, Kim's creations are indeed "*Invisible Objects* (title of Kim's solo exhibition at SOMA Drawing Center in 2010)."