

Seung Young Kim

About
Communicating and Traces

About Communicating and Traces

Lee Eunjoo, *Independent Curator*

Seung Young Kim's work always contains a philosophical momentousness. The consistently recurring images and motifs in his work mostly reflect the perpetuity of an invisible spiritual dimension and nature's fundamental connection to such a dimension and furthermore an earnest and sincere self-reflection of human attempts to enter this dimension. Through all the times I have seen his work, I often felt as though I encountered some kind of religious practice since I could feel that his attitude toward a fundamental dimension beyond the boundary of ordinary everyday life that we see. As a matter of fact, although there is no religious metaphors represented in his work, somehow such a deep and clear meditative atmosphere, which one might sense in an old temple in mountains or very quiet old church. The interesting point is that such a meditative attitude is certainly different from that of mysticism, which implies an intention to obtain a self-transcendental moment or experience the vitality of the universe or the flow of energy. What attracts me was the fact that the "I" in his work is not a transcendental figure, rather an existential being in constant agony between infinite and finite, trying to move forward from there. This "I" does not get fragmented and scattered into some infinite space or dissolved into the universe as a fraction of energy, but certainly exists in a banal dimension that we live in, and at the same time moves toward a dimension beyond the banal.

In this way, Kim's work is essentially very personal. It makes the viewer realize the existential condition of true human character, which like that of Sisyphus portrays attempts to move forward, although frustrated by the limitations of human being. Nevertheless, it is impressive that his work contains a meditative attitude towards a kind of integrity and light that is unfolded from the infinite dimension, not an agonized figure that fiercely anguishes over the incompleteness of existence itself. It reminds us of such feelings that we unexpectedly encounter in accordance with nature, the flow of time, or luminous moments in our experience. It seems that Seung Young Kim himself always seeks for the meanings of human existence through contemplation of nature. In this way, he sees the existential condition of humans in the harmony with the nature that they were born of.

Reflection-Introspection through Nature

The most fundamental motif in Seung Young Kim's work is always nature. With a focus on the natural motif, he deals with the world hidden beyond natural phenomena. The recurrent phenomena in nature are like a mirror that reflects the reality of an infinite dimension. Since 1995, in order to express this subject, Seung Young Kim has employed some significant metaphors. <Reflection>, <Stepping Waters>, <Memory Room> are titles that often appeared in his work. In these works, he uses materials like water, leaves, puddles, light and doors repeatedly. By doing so, it might appear as though there has not been any change in his work for the past ten years. However, if one closely looks into his work, they will notice that over the years through such repetition Seung Young Kim has been completing a coherent, more elaborate story that forms a big stream. Instead of making periodic changes, he tries to link the things he is naturally interested at various times with each other, making the synthesis as one story.

Since 1995, Seung Young Kim has constantly pursued the subject of 'reflection.' 'Reflection' can be read as having two meanings: one refers to the casting of a reflection of something, and the other refers to the act of introspection. It embraces a passive phase in the meaning of 'to accept the phenomenon of the external world and to project the image of the phenomenon' and an active phase in the meaning of 'to introspect the reflected image' at the same time. In order to represent the theme of 'reflection,' Kim often uses 'water.' By recalling the water of a mother's womb, the water contained in a pool enables an imagination of the return to the basis of nature and at the same time since water is reflective, it evokes recollection of the self-reflective mirror, through which Narcissus looks at himself. Moreover, water has the trait of maintaining its distinct and authentic characteristics while functioning as a mirror reflecting the nature of the world by sensitively reacting to a movement of the world. Since water simply receives the movements of its surroundings and returns to the surface calmly, water is like a rubber band that always returns to its intrinsic state of itself after being stretched.

This shows what Seung Young Kim's work's fundamental stance is. The 'reflection' represented in his work enables the viewer to feel an image of a man that includes scenery of ancient time or an image of nature, which could be the root of human being. It reminds of some existing being that has very subjective and reflective will, which is at the same time a reflective being such as a human having an image of god in his soul, not some simple copies of nature. The reason why I am so attracted to Seung Young Kim's work, while I am not usually interested in art works that just depict nature is his work shows symbolic expressions of human cognition. In this way, Seung Young Kim's 'reflection' is not

just some images on a mirror, but purports the procedure of clear cognition that is to try to reflect on oneself through the light of nature and actively move toward the truth therein.

In one of his <reflection> series made in 1995, the artist filled a round steel frame with dirt, and set up a motor inside the frame, so that the water could keep rotating in one direction. In another series made in the same year, he again made a round steel frame and this time he put three different materials in the frame, and presented how those materials react to water drops dropping on their surfaces. And also, in his first solo exhibition in 1996, where he exhibited a <reflection> series work, he put dirt in the center of the frame and made the water rotate in one direction around the center. In his installation work at the <PRIXHWANKI> exhibition in 1997, he made a small puddle inside a thicket of fallen leaves, and focused a spotlight on the water's surface where drops of water would drop from the ceiling and make waves consistently. With the spotlight focused on the surface, the image on the surface gets reflected on the ceiling. In this work, many of his significant motifs such as the fallen leaves, water surface, light, and water drops from the ceiling, which were later often represented in the artists' work began to appear. At the same time, by doing so, his turn toward installation work of compositing a scene in present time with many fragmentary images clearly came out.

<Memory Room> exhibited in Heyri in 2003 showed that he Kim had achieved a full aesthetic with its representation of a systematical structure with depth and all the symbolic images that had appeared in the previous <Reflection> works. With natural light coming through the glass doors of the exhibition space, water lies on the floor in the center, and around the circle of water, old book shelves are placed. From glass funnels on the ceiling, clear drops of water are drop on to the surface of water at regular intervals, and make clear and rhythmic echoes with waves. Seeing this work reminded me of an early morning that I had had in Hwaom Buddhist temple in Jiri Mountain a long time ago. The clear cognitive moment that was given by the reiteration of monks' wood block sound in silence and light, the old wooden buildings with the smell of the passage of time and the early morning air were returned by his work. Indeed, <Memory Room> is realized as a living being with all the significant motifs of Seung Young Kim, not as some fragmented language. In this manner <Memory Room> enables the audience to experience a meditative moment, in which the nature, time and the self become one. All of the motifs



1



2

1. <Reflection> Mixed Media, 160×160×30cm, 1995
2. <Reflection> Mixed Media, 140×700×30cm, 1995
3. <Reflection> Mixed Media, Variable Size, 1997
4. <Memory Room> Mixed Media, Variable Size, 2003



3



4

from his past work such as the calm water surface, water drops falling from cylinders on the ceiling, the concentric circle on the water, lights, and the water dropping sounds are emanating powerful inner echo.

It is indeed nothing but silence that pulls together with all these motifs to produces a unity. The repetitive sound and echo of water make the viewer become more focused on the tranquil scenes in front of them and eventually lead them to a serene silence. Silence is the point where the seen and unseen are embraced, and moreover it is the point where we can capture the moving energy of quietness. In the silence, <Memory Room> leads us to feel a calmed self-reflection in the water and the fundamental self, rather than the socially constructed self.

The Passage of Time- Connected Dimensions

In Seung Young Kim's work images of windows or door often appear. The window and door images in <The Mind> in 1995, <The Gate> in 1997, <Memory Room> in 2001 have meanings as a passage into the third and fourth dimensions, a passage to the physical dimensional and a passage to the dimension of time. By applying the form of drawers, his

<Drawer> series, done in 1994 and 1995 also connect to the door image in the sense that it reveals the concept of opening and closing. In his work <Memory> in 2004 exhibited at the <Park, Comma, People> exhibition at the Marronnier Museum, he painted the entrance window in yellow, so as to give an odd sense that the scenery of park outside was separate from the inside space, as if it is part of a different dimensional world. As a matter of fact, the doors or windows that often appear in Seung Young Kim's work remind of a borderline or an entrance to a new space in a different dimension, which we might be able to encounter if we open the door in front of us and step out. Likewise such dimensions are connected to each other through mechanisms like doors, these dimensions are not completely separated from each other, but connected to each other at some point securing some sort of spatial severance between the dimensions. In other



5



6



5. <The Gate> Mixed Media, 100x100x210cm, 1997
 5-1 <Drawer> Mixed Media, Variable Size, 1997
 5-2 <Drawer> Mixed Media, Variable Size, 1993
 6. <Memory> Mixed Media, Variable Size, 2003

5-



5-

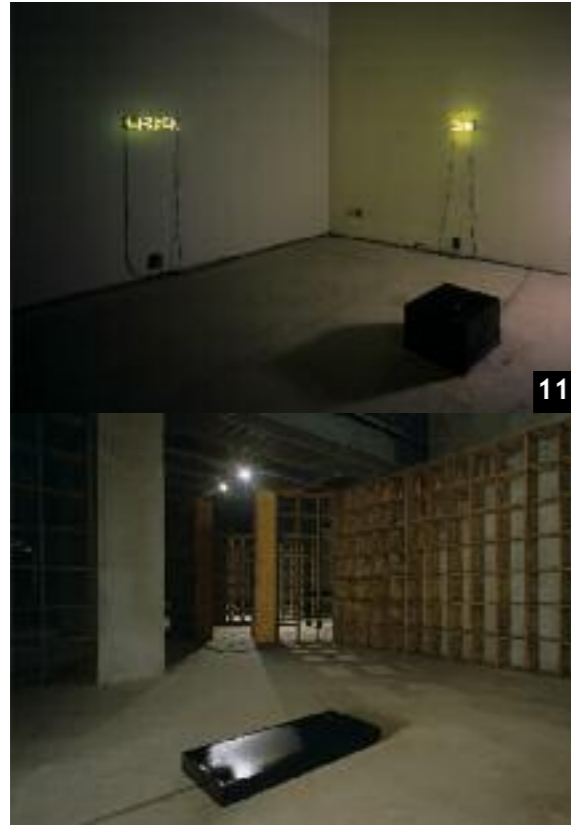
words, while the various dimensions might physically be included in different spheres, they are invisibly connected to each other in the passage of the past, the present and the future.

The concept of communication between one space and another was also shown in his <Stepping Waters> series installed first near the Daechung Lake in Chungjoo in 1998. Seung Young Kim continuously represents the composition of connection separate spaces in this series. He has done this by making long road connected by many puddles, as in his <Stepping Waters> installation in Oita Prefecture, Japan, in 2001 where he made a connection between an old temple and a contemporary space, as well as in his exhibition at Marronnier Museum where he led viewers into some bright space with a string of water puddles. Through this kind of work, we can understand that in the background of his work time plays the role of interconnecting all the fragmented physical spaces into one. The circulation of time can be found in the concentric circles made with rotating water in his <Reflection> series. Also in the rotating doors in the Marronnier Museum exhibition as well as in his outdoor installation work done in Heyri, the continuous connection and circulation between here and there, inside and outside, the past and the present are represented. In the present time, by consistently reacting to the external world around us, we are making our own experiences. And by making the things that once existed become memories of the past, a history of a moment, we continue our journey toward the future.

Such images of time flow in the passages between the past and present and the future and space became more concretized in <Memory Room>, which was completed after his participation in P.S. 1 studio program in New York, 2001. In this work, a maze like alley with old book shelves is presented, and at the end of the alley, a tranquil light from a window shines on a chair placed in front of the window. On the chair, an old family photograph fades away as it sits in a shallow pool of water. Seung Young Kim says that he was trying to convey the smell, history, memory, life and the traces of life that we feel when entering a library and walk around the book shelves. In this manner, he often transfers his interest in time into stories of traces. The trace that he refers to is not something all stuffed and mounted, but is instead something that continues in creative motion in the present like a photo being slowly transformed under the water surface. Also the sound used in his work can be also read as a metaphor signifying the continuation of time, like the flow of water or revolving door mentioned above. While walking in the silent corridor of <Memory Room>, viewers can hear small noises from everyday life such as the sound of opening and closing a door. This kind of subtle sound effect transforms the simple scenery of an old bookshelf and a dark murky colored floor into a sort of experience of time. In the end, one can say that an installation work like <Memory Room> is a work realizing a passage of time that transfers traces of the past that had been made

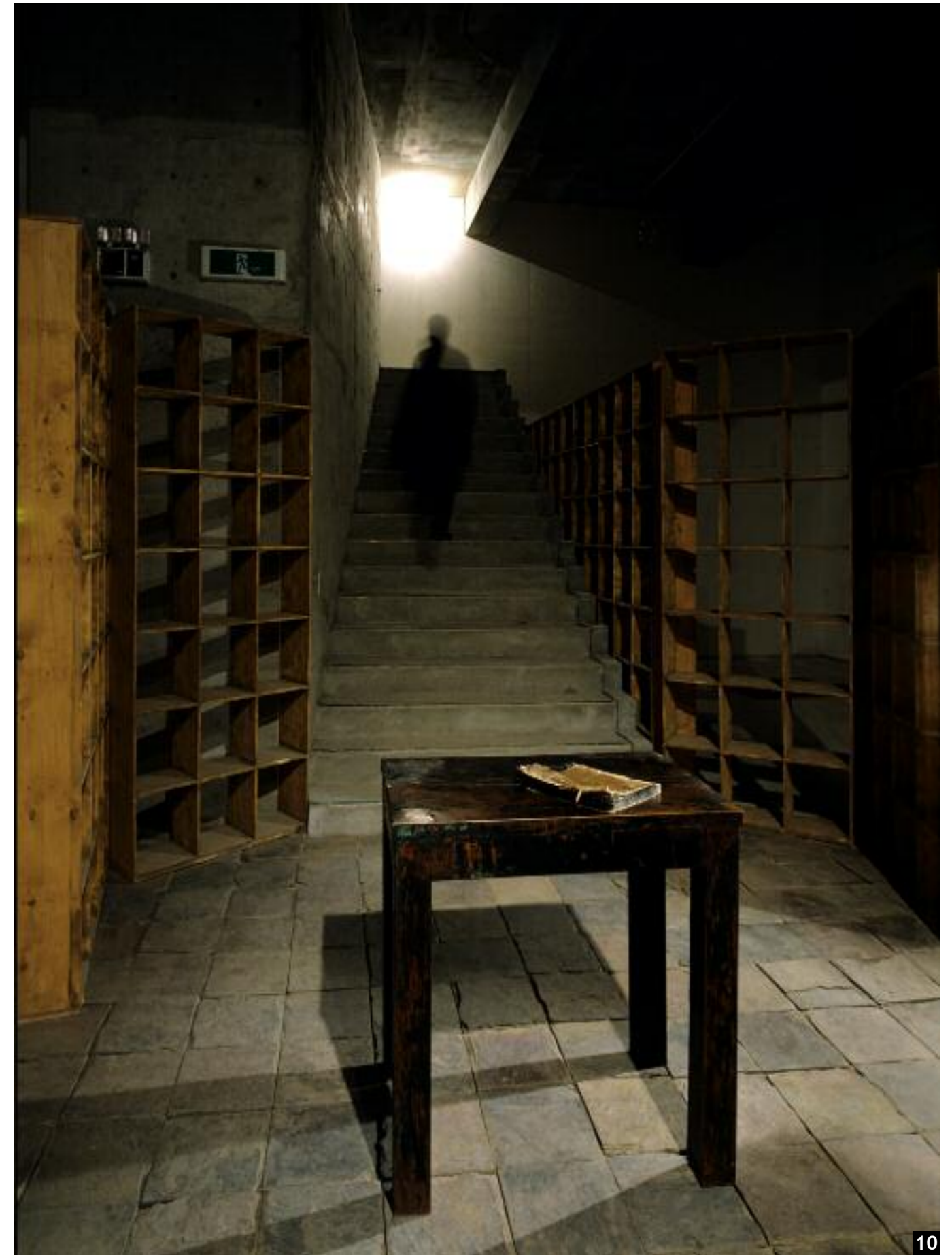


in abundance over infinity into something at the present time. Through this kind of time passage, Seung Young Kim manifests spaces that synthesize physical experiences, memories and imaginaries, and communication with different dimensions.



In his <Memory Room -A dedicated poem> done in 2003 at the Bookhouse in Heyri, in the memory of a poet Ki Hyung do and his fellow artist Koo Bon Ju he realized a point where death and life are joined to each other in silence and in time. This work takes its motif from a poem written Ki Hyung Do who had passed away at an early age. His poems capture tragic moments of life, which lie in the many phases of our reality. Influenced by his reading of Ki Hyung Do's poem called <An Old Book>, Seung Young Kim placed an old book with the contents were painted over in black ink onto a black table, and these motifs remind of the subject matters of the poem, "my soul is/ mostly in black pages/therefore,/who would

be/interested in opening me? But in that case/ they have no right to discuss a lie/a lie and a truth both should/dream of one purpose." However, if Ki's work depicts the black holes of existence in many places and a shadow of despair and extinction revealed by such holes, the point that Kim is looking at is rather positive and active. Whereas Ki says "Fear is my generic character/ and future is my past/ therefore, I exist," Seung Young Kim, while feeling the tragedy of existence and fear of life that keeps perishing and disappearing in the flow of time, keeps longing for an expanded dimension as he continually restarts his journey. Maybe this is why Seung Young Kim wrote "he opened the door and went out" on the wall in the room of the memory of Koo Bon Ju, as if he was responding to a paragraph from Ki's poem <Empty House>: "I am closing the door fumbling like a blind/ poor my love, capture in the empty house." With sincere feelings for his deceased friend he probably wants to believe that his friend opened the door of the dark tragic room, where Ki Hyung Do once stayed, and stepped out toward a broader dimension. As represented in this work, the space that he longs for is a space where "I and the Other," "the past and present," "life and death," "this life and the life after death" can connect and communicate to each other over isolation and separation. In other words, it is a space where we can open and close the doors between different dimensions.



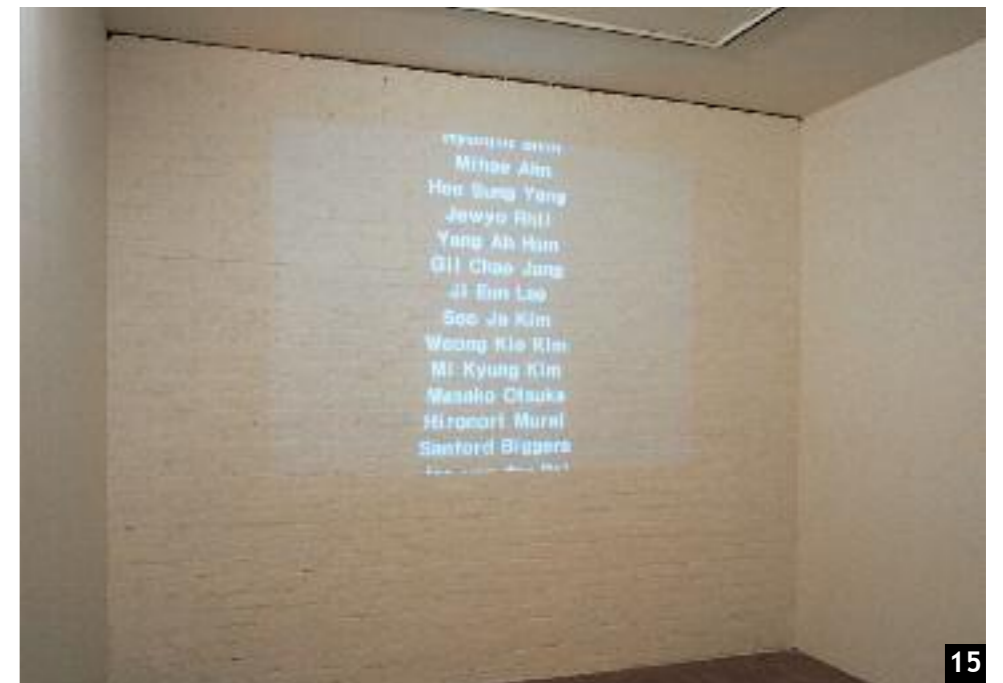
Trace of Existential Self

Seung Young Kim began exploring issues of self identity in earnest when he participated in P.S. 1 studio program in New York. Owing to his experiences in foreign circumstances, especially with regards to communication problems, he seemed to be driven to issues about how to place himself in foreign and dynamic environments. His work exhibited at Geumsan Gallery in 2001 was a project presenting nature, himself and the interconnections that have been built by the flow of time in a united organic universe. In this project, by setting up the three floors with the themes of root, stem and fruit of tree he transferred the whole gallery space into an organic object like a tree. By doing so, he combined his attitude toward nature which had been represented in his earlier work with his self-reflection and the external realm that it reflects.

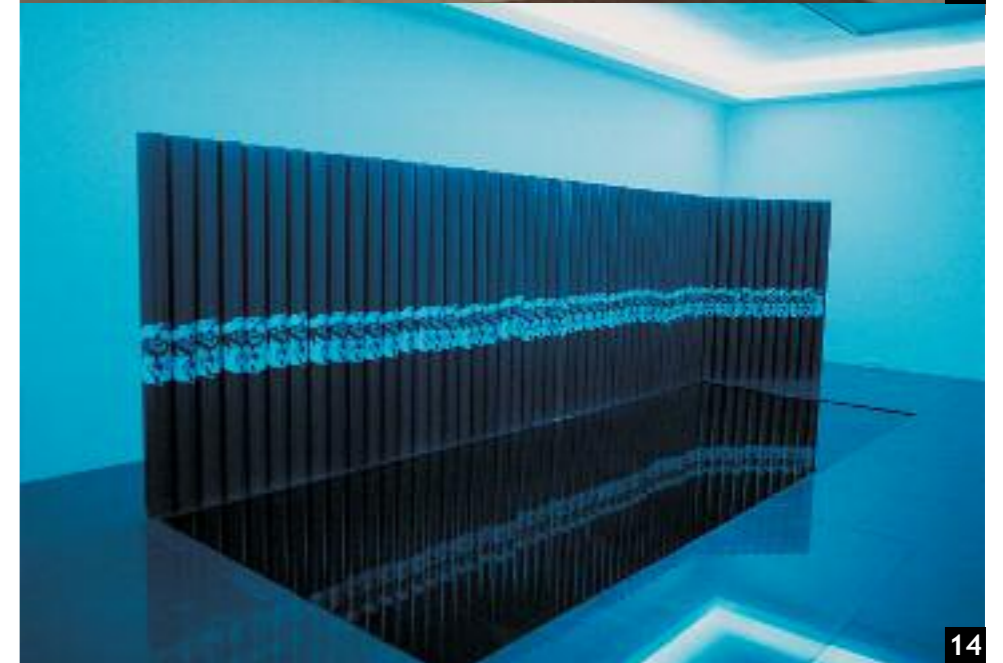
< Self-portrait >, a video work presented on the first floor of the gallery, was conceived from an episode of when Seung Young Kim tried to put a photo of Joseph Beuys on his wall. Whenever he would try to put it up, he would find the next morning that it had fallen down. In this work, he had his self-portrait photo printed out in slightly bigger than life size. After that he put it on a wall, and whenever the photo dropped down he would pick it up and try to put it up again. This happened repeatedly. The film takes the image of him repeating the motion of re-posting the photograph over and over again. This work seems to show feelings we would feel when our hardworking effort to establish our identities in foreign circumstances became dissipated all of sudden, and thus we had to start it all over again. Here, Kim seems to pass a message to the viewers that he tries to accept this kind of repetitive cycle as a natural process of life or work, as he continues to keep moving forward. As a matter of fact, such an attitude of his was presented in his video work titled <Beyond> while he was in New York in 2000. <Beyond> shows the process of a letter "I" written on sand gradually disappearing in the wind. One can see that he is accepts this kind of repetitive process ? a process close to transience - as a condition of existence. In this way, his work makes us to feel that life is something that leaves its trace, though self-image will be erased by the flow of time as shown in the disappearing letter on the sand.



13



15



14



12

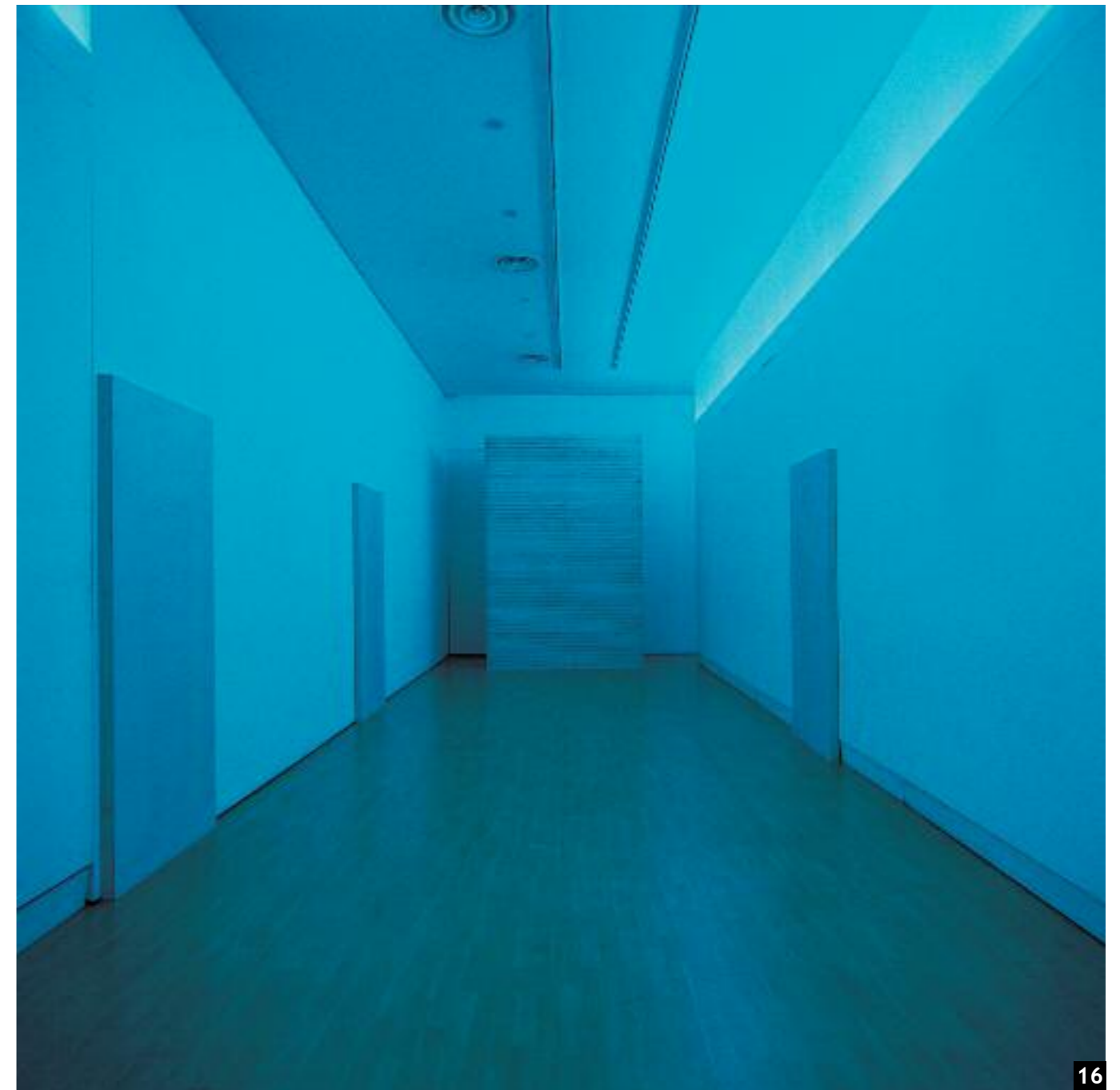
- 12. <Self-portrait> Single Channel, 16' 01", 1999
- 13. <Beyond> Single Channel, 2' 55", 2000
- 14. <Self-portrait> Mixed Media, 655x510x185cm, 2001
- 15. <1963~2001> Video Installation, 5min, Variable Size, 2001

We can probably see that this deep-rooted affirmation represented in his work is based on his self-affirmative attitude when seeing his work <Self-portrait>, which was installed on the second floor of Geumsan Gallery in his PS1 Homecoming Exhibition. In this work, a water pool was installed on the floor, and the surface of the water was calm but tense. And also next to the wall, he displayed fifty-seven large self-portraits rolled so they appeared in the shape of larva, only revealing his eyes and ears. Kim says that he wanted to express his circumstances in New York, in which he was very withdrawn like a small larva. The state of being withdrawn is a preparative state for the future, just like the moment of a caterpillar spreading out its wings. The stare of withdrawn eyes in this work seem to be depicting such a tense suppressed energy: the eyes seem as if they are waiting for their moments to come, while carefully looking around the surroundings with inner energy for a leap into the future. The dark water surface on the floor looks very calm and sharp as a blade, and while it sensitively and serenely reflects the images of its surroundings, it emphasizes the potential energy built up around the space: therefore, it enables us to feel a premonition of some kind of events that might be about to happen.

The exhibition on the third floor was designed to expand the energy of the exhibition on the second floor to a soft and warm space. Kim put bricks on the front wall of the space, and projected all the names of the people who influenced him so far like credits in a movie. He titled this work <1963-2001>referring to the time period from his birth year to the production year of the work. In this work, the bricks signify each event and person he had experienced until that time, and in that way the brick wall surface signifies his self-image made by the affinities. The interesting point is all the immaterial events and affinity in the past appear as accumulated forms built in units. It suggests that even though we feel that all the moments of our lives are meaninglessly passing, those invisible moments are, in the end, left visible. This work lyrically illustrates that what meaningfully accumulated in Seung Young Kim himself are the human connections left over time: although everything becomes dissipated in the flow of time, the human relationships that connect one to another remain.

Seung Young Kim's interests in acts of providence and human relationships were already shown in his solo exhibition at Wonseo Gallery in 1999. In this exhibition, Kim presented a work of <Memory Room> that consisted of piles of canvases, wherefrom using white paint he had erased drawings that he had drawn of his acquaintances. In this work, out of vague memory he painted the images of his acquaintances onto canvas in the size of his studio door, and once the drawing was done, he then erased all the images with white paint. Then, he piled them up in stacks. About this work, he says, "I wanted to erase all my memories about people." The idea was conceived from his little discovery of liquefaction process of photos: when you put a photo in water, the image on the photo

16. <Memory Room> Canvases, Halogen lamp, Silk, Variable Size, 1999



gets totally erased, and through this work, he seemed as though he was trying to secure his own space from many difficult human relationships by actively working on the action of deletion itself. The work of piling up canvases with erased images can be related to the work of piling up bricks at Geumsan Gallery exhibition. The piled canvases probably imply the weight of the people who remained in Kim's own memory. However, from the Geumsan Gallery exhibition, his attitude about his relationship with the people around him seems to become more positive when noticing the fact that he no longer tries to erase the traces of people, but rather to actively remember them and accept the memory of them as a part of himself.

Making Active Relationships



The biggest change of Seung Young Kim's work after his participation in P.S. 1 studio program is that his interest in the web of human relationship that surrounds him as well as his interest in society became much more significant. This is indeed represented more actively in his work. It seems like that the culture shock and psychological withdraw that he experienced by his abrupt confrontation with a different culture influenced him to recognize the necessity of communication between himself and the world. Kim's interest in society is not expressed as a political or institutional stance, but rather expresses the reality that we confront in human relationships. The paper plane project that happened in Harlem, New York in 2000 is an example. In this project, he typed in braille points saying "why are you afraid of loving?" on the paper plane, and flew the paper plane with people in Harlem. This project examined one of the possibilities what art can bring, which is to establish peace and understanding between peoples. In the same context, Seung Young



Kim made a performance piece titled <A Ship Project> in Oita Prefecture in Japan in 2001. In this project, he transformed a small island in a creek in a mountain in Oita Prefecture into a ship shaped island using the grass and dirt of the original island itself. After that, from and around the island he floated some small ships made of bamboo and paper with junior high school students from Korea and Japan. In this manner, Seung Young Kim tried to pass a message of hope for a bright future with his interest in natural environments.

Then about a year later, on July 29, 2002, at the borderline in the Korean Straits between Korea and Japan, Seung Young Kim made a performance piece <Picnic on the Ocean> with Hironori Murai. Murai is a Japanese artist who he met during his residency at the P.S. 1 studio program. The performance is the story of a Korean man and a Japanese man - each with his own historical trauma as Korean or Japanese - having a small picnic at the borderline on the ocean. Murai left from Tsushima, Nagasaki Prefecture, Japan and Kim from Geojedo, Korea and met each other at the borderline to talk about some topics about each other's past and identities. In order to realize this project, Seung Young Kim spent two years meeting relevant persons in Korea and Japan. After going through many institutions and appropriate people such as the ministry of Foreign Affairs, researchers at the Korea Ocean Research Institute, etc., Kim was finally able to realize this project. In an interview with a Japanese journalist regarding this project, Hironori Murai said, "it is not just a dream that individuals with lots of differences can reach out a hand in friendship." And about that, Kim continued, "to listen to each other's opinions, to wait with patience; these are the two nuggets of wisdom I have learned from this performance." This performance conveys a meaning that through the friendly relationship between Seung Young Kim and Hironori Murai, from the very communication between an individual and the individual's history, a true social relationship can be born. The attempt to reach out to a living being in friendship and trust seems very meaningful. The fact that such a simple action like opening one's mind toward another can be a performance itself shows that this kind of very basic act of communication is not at all easy. Nevertheless, it reminds us of the fact that from that very point, everything can start all over again.



19



19

When thinking of all of Kim's past work, we can infer the reason why this project could be realized. In his other work affirming himself in relationships through his self-reflection, this symbolic performance also deals with the process of his discovery of himself in other people or the people in himself through meeting with them. This reflects a positive future prediction about the world, which overcomes the dark and damp world, the personal tragedy of existence that Ki Hyung Do mentioned in his poem. It also talks about a life within relationships that is always open to and communicating with the outside world through the very existence of the self as made through human relations emerging out of providence, not disconnected existence. Further it could be said that it is like stepping stone that help us reflect upon ourselves and take us from here to there, a condition of existential existence and social circumstances.

It seems as though his standpoint vis-a-vis the time dimension is not based on the thought that it will all disappear someday, but his prospect that it will disappear at the same time as it regenerates itself. One can say that this kind of positive attitude defines the beauty of his work. The traces in sand keep disappearing by the incoming tide, but we simultaneously notice that something is being written in the same quantity at the same time. Things become things of the past, but that also proves that the present is being creative. To look at infinite repetition as life, not transience, this kind of positive attitude is felt in his work. Herein Kim's standpoint appears to hold a positive attitude towards the relationships that we must continuously keep making, even though they may disappear. That is just like a story about those of us who live in the present disappearing; continuously leaving traces of life in the net of relationships that can be felt in transience.

Epilogue

In my interview with the artist, while showing a strong interest in traces himself, Seung Young Kim mentioned that there are lots of stories and energy in dust and remains. His comment touched me in a special way, because I felt that there must be some kind of connection between the impression of his work and the images of time and infinity in the beauty of dust and remains. Nevertheless, I am not saying that his work looks desolate or that it is a pursuit of the beauty of ruins. Maybe, to him, traces are not disappearing broken fossil, but invisible moving energy still related to the present in the flow of time. The traces in his work do not concentrate on the carved image itself, but appear as images of changing characteristics in the flow of time like liquefied photos in water. The reason why his traces do not appear as the images fixed to the past is because he does not give meaning to the traces themselves, but rather to the action of making traces in the flow of time. It is as though to affirm that the infinite action itself will begin and finish or finish and begin at the same time, rather than to catch a trace in the cycle of time where the past can be also the present, and the present can be the future. In this way, Kim's space depicts the time-space where being deleted and being born can co-exist. As the image of water appearing in <Reflection>, the time-space he creates is continuously creative and flowing.

Since his work fundamentally deals with the flow of time that exists beyond the limit of physical reality, we can often see clearly and haphazardly appearing moments of silence and light when, through his work, the hidden truth in natural phenomenon communicate with the physical dimension. In this kind of work, as though looking at a window reflecting lights or images on the surface of calm water, his meditative and contemplative gaze is found. However, this gaze stands on the point where it rightly intervenes with the physical world and transcends it. In other words, he tries to accept the existence of human being in our reality, not to negate it. This is because Seung Young Kim's work always begins from a fundamental self-image that he lives at the point where the reality and that which is beyond reality connect to each other.