

Creation in precarious balance Ideas and concepts in the oeuvre of Dong-Yeon Kim

Thomas Hirsch

The oeuvre of Dong-Yeon Kim revolves around elementary and archetypal forms of civilization, it deals with the sheer existence of life and the processes of nature. A first overall impression of his work would be that in sounding out tradition, rite and progress Dong-Yeon Kim embraces motifs of urbanity and addresses them before the backdrop of the experiences he had in such vastly different systems of culture and society as are South Korea and Germany. Central subjects *eo ipso* include urban development and the architectural fragments between topos and model that have been assigned different functions and are now being presented pared down, paraphrased and further differentiated, predominantly in sculpture, installation and drawing, and rarely in (small-format) painting and performances. He often makes symbolic and associative allusions to the history and culture of his native Korea, starting with his choice of materials. Dong-Yeon Kim uses predominantly delicate materials, thin layers of poplar, linen, cast resin, paint and infrequently plastic or metal for support. Man in his physical but also mental constitution is his point of reference. While the symbolism in the shapes of the building and dwellings has for a long time gone hand in hand with the loss of the inhabitants themselves, Dong-Yeon Kim's urban citations and designs tend to be emptied of people. The paradox of the presence of man is his absence, which is achieved through the intensity of the creative choice and all that is suffused with memories and associations. Ultimately, it is about creating self-containing forms that are to be comprehended as sculptures – in the sense of the exploration of sculpture and concentration of content.

Figure

By contrast, at the outset of his work Dong-Yeon Kim directly focused on the human body. Casts of the head done in clay or transparent glass were connected with cables along the floor. Arms and hands made of colored plastic and surrounded by wire loops were layered atop one another on a table, intertwining and suspended from the ceiling. The focus on man's intellectual core or acting limbs referenced the relationship between singularity and reproduction along with the delicate balance between the individual and the masses. In his 1992 piece entitled "Für Michelangelo" (For Michelangelo) Dong-Yeon Kim worked with Antique sculpture to establish a connection to a discourse of Renaissance and took it further. In so doing, he compiled the missing pieces, in other words, the limbs of the Antique masterpieces that were lost over the course of the centuries and he recapitulated Michelangelo's position of the ideal within the imperfect or fragmented, as evidenced in his refusal to restore the Torso of Belvedere and in the legend about who created the missing right arm of the main figure in the Laokoon group, not to forget the model of a river god in the Casa Buonarrotti, Florence, which originated in the workshop of Michelangelo. Michelangelo's radical striving for the singular form was juxtaposed with the possibilities afforded by modern reproduction technology and the availability of the body. Consequently, his early works already anticipated the issues that to this day have remained central to his work: Dong-Yeon Kim contrasts the origins of civilization with the progress made in society and academia, which follows the rules of pragmatism. He investigates the "essence" of human existence. Essentially, the works he created in the early 1990s and while studying at Düsseldorf Art Academy have been spawned by the same ideas that still concern him today.

However, he has since immersed himself in different, stereometric forms of expression, as well, which, particularly when working with plywood, approach the realm of architecture, and which beyond their prototypical nature must be understood as representatives of modular systems, which evoke the idea of a dwelling. Neither do the serial forms, suspended like a ring between ceiling and floor, indirectly address the suitability of the universe as a space for existence, nor are they meant as a reaction to overcrowded living environments. While other realizations of this vocabulary allude to primeval building designs, Dong-Yeon Kim places miniature, long drawn-out, staggered triangular shapes that are cast in bronze on the ground. Their tent-like structure provide basic protection from the elements, and their symmetrical arrangement is equally attributable to man as it is to nature's microstructures. Their small scale and position on the ground keep the works at a distance to the beholder. Dong-Yeon Kim formally employs aspects of Minimalist sculpture⁵ – the arrangement of the same modules of glazed ceramic alone, which he brought to even further abstraction over the years, would point in this direction – and causes physical uncertainty in the movement of the beholder. One reason is that when seen from above the formulations are hidden from view, keeping their secret at their core. Moreover, Dong-Yeon Kim undoubtedly still makes reference to cultic buildings in Korea⁶ – something to which the title of his later work group, "The holy city", most certainly alludes.

Be that as it may, in the works of Dong-Yeon Kim one thing references another, and some of the early ideas get picked up again years later. Working on a small scale and connecting the sculptures to the ground, playing with different proportions and ratios, the relationships formed with the beholder and his physical mobility have manifested themselves, however, as a permanent strategy. And in the hands of Dong-Yeon Kim each form enters into a relationship with man. From this there arise different modes of architecture, even if he simply creates miniature segments of fluted columns out of cardboard, pigment and linen.

In the context of architecture Dong-Yeon Kim finally homes in on the human figure as a whole. Within the specification of a sculptural situation, it is at first presented as a benchmark for our imagination. Dong-Yeon Kim places ceramic figures which are rooted in our culturally steeped doll houses and which connect conceptual reference with artificiality and delicacy with patina, in a spatial setting in the form of an architectural model. Various constructional states arise as a scene between the architectural site and theatrical stage. Different dimensions of remembrance and presence come together.

Cultural allusion, load-bearing structures and transitory elements then characterize the "non-solid" substance of smoke, which voluminously rises from the bricked chimneys but is in fact as rigid as plaster ("Engel & Venus", 2005): They appear as figures and torsos that are idealized in their materialization, in particular in the perfection of their whiteness. Annette Lagler correctly draws a connection to the myth of the gods born of foam. The corporeality of the bodies, which contrast the rough factory architecture, is realized here with reference to Renaissance art.⁸ And just as he draws the connection to his works from the early 1990s, he likewise alludes to the history of art at a later point in his 2009 work "Idea & Reality".

In "Idea & Reality", once again presented in white and with the same degree of realism, Dong-Yeon Kim immerses himself in the programs of Plato and Aristotle from Raphael's "School of Athens". He strips the two philosophers from the context of Fresco painting and stages their dialog atop staggered, more artificial than natural and, in this

sense, correlating mountain peaks. These could be interpreted as alluding to Mount Olympus but also in connection with Raphael's aptitude to create spatial effects.

In his famous fresco, Raphael centers the two philosophers within the "Stanza della Segnatura". He glosses over their different positions dialectically: Plato is holding Aristotle's book on nature, while Aristotle has Plato's philosophy of ethics. "The search for truth on earth is in analogy to theological wisdom," comments Dagmar Feghlem. The synthesis as concept and utopia becomes the essential theme in Dong-Yeon Kim's "Idea and Reality". She contemplates the fractures within Modernism and the experience of the incommensurable nature of the designs in his work. The three-dimensional (sic!) realistic depiction of the two figures is juxtaposed with the casual composition of the tapering surfaces, which has the appearance of a (negative) mold with its surrounding supports.

Dong-Yeon Kim conceived the prototype of this form in different directions. When pushed inside out, the cone shape turns into a crater, a lake even, in any case a hollow mold that he has further substantiated and realized, for instance, as a model within a framework.

The two philosophers are expressed with great realism by Dong-Yeon Kim. His works are becoming increasingly figurative, while allowing for open interpretation. To this end he has found a format that he has since applied to an essential part of his work. He initially subsumed the figures under the – deliberately ambivalent – term "monster", however, his more recent sculptures have been referred to as "snowsters". The accent shifts from an emotional impulse to their material texture. "As regards their content, monster and snowster are similar yet not entirely synonymous in meaning. The monsters are invisible from the very outset, while the snowsters will melt over time before they too become invisible," writes Dong-Yeon Kim. While the "monsters" are a product of our thoughts and dreams, the "snowsters" are real – in their watery form, within the ground.¹¹ The shift occurs away from the staginess, the culturally conceived notion, and toward a universal phenomenon in the sense of a law of nature. The figures are nonetheless presented in materialized form, in the vividness of the visual arts.

The "monsters" and "snowsters" are characterized by their subtle differentiation of parts of the body. A massive organic form rests upon another (a non-compartmentalized, chunky lower body, the upper body with its arm stumps horizontally extended, the head with sewn-on eyes and a squashed nose and mouth), while the surface appears to have been shaped with modeling clay, using the fingers. Their appearance oscillates between stone, glazed ceramic and, of course, snow. These figures are still feeling their way into the world and are, as directly suggested, ubiquitously perceived as creatures. They can be made of different materials, exist in different sizes between miniature and gigantic realization in the public space and have been placed in widely different contexts. They present themselves in the shape of a bustling anonymous mass – and as a metaphor for a gathering of people or even a population – or they are powerful individuals expressing an active presence. For example, the figures are placed in the model of a multi-story building shell that is clad in scaffolding. In another work they now find themselves in an opening within the genuine architecture of the exhibition room, suggesting that the beholder gazes into a world that is otherwise concealed from view. Such constellations remind one of "Gulliver's Travels" – in the mobility and the physical and communicative capacities of the Lilliputians. As regards architecture it can likewise be interpreted as a bundle of slats held in place and set in balance by perpendicularly

positioned pieces of wood. The white figurines remain between the wooden slats; they have the appearance of wiped-down paint splotches, while the paint itself has dripped on to the slats. In another instance, the figures are placed relative to size and in small groups in propped up cabins made of plywood with a translucent corrugated roof, while the interior remains open to view, resulting in a kind of stage. Dong-Yeon Kim has likewise created models specifically for the theater, indicating and completing an arena for the audience to sit and watch the actors. The metaphorical is immediately evident; ultimately, who is watching whom and what role are we adopting in the process? In these works, the idea of a world theater with the inhabitants of the earth as actors is perhaps addressed most directly.

Dong-Yeon Kim has also formulated an alternative to this design. The figures are now clad in white linen. The differentiation has been toned down even further. The fabric falls in loose folds; the head has morphed into a hood. The arms, ever so slightly tapered, culminate in horizontal tips. In a new work composed of four figures Dong-Yeon Kim contrasts the two groups with each other. A cast black figure with a modeled surface lies on the floor. It is surrounded by three white figures of the other type, who are facing one another. One stands upright, two are afloat (suspended on invisible strings) at different heights. Suggestive of the appearance of skin and cocoon, the fabric is joined by a vertical seam, the strings loosely suspended. What is insinuated here are existential tragedies in which the beholders partake. They can gaze into parts of the figures, recognizing the exclusiveness of the coat, the impressions of lightness and breeze, in particular when juxtaposed with the heaviness of the dark figure lying on the ground. The contrast between black and white, resistant matter and pliable consistency moreover resembles a silent, purist shadow theater that is full of contrasts as regards what gets assigned to the characters. Also executed is a – perhaps ritually motivated? – landscape between idea and corporeality; human life gets portrayed in various levels of consciousness. And even here one thing is related to another: The white figurations in their tectonic qualities, in the brittleness of the seams and in their reduced state evoke associations with the structure but also texture of the high-rise buildings that Dong-Yeon Kim designed some years earlier.

Architecture

In 2005/06, the architectural structures of “The holy city” were assembled in an exhibition tour of Goch, Beckum and Darmstadt, allowing first conclusions to be drawn about Dong-Yeon Kim’s oeuvre. It illustrated that his thoughts on civilization and urbanity were ways of dealing with society. Here, the duality of endangerment and resistance became even clearer. The beholder got a sense of the usedness and porousness of the superstructures. Functionally-related, succinctly-conceived blocks protruded up at human height, penetrated by horizontal incisions that referenced empty rows of windows. From time to time, white pieces of fabric hung in the openings, which added to the impression of parcels staggered atop one another. The houses appeared to have been left to decay, which bestowed upon them a transtemporal, elementary character. Kim’s constructions were to be read as warning signs for our society with its inclination to self-destroy and the problematic treatment of the environment.

Stephan Mann emphasized the contrast to the “reflecting facades and glass fronts of our cities”. Annette Lagler pointed to Dong-Yeon Kim’s interest in the Bauhaus and in the Western functional building style of the 1920s. These houses are mere surrogates; they have no door and thin layers are coming off the walls; the seams are coming loose. They metaphorically depict exhaustion as intensification,

at times renunciation. Between construction and destruction, skin and skeletons shine through, and Dong-Yeon Kim demonstrates the hollow space behind the facade. Equally significant are his economical use of color, his usage and disclosure of "cheap" materials and simple building principles in the coming together of lability and stability and the immediate representation of reality and its momentary transcendence as simplicity. This equally addresses the prefab architecture that, for example, defines the urban streetscapes in Eastern Europe (or did so in the past) and how in the West it was banished to the periphery; now it has become a central subject in the current discourse on urban development.

Dong-Yeon Kim has arranged his conceptions of the city, village or building compound – initially without figures, later with them – in extensive groups of work entitled "The holy city", "Flying City", "Monster City" and for about the past two years, "Beautiful Fear". Even the names address the simultaneousness of antagonistic principles. In Dong-Yeon Kim's works, the city transpires to be a melting pot of different spheres amongst which the spiritual has to find its home and maintain it. Urban development and architecture culminate in the disparate space that is the city as a mode of splendid abundance and utter emptiness, as a utilitarianism that has been lost within history and overturns monuments and as a documentation of its genesis. One aspect of this is that Dong-Yeon Kim combined the depictions of high-rises now abandoned (and perhaps never occupied in the first place) in several of his exhibitions on the "The holy city" with images of utility poles. Tapering symmetrically and composed of metal sections, the pylons extend beyond the high-rises. They brightly point up to the sky while the blocks of high-rises relate to the ground as sculptures. Following the nuclear disaster in Japan, the notion of power supply is of course to be read differently, in the same manner in which the force of nature is to be experienced in the dilapidated state of the buildings. That said, the orientation of the poles would be equally suggestive of pagodas, in themselves synonymous with the achievements of modern life: "The holy city" is emblematic and symbolic, fragmented and topical. Heimat, or homeland, and the loss thereof are encoded in it in different ways. Perhaps Dong Yeon-Kim is alluding to his own dichotomy, which is oscillating between two different worlds with an eminent desire for progress and an enormous acceleration of life, while he himself grew up in a village outside of Seoul. Another type of building utilized in the "The holy city" are brick structures, some furnished with a chimney, others consisting only of a chimney, some partly without roofs, open to view like a ruin after a fire. The smoke references past methods of energy production and is instantly laden with connotations. The compound with the incredibly tall chimneys hovers between preindustrialization and the onset of industrialization. The hollow form is in itself a formulation that reverberates throughout Dong-Yeon Kim's oeuvre.

As early as the early 1990s, Dong-Yeon Kim immersed himself in "simple" structural shells for which he formulated pieces between tactile individuality and standardization, which reflect the basic elements of primordial dwellings. Still referencing these, within "The holy city" he later employed standardized, in part die-cut modules to create a range of different buildings. Single surfaces flip up, opening up sections that branch off labyrinthically and which could outline the structures of a town ex negativo. Dong-Yeon Kim has addressed their nature directly with his intricate wooden structures. For example, he made small delicate baskets that could be closed at the top, which thus indirectly referenced a shrine, metaphorically symbolizing a feeling of security and perhaps also alluding to Christian imagery. To some extent starting in 1998,

but mainly beginning in 2002/03, he crafted small, even minute models of huts and houses from panes of wood and fabric, to which he added color at individual points. Entirely made of natural materials, they evoke the building style of the Far East in harmony with nature – far away from the big cities. Especially in the case of the densely composed erect structures, the interior dimensions are almost impossible to gauge, even when it is possible to look inside. Between doll house and ecological concept we sense the transitory nature of the dwelling. These huts express a particular randomness. Their roofs are parceled out, the building comes out of balance and the structures could break apart in the next storm. This requires them to be erected on an unstable, indeed flexible ground. The strips of wood often seem massive vis-à-vis the buildings and at times even denote the landscape's horizon. Dong-Yeon Kim occasionally concentrated the huts to evoke the idea of a village that is established over rocks, forms a line or embraces a free square. Held afloat by looped strings, they are suggestive of castles in the air. On the other hand, the wooden sheets partially painted in white follow inherent principles, reverse themselves as a mobius strip and in their evenly oscillating to-and-fro, they parallel the flow of writing. Some of the tips are firmly resting on the ground, other times even these strips are afloat, symbolizing a state of lightness in their isolation, which links the protection afforded by a fortress to community life. On occasion the widely spread wings evoke connotations with petals; yet they also demonstrate the paths that need to be taken from the village. "Nowadays there are so many roads and directions (crossroads), whereas back then there was of course only a single street," writes Dong Yeon-Kim.

Roads and paths

The "road" transpires to be a central subject in his thoughts on the state of civilization. Similar to the way in which their angular designs moved away from that which has "grown" organically to point toward that which is "constructed" in his early modular pieces, the strings address the idea of the "road" in his current works. The road is to be understood as being caught between the poles of an arduous mountain path and wide motorway – as a chute with added catapult-like acceleration. "Road" means the trade channels and routes that have to be taken when living a nomadic life or traveling temporarily, as does the stream that contemplates its way between the winding creek and wide river. In the context of Dong-Yeon Kim's work the road is to be grasped both as a ritual experience and a nature trail. To illuminate this, there is a small tablet that he has conceived not so much as an object but as a drawing – his 2003 piece "Brunnen" (Well). The work is intimate and personal, and it gets directly to the point. It describes the journey that water takes, from its origin in a well as it travels through a town. Indicated with lines, the stream goes past buildings made of tiny wooden blocks. The well itself, however, is a white hollow form made of plaster, which protrudes through the wooden board. This is a defining work in which Dong-Yeon Kim illustrates the topography of his hometown in its real life setting and the immediate relationship with nature.

In contrast to the above is the city. Kim succeeds in evoking connotations of the latter with his silhouette-type depiction of the entry and exit ramps of an expressway, the pattern of which he based on a New York streetscape. He creates situations of exchange and alludes, for example, to the circulation of blood in the human body and to communicative processes. However, when viewed from above, one finds that Dong-Yeon Kim has stripped the depiction of its core and thus emptied it. He left it in white or gray and placed strips across it in order to depict elevated stretches. And it is only consistent that he ultimately removed the curving sequences from their base and suspended them

linearly in the room as separated forms made of aluminum, to engender a dynamic and yet angular calligraphy between continuity and rhythmic decomposition within movement.

In continuation from the above follow the "Flat Buildings", which represent the latest pieces of urban architecture in Dong-Yeon Kim's oeuvre. The partly staggered planar aluminum strips reveal the grid patterns of the facades as sequences of roofed spaces. Kim used digital editing to mount several photographic images such that they illustrate perspective experience and thereby achieve threedimensionality within the plane. If with his "The holy city" Dong-Yeon Kim succeeded in unsettling our perception by means of scale and the distance to the architecture on the ground, he now does the same with the wall facing us. The reflecting metal and shadow effects heighten the impression. With these apparently die-cut works he has achieved the ultimate degree of artificiality – along with a perfect grid-like surface. And this might explain why he links beauty with fear and firmly situates the outcome within our (digital) information society as "beautiful fe@r".

Nature and creation

Dong-Yeon Kim also conveys some essential aspects about the uniformity of our civilization and the endangerment of primordial and natural orders. And in devoting himself to the concept of a model funicular railway (which, after all, combines the aspects of robust utility poles and fragile cabins), he now illustrates how the technical realization of it responds to the shapes of the landscape, thereby mediating between the higher spheres and the Earth, as it were. Related to this is the shape of the four-leaf clover as a topos for regulating excessive traffic on various spatial levels, which in itself represents nature and is also conceived as a lucky charm.

It is characteristic of Kim to combine aspects of our lives in his sculptural images that would normally exclude one another. His explicit focus on natural phenomena demonstrates how serious he is about this art. In one of his murals he pushed bundles of twigs through the frames of a wooden box. While the green leaves fall over the structure, the roots get entangled below. Inside the box itself, which is shown in landscape format, we see a pretend spider made of wire alongside the twigs. Presented like icons, the components are clearly distinguished from one another.¹⁸ Dong-Yeon Kim relies on the powerful effect of such images. And here too he brings together object-like elements with instances of fine drawings. There are also blue outline drawings of roots, the nervously entangled lines of which stretch out like tentacles, inherently suggestive of fragility and decay.

In recent years, Dong-Yeon Kim has explored growth in nature in several other of his works, including his contribution to the 2008 Biennial in Busan, for which he moved live natural objects, a tree and grass along with some birds, into the exhibition hall. The water supply worked perfectly, but due to the lack of sunlight the tree died and the birds flew away. Dong-Yeon Kim's installation was a scientific experiment, case study and sculptural arrangement of a gradually decaying paradise, staged as a process that the audience could follow. Here, Dong-Yeon Kim illustrated the questionableness of our environment through simple observations thereof. Taking concepts often rooted in Korean traditions as a starting point, he formulated a descriptive visual language for the perils of our time as a result of the changes made to our living environments. He raised questions in relation to ecology and how we should handle our natural resources. What are the consequences of overpopulation and the increase in traffic for our planet Earth? In Dong-Yeon Kim's art we are assigned the role of beholders who can determine their own fate. He repeatedly makes use of the arena as a form of presentation, in which

we take a seat and reflect all of the above and, depending on the context, become more or less involved.

Theatrum Mundi

Essentially, this distanced, analytical view of nature and civilization, past and present, is already inherent in the metal shelf that houses individual, now even more fragile looking objects. Here too Kim employs a method of staging that will instantly evoke connotations of exploitation, destruction and fragmentation. The piece refers to our own history of creation, which, although already neatly archived and stored away, we nonetheless confront. Dong-Yeon Kim presents theater in a variety of forms, and it is celebrated directly and consequently as a ritual act. To do so, Kim built stages that were frequented by “monsters” and “snowsters”, but equally by humans too. In addition, by pointing out the invisible nature of these figures he has shifted the dimensions of the dramatic, of immediate emotion and dismay into the realm of our senses. Everything in his work becomes a traditional state from one form to the next. Consequently we can never be simply be passive spectators.

By illustrating different models of settling into urbanity as a form of life between happiness and misfortune, Dong-Yeon Kim is a trailblazer, addressing many sociological issues. In so doing, he touches upon spiritual aspects – which still go hand in hand with the delicacy of his formulations and the interest in natural phenomena – and he calls for humbleness. In a recent work to this end he paraphrased “Lanchester’s Law” as follows: All the wealth we have accumulated in our lifetime will with death turn to dust, we shall therefore return to the mere existence of the moment of our birth.

Fate, destiny and the insignificance of man within the universe are topics that Dong-Yeon Kim has engaged with from an early age. This is immediately felt in his drawings that succinctly denote stellar constellations and the palms of the hands. They depict palm lines and draw attention to the expressiveness of the hands. Reference is also made to Indian mudras and the symbolic importance given to the position of the hand in Indian ritual dance. Nonetheless, Dong-Yeon Kim always emphasizes the importance of respecting the origins of the world and demonstrates to us indeed how fragile they are. As a contemporary artist he works with vivid images, which transpire to be as succinct as they are modest but are in fact decidedly philosophical as they illustrate the precariousness of today’s systems. City and architecture as a living environment between settled existence and fluctuation in his work become a sample space of the profane and the exalted, of depressing and magnificent things, of smallness and magnitude. Reference is made to art history, and particularly to the Renaissance, which so decidedly devoted itself to Antiquity. Dong-Yeon Kim alludes to it once again by presenting his sculptural work “Idea & Reality” at the end of the catalog. In so doing, he likewise aims to reconcile different spheres and cultures, while he himself – from the perspective of a Korean who was educated internationally – lives in the age of the Internet, of quick air travel and changing time zones. However, Dong-Yeon Kim time and again succeeds in decelerating things and in enticing us into a sense of perpetual astonishment. Ultimately and above all, through his work we come to realize that without nature there would be no civilization.