

# **Aesthetics of Outsiders**

*On the Fiction of the Korean Artist*

By

**Jeong Ae Park**

Aesthetics of Outsiders: On the Fiction of the Korean Artist

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2026

Ethics International Press, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-83711-427-6

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-83711-428-3

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# Globalisation of Art and the Issue of Koreanness

In the twenty-first century, a growing number of people around the world are voluntarily embracing a nomadic lifestyle. According to the *United Nations International Migration Report (2017)*, over 258 million individuals were living outside their country of birth—a number that continues to rise each year. Korean artists are no exception. Many have studied abroad, established themselves in foreign countries, and now work internationally. These artists, while residing in cities like New York, lead itinerant lives, exhibiting their works across global art centres such as Berlin, London, Milan, Paris, and Tokyo. At the same time, they maintain close ties with the Korean art scene, with their works often exhibited and acquired by major Korean museums and galleries. In fact, international recognition frequently facilitates artistic careers in Korea. In this way, Korean artists living abroad as outsiders in a geographical sense are becoming central figures in reshaping Korea's art world. They operate within a transnational and transcultural system, transcending any single national identity.

This phenomenon is underpinned by the broader force of globalisation, driven primarily by global capitalism. In this era, people and capital flow across national borders, intensifying cultural exchange and interaction. Korean artists no longer create exclusively for Korean audiences. As a result, their works are inherently hybrid. Take K-pop, for instance. Crafted for a global market, it seamlessly fuses Korean lyrics with Western genres ranging from pop and hip-hop to jazz, rap, and beyond. Korean and Western instruments intermingle, resulting in a deeply multi-layered, hybrid form. K-pop is no longer rooted solely in traditional Korean music; it is deterritorialised. Within this context, a perplexing question arose for me: *What defines a Korean*

*artist in the age of globalisation?* To explore this, I sought to examine the evolving identities of Korean artists working in an international city like New York—an environment where diverse cultures coexist and dynamic exchanges flourish.

This book is the culmination of extensive fieldwork conducted with Korean artists based in New York, a city that stands as a global epicenter of contemporary art. As a vibrant, multicultural hub, New York attracts artists from every corner of the world. These individuals bring with them unique cultural, ethnic, and religious heritages, yet they engage with and are transformed by the cultures around them. Among international cities, New York is home to a relatively large community of Korean artists. It is also a space where cultural tensions often surface, shaped in part by the history of Korean immigration to the United States.

My journey began in January 2010 when I attended the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition of the Korean Cultural Service New York (KCSNY), titled *Faces & Facts: Contemporary Korean Art in New York*. The exhibition showcased the work of 60 Korean-American artists, including 54 living artists based in New York. This experience provided me with an initial conceptual map of the Korean-American artistic landscape. From there, I engaged in field research with 40 Korean artists living in New York, from 2010 through 2023.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following list presents the artists in the order in which I interviewed them: Nikki S. Lee, Sook Jin Jo, Do Ho Suh, Soo Ja Kim, Myong Hi Kim, So Hyun Bae, Ka Kyung Lee, Sung Ho Choi, Ik Joong Kang, Mi Ru Kim, Chong Gon Byun, Ju Yeon Kim, Sang Nam Lee, Young Sam Kim, Sun Kyung Kwak, Shin Il Kim, Young Gil Kim, Jung Hyang Kim, Choong Sup Lim, Ka Hae Park, Hyung Sup Shin, Soo Im Lee, Il Lee, Seung Lee, Jong Il Ma, Sang Woo Koh, Byron Kim, Michael Joo, Mi Kyung Kim, Chung Yoon Kim, Jean Shin, Byung Ok Min, Il Dan Choi, Hong Seon Jang, Youn Hee Chung, Woong Kim, Yong Soon Min, Tchah Sup Kim, and Joseph Pang.

Based on sustained interviews and long-term observation, I came to identify three broad identity categories among these artists: Artists who moved to New York as adults, often after completing their university education in Korea or pursuing graduate degrees abroad. Artists who immigrated to the United States at a young age, typically with their parents. Korean-American artists born in the United States. The distinctions among these three groups became evident early on, particularly in their use of language. Interviews with the first group were conducted in Korean. These artists remained emotionally and culturally Korean—their location may have changed, but their sensibilities had not. In contrast, the second group preferred to be interviewed in English due to limited proficiency in Korean, though they generally understood it. The third group, born and raised in the U.S., spoke no Korean at all. These linguistic differences sparked a critical hypothesis: Language is a decisive factor in shaping identity.

However, as my research progressed, I found that identity is far more complex. Within each group, there was a surprising range of individual differences. Some artists born in Korea felt emotionally closer to those raised in the U.S. Others who had left Korea as children retained strong Korean sensibilities. These fluid boundaries suggested that something deeper than language was at play. I came to understand that *affect* and *desire*—emotional and psychological drives—play a far more essential role in identity formation than language alone. Desire, in particular, emerged as the most powerful force. Artists, by nature, are beings of desire—constantly seeking transformation and self-fulfillment. This desire, often triggered by affect, transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Language, then, may function as an external marker of identity, but the internal drive to become—to express, to create—unites artists across categories. Despite their surface differences, these artists are fundamentally similar in nature. It is here that I turn to Gilles Deleuze's

notion of *univocity of being*: the idea that all beings speak with a single voice, even in their difference. My writing, then, aims to articulate how Korean artists in New York are both different and alike. Different in experience and background—but fundamentally united by desire, emotion, and artistic pursuit.

To support this analysis, I turned to psychoanalytic and philosophical frameworks. Jacques Lacan's triad of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real helped clarify how subjectivity operates through body-image, language, and that which remains beyond expression. Yet the diverse imaginative and symbolic systems of the three artist groups do not operate identically. Later, Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of *desire as production* provided an even more generative lens. Their idea of rhizomatic thinking—a non-hierarchical, decentralised system of growth and connection—beautifully mirrors the contemporary artist's journey. In an increasingly interconnected world, artistic identity, like the rhizome, spreads unpredictably, connecting diverse influences across space and time.

Given that artists are singular beings with unique *becomings*, I employed a qualitative research method. Unlike quantitative methods that favor objectivity and numerical data, qualitative research values subjectivity, meaning, and lived experience. My approach included ethnographic observation, biographical study, interviews, and interpretive analysis of artworks and exhibitions. I conducted fieldwork in artists' studios, homes, and exhibition spaces. Interviews lasted between one to one-and-a-half hours, recorded and later transcribed. Over time, my understanding evolved as insights I once considered insignificant later proved to be important. I continued to engage with the artists, gathering supplementary interviews to revise or expand previous findings.

Analysis revealed that first-group artists, while not explicitly focused on Koreanness, often explore Korean subjects to assert personal iden-

tity. Second-group artists, having left Korea a young age, often express a desire to reclaim a tenuous Koreanness. Third-group artists embrace Korean identity as cultural heritage, independent of geography or politics. Thus, who qualifies as a “Korean artist” remains an open, nuanced question. Consider Nam June Paik, arguably the most iconic Korean-born artist of the postwar era. He lived a nomadic life—from Korea to Hong Kong, Japan, Germany, and the United States. This nomadic trajectory found a striking expression in *TV Buddha*, in which a Buddha statue gazes at itself via a closed-circuit television. The work unmistakably bridges Eastern tradition and Western modernity. An ancient Buddhist figure confronts its own image through a technological medium, producing a composite configuration that resists fixed interpretation. Paik’s work thus anticipates the idea of the global village, viewed through an Eastern sensibility. For Deleuze and Guattari, such a formation can be understood as an *assemblage*: a configuration that emerges not from linear evolution but from the alliance of heterogeneous elements. K-pop is an assemblage. So is *TV Buddha*.

Just as in the case of Nam June Paik, an increasing number of Korean artists in the twenty-first century are living and working abroad, producing hybrid works that draw from traditional Korean identity while simultaneously assembling new cultural elements. These hybrid artworks clearly express the artists’ own hybrid identities. Accordingly, this study approaches artistic practice as a crucial site of knowledge—a lens through which one can understand the lived experiences and cultural contexts of the artists themselves. This book distinguishes three groups of Korean artists: those who moved to New York as adults, those who emigrated at a young age, and those born in the United States as Korean Americans. While these categories serve as a point of departure, the investigation also explores the overlapping traits and blurred boundaries between them. Central to this inquiry is the role of desire—how it operates to produce both commonalities and differences among the artists.

Ultimately, this study explores *assemblages*—the hybrid, affective, and desiring processes that shape Korean artists in New York and beyond. By tracing these personal configurations of identity, it seeks to illuminate how national identity itself is constructed. A nuanced understanding of individual identity as dynamic and adaptive offers insight into the evolving influence of Korean culture in a transnational era. The discussion begins with a close examination of the New York art world—the context in which these artists are actively making and remaking their worlds.

## Chapter 1

# The New York Art World and the Formation of the Korean Artist Community

This chapter traces the intertwined histories of the New York art scene and the Korean artist community that took root within it. The story begins in the 1920s, when New York's art world was itself still taking shape. From its outset, the Korean community evolved alongside the city's shifting artistic landscape. The styles they embraced bore an organic relation to the leading movements of the time. Yet rather than being carried along by prevailing trends, Korean artists in New York engaged with them selectively, filtering each influence through the texture of their own sensibilities. At times they resisted; at others they refracted or subtly reconfigured dominant forms, forging an idiom distinctly their own.

The exchange with the New York art world was thus not a one-way transmission of influence but a reciprocal process of negotiation, in which artistic vocabularies were reconfigured across cultural boundaries. Seen in this light, Korean artists in New York appear not as passive recipients but as active agents, positioned at the threshold between worlds. They drew on the materials, media, and discourses of the New York scene, yet transformed them through the sensibilities carried from their own cultural inheritance—opening pathways to new artistic horizons. This creative trajectory unfolded as a dual dialogue: with New York's ever-changing art world and with the Korean art scene that remained a vital point of reference.

Approaching the New York art world as a site of social production, this chapter examines the historical conditions in which its major

styles emerged and the ways Korean artists, working within those conditions, devised their own formal strategies. By tracing the artistic choices that shaped their work—whether in medium, technique, or mode of expression—it considers how these artists not only translated but also reinvented existing idioms, moving beyond cultural mediation into acts of creative transformation.

## **The New York art scene and the emergence of New York art**

New York, located at the southern tip of the state in the northeastern United States, grew into the nation's largest city during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as millions of immigrants arrived from abroad. This expansion unfolded amid the accelerating modernisation of Western Europe and North America—driven by industrialisation, advances in science and technology, the spread of capitalism, and rapid urban growth (Featherstone, 1991). The rise of New York must be understood within this wider historical frame: it was a city born of capitalism, shaped by a mass influx of immigrants drawn by the expanding market economy. From the outset, New York differed from the historic cities of Europe. It emerged as a city grounded in modernity—not merely as a historical epoch but as an ideology rooted in Enlightenment rationality. By the eighteenth century, this rationality had become the philosophical engine of industrial capitalism (Steger, 2013), promoting universalist ideals of “freedom,” “individuality,” and “self-expression.” Modernism, as a cultural movement, translated these ideals into artistic form, and New York provided fertile ground for such a translation.

From the early twentieth century, modernist tendencies took root in the city, nurtured by major cultural institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (founded in 1929), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

These museums not only offered exhibition platforms but also legitimised modernist art as a symbol of creative autonomy. Within the rapidly modernising urban landscape, modernist works came to symbolise individualism, standing as markers of personal vision (Duncan, 1983).

In contrast to the more conservative art circles of Europe, New York proved receptive to experimental and innovative forms, aligning them with American ideals of the free market and individualism. Even before the First World War, the 291 Art Gallery on Fifth Avenue—founded by photographer Alfred Stieglitz—was exhibiting works by Rodin, Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi, and Rousseau. During the war, “291” became a hub for Dadaist artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Man Ray (Lucie-Smith, 1995). It was in New York, rather than in his native France, that Duchamp unveiled his controversial *Fountain* in 1917 at the Society of Independent Artists, a group he had co-founded. This act signalled the city’s emergence as a centre for Dadaism. Rejecting what he called “retinal art” — art appealing only to the eye—Duchamp advanced a conception of art as intellectual provocation, laying the groundwork for generations of New York artists.

From the 1920s onward, the city’s art world flourished with the arrival of immigrant artists from around the globe. Armenian-born Arshile Gorky immigrated to the United States in 1920 and soon settled in New York. Willem de Kooning, from the Netherlands, arrived in 1926 and formed a close artistic bond with Gorky. Russian-born Mark Rothko arrived in 1923, and by the 1930s the city had become a refuge for artists fleeing Nazi persecution, including German-born Hans Hofmann, who arrived in 1932.

As fears surrounding Nazi Germany intensified with the outbreak of the Second World War, Piet Mondrian left Europe for New York via the United Kingdom in 1940. The city offered an ideal setting in which to advance the Neoplasticist principles he had long championed. Its grid-like streets, dazzling neon signs, and ceaseless yellow cabs inspired him

to translate urban rhythm into geometric compositions of line, form, and colour, as seen in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. German-born Max Ernst, who had earlier relocated to Paris, settled in New York in 1941. From its earliest days, the New York art world drew vitality from the convergence of diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Immigrant artists found in the city an atmosphere of freedom that allowed them to devote themselves fully to their work. As a result, the steady growth that had characterised the art scene since the 1920s gave way to a dramatic surge in vitality following the Second World War—transforming New York into not just a geographical centre of art, but a living nexus where forms, ideas, and cultural rhythms continuously intersected, collided, and recombined into unforeseen arrangements.

In the postwar years, New York became the undisputed centre of the art world. Out of this milieu emerged Abstract Expressionism, the first truly international American style. It was shaped by the trauma of war, the rise of existential anxiety, and the American emphasis on individual freedom.

It sought to capture eternity within the instant—a vision resonant with Nietzsche’s notion of eternal return, which Gilles Deleuze (1994) reinterpreted as the return of difference rather than the repetition of the same. In this light, each painterly gesture becomes a singular affirmation of becoming, an ontological event in which sensation crystallises into presence. Drawing on the influence of European émigré artists such as Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning, Americans like Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still forged a new visual language of gestural abstraction. More than an aesthetic, it was a philosophical and emotional response to an unsettled world. The so-called “New York School” thus gave rise to the first American style with global reach: Abstract Expressionism. From the late 1940s through the 1950s, the movement dominated the American art scene, encompassing two primary tendencies: the dynamic, gestural approach of Jackson

Pollock, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning, and the more contemplative, non-figurative canvases of Mark Rothko.

By the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism had become the most authoritative style in American contemporary art. Clement Greenberg—one of the most influential art critics of the mid-twentieth century—emerged as its most ardent advocate. For Greenberg, Abstract Expressionism represented the very essence of “pure art,” capable of resisting both political instrumentalisation and commercialism. Paradoxically, the rise of New York’s art scene was inseparable from strong economic support.

The development of modern art in twentieth-century New York was sustained by a dense network of dealers, galleries, and museums. Among the most prominent was Leo Castelli, whose gallery played a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of postwar American art. Over more than five decades, the Leo Castelli Gallery exhibited leading Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and later became a platform for Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art, showcasing artists including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol. The rise of institutions like MoMA and figures like Castelli marked the emergence of the so-called East Coast gallery system. In contrast to the hierarchical, state-sponsored salon model of Europe, this system was more fluid and decentralised, operating through a network of commercial galleries, museums, and critics that privileged artistic innovation, market viability, and critical recognition. While MoMA conferred cultural legitimacy upon modern art, dealers such as Castelli constructed the commercial and exhibition infrastructure that allowed artists to flourish, establishing him as a pivotal figure in the global rise of American modernism and movements including Pop Art and Minimalism (Cohen-Solal, 2010).

At the height of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, the assemblage movement began to take shape, later flourishing in the 1960s. Assemblage refers to three-dimensional compositions constructed on a fixed

base, often compared to collage, which remains two-dimensional. While collage layers flat images or materials, assemblage incorporates volumetric elements, frequently using found objects—materials not originally intended for art. This practice inherited the anti-art spirit of Dada and developed into what was later known as Neo-Dadaism. Neo-Dada artists employed both collage and assemblage to juxtapose contemporary materials and popular imagery in irrational, non-linear ways. Assemblage redefined creation: no longer the realisation of a pre-existing form or essence, as in the traditions of antiquity, but the experimental composition of heterogeneous elements that resist reduction to a single logic.

This reconfiguration unfolded within a broader postwar condition: the world was no longer conceived as a unified, harmonious cosmos, but as fragmented, decentered, and in constant flux. The self, likewise, ceased to be a stable, coherent entity, becoming instead a provisional constellation of relations and affects. Artistic practice, in this context, was less about representing a given world than about staging encounters between disparate elements—arrangements in which something new might emerge, a becoming that could not have been predicted in advance.

In retrospect, this approach anticipates with the concept of *agencement* later articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987; 1994): a mode of composition that is neither merely aesthetic nor merely material, but ontological in its capacity to generate new relations. The works of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Joseph Cornell thus carried an implicit philosophical dimension: they did not simply express ideas but actively made thought happen—transforming the gallery into a space where form and meaning were always provisional, contingent, and open to rearrangement.

In its early stages, modernist art largely concerned with expressing the inner self. Over time, however, it shifted towards subjects drawn from the changing conditions of production—machines, factories,

urbanisation, supermarkets, advertising, and mass culture. This shift reflected a transformation in the very environment in which art was created: artists could no longer ignore the realities of an increasingly industrial, consumer-driven society. Gradually, they began to address the effects of capitalism, which became a central theme in their work. This turn paved the way for the emergence of Pop Art.

In the 1960s, American artists reinterpreted British Pop Art and developed it into a distinctive movement of their own—one that sought to narrow the gap between art and reality by incorporating popular imagery. In contrast to Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art was more representational, reflecting the consumer culture of post-war America and evolving into a distinctly “American” form of art. Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol each enriched the movement through unique styles and approaches. Viewed in hindsight, Marcel Duchamp’s readymades may be seen as precursors to Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans*: both emerged from the conditions of industrial capitalism, transforming everyday objects into works of art.

During the 1960s and 1970s, another group of New York-based artists began creating monochromatic, abstract sculptures marked by formal simplicity. Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris pioneered what came to be known as Minimal Art. Minimalism became a defining tendency in contemporary art, distinct from both Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. Whereas Abstract Expressionism conveyed affective intensity in a virtual register, Minimalism sought to impose order on the material world of the 1970s—a shift that Deleuze might frame as a passage from the virtual to the actual, where form crystallises into a clear spatial rhythm.

Around the same time, Conceptual Art emerged, asserting that the idea or concept of a work should take precedence over its aesthetic, technical, or material execution. Advocates of “art as ideas” rejected traditional forms grounded in manual skill and sensory expression.

They were also sceptical of Minimalism's formalism, regarding it as reductive and overly focused on material form at the expense of meaning. Instead, conceptual artists expanded art's horizons beyond the purely visual or perceptual, engaging with language, philosophy, and cultural critique. Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik were instrumental in pushing these boundaries, incorporating themes from feminism, popular culture, and semiotics. In New York, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner produced language-based works that placed text at the centre of artistic practice.

The rise of installation art in the 1970s marked a natural culmination of these experimental practices in conceptual and performance art, coupled with a sustained critique of the traditional gallery space. It brought spatial and experiential dimensions to the forefront, transforming the viewer's encounter with art. Rejecting static, object-centred works, installation artists created immersive, site-specific environments that altered spatial perception and engaged viewers physically. Such works did not merely represent space; they rearranged its forces—echoing what Deleuze (2002) identifies as a reorganisation the *percept*, where sensation is made to shift and reorient itself.

In the early 1980s, a Neo-expressionist tendency emerged in opposition to Minimalism and Conceptual Art in the 1970s, rallying under the banner of the "New Painting." Artists such as Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Eric Fischl led this movement, employing a vigorous, emotionally charged, and often baroque painterly style. Their works dealt with mythological, cultural, historical, national, and sexual themes, expressed with compelling visual intensity. This resurgence of expressive painting arose as a reaction to the perceived intellectual austerity and emotional detachment of the preceding decade. As political and cultural climates shifted—with the rise of postmodernism, identity politics, and a renewed interest in narrative—artists sought to reintroduce figuration, personal expression, and

historical consciousness into contemporary art. The return to large-scale, gestural painting reflected a desire to reclaim the sensual, affective, and mythic dimensions of the medium in a time of growing cultural fragmentation. Although not synonymous with postmodernism, Neo-Expressionism can be seen as one of its early manifestations—signalling a turn away from the purity of form and universality of modernist ideals toward plurality, hybridity, and the return of the subject.

Among its most prominent figures was Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose work fused poetry, text, figuration, and abstraction with historical knowledge and contemporary critique. Rising to fame through the *Times Square Show* in the early 1980s, Basquiat became a symbol of New York's burgeoning downtown art scene. Alongside him, Keith Haring pioneered a street-based art practice, transforming subways, streets, and nightclubs into democratic sites of visual engagement. These artistic interventions unfolded against the backdrop of dramatic urban changes in New York City. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by gentrification, racial segregation, and economic disparity—conditions that fuelled politically charged street art. Black and Latinx communities increasingly turned to graffiti, performance, and installation as acts of resistance, shaping a vibrant countercultural scene that influenced figures like Basquiat and Haring.

This period also saw the emergence of critical voices such as Rosalind Krauss, Lucy Lippard, and Hal Foster, who challenged the formalist orthodoxy of Clement Greenberg and foregrounded the social, political, and conceptual dimensions of art. Their interventions helped pave the way for more pluralistic, interdisciplinary approaches to criticism.

The 1980s, when Neo-Expressionism was at its height, also marked a broader cultural turning point: the decline of modernist ideals and the rise of postmodern discourse. A growing awareness that the art world had historically centred on white male artists led to the dismantling of *grand narratives* and the embrace of *little narratives* in intellectual

and cultural debate. The decade witnessed the increasing visibility of minority and marginalised artistic voices. Once dominated by Euro-American hegemonies, the art world began to open to multiple cultures and artistic practices. Postmodernism in art materialised through the recognition and affirmation of difference—whether ethnic, racial, sexual, or individual.

The 1960s had already witnessed its stirrings: Andy Warhol blurred the boundaries between popular and high culture, while installation in Conceptual Art foreshadowed a defining postmodern feature—the collapse of traditional genre boundaries. Robert Rauschenberg, a key figure in Assemblage and Neo-Dada, called his work *Bed a combine*—a notion that parallels what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would later conceptualise as *agencement* (assemblage). In this view, art is not merely representation but an act of arranging, modulating, and composing—a field where heterogeneous elements coexist without subsuming their difference. Such hybridity was already present in the New York art scene of the 1960s, and became fully realised in the art of the 1980s and beyond.

Postmodern art is less a unified movement than a constellation of practices that reject modernist purity and universality. It collapses the distinction between elite and popular culture, appropriating and synthesising diverse cultural elements. The result is a layered field of meaning, at once harmonious and discordant—a *multiplicity* in Deleuze's sense, where elements interact without being reduced to a single order. David Salle, for instance, used diptych formats to stage this duality, creating illogical, fragmented pairings that resist straightforward interpretation.

Since the early twentieth century, the New York art scene has drawn vitality from immigrant artists of diverse national origins, each contributing distinct cultural energies. Today, more than 800 languages are spoken in the city (Lubin, 2017). In this sense, New York stands as a

living enactment of poststructuralist concepts such as fragmentation, indeterminacy, and perpetual becoming. In this ever-shifting environment, the world's leading artists gather to compete and collaborate. Korean artists—ambitious, driven, and determined to succeed—are no exception. For many, a decisive encounter with New York's art world feels almost inevitable. It is through such crossings that the Korean artist community in New York has taken root.

## **The Korean artist community in New York**

The arrival of Korean artists in New York did not follow a single line of migration, but unfolded as a dispersed series of trajectories that eventually converged into a loosely woven field of relations. Each artist brought a different set of memories, techniques, and cultural references, and in New York these elements interacted, overlapped, and sometimes resisted one another. The result was less a unified school than an assemblage—a living configuration whose shape was continually redefined by new arrivals and shifting artistic currents.

### **First-generation Korean artists in New York**

The first Korean artist known to have reached New York was Bal Chang, who arrived in 1922 after studying at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. At Columbia University, he turned towards art history and aesthetics before returning to Korea, where he later founded the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University. His practice—anchored in religious imagery shaped by his Catholic upbringing—remained relatively untouched by the avant-garde energies circulating in New York. Yet even in this distance from experimentation, his presence marked the opening of a connective line between Korean art and the emerging modernist field.

John Pai (Young Chul Bae) immigrated to the United States in 1949 with his father, a Korean independence activist, and his mother, who had

grown up in Russia. In the 1950s and 1960s, as Bauhaus principles and abstract experimentation shaped New York's art world, Pai developed a sculptural language of deconstruction and recomposition. Drawing from Russian Constructivism, he assembled non-representational elements into open lattices of welded steel—structures at once precise and porous, balancing engineering discipline with spatial openness.

Po Kim (Bo Hyun Kim) arrived in 1957 at the age of forty, having first visited the United States in 1955 at the invitation of the University of Illinois. His 1961 work, *Untitled*, exhibited at *Faces & Facts: Contemporary Artists in New York* held at the Korean Cultural Centre in New York in 2010, features bold, rough, and busy brushstrokes reminiscent of Willem de Kooning's painting. It reveals the intensity of his engagement with Abstract Expressionism. During the 1970s, he turned to realist still lifes, later embracing the vivid, gestural force of Neo-expressionism in the 1980s. Yet across these shifts, Kim's work retained its commitment to painterly vitality and emotional intensity. They revealed the adaptability of an artistic current that could traverse multiple idioms while maintaining an internal pulse.

After graduating from Seoul National University, Yongjin Han left Korea in 1963 to study at Dartmouth and Columbia. In New York, he translated modernist abstraction into a tactile grammar of steel, stone, and wood. Later, during a retreat to Jeju Island, he worked with volcanic basalt, carving it into minimal forms whose quiet dignity recalls the weathered grace of Joseon Buddhist statuary. In both New York and Jeju, his work resisted the grand narratives of Western modernism, embodying a humble, meditative presence. His trajectory demonstrates a becoming that is not linear but oscillates between centres, moving between the global art world and local landscapes, each inflecting the other.

Whanki Kim entered the New York art scene in 1963, opening a decisive final chapter in his career that lasted until his death in 1974. Already

celebrated for a distinctly Korean abstraction that translated the sensibility of white porcelain and celadon into a modernist idiom, Kim gradually moved from semi-abstraction to pure non-representational form. His late canvases—dense fields of luminous blue dots—culminated in the meditative *Where, in What Form, Shall We Meet Again?* executed in 1970. While these intricate surfaces recall the woven light of Mark Tobey, their rhythm and breath are uniquely Kim's, carrying the poise of Korean sensibility into the restless currents of New York abstraction.

Nam June Paik arrived in the mid-1960s after a peripatetic journey through Hong Kong, Japan, and eight formative years in Germany's avant-garde circles. Settling in New York at the age of thirty-two, he went on to stage a succession of groundbreaking exhibitions—beginning at the New School for Social Research in 1965, followed by the Museum of Modern Art in 1977, the Whitney Museum in 1982, and the Guggenheim Museum in 2000. These exhibitions were less static displays than events—assemblages of technology, sound, and human presence. In Paik's hands, art became a site where disparate forces—East and West, machine and body, past and future—entered into unpredictable conjunctions.

Following the Korean War, South Korea formed a close alliance with the United States throughout the 1950s. This relationship enabled many artists to participate in cultural exchanges, fellowships, and scholarship programmes that opened pathways into the New York art scene. One such artist was Byeong Ok Min, who moved to New York in 1964. She later completed her graduate studies at the Pratt Institute and has remained actively engaged in the New York art world for over half a century. While her early works in Korea were executed in a semi-abstract style, her approach shifted to full abstraction after her move to New York. Her move marked a shift from semi-abstraction in Korea to full abstraction, and since the mid-1980s her evolving techniques have maintained a coherent worldview—bridging her Korean origins with a cosmopolitan sensibility shaped by the city.

That same year, Mi Ae Moon brought with her the sensibility of Korea's avant-garde, shaped by her participation in the *Actuel* exhibitions and her immersion in the raw expressiveness of Art Informel while still in Seoul. Her 1964 work, *Untitled* (Fig. 1), now in the Whanki Museum, was created in the year of her relocation. Against a yellow ground, concentrated brushstrokes gather near the top of the canvas, signalling an affinity with Abstract Expressionist idioms. Yet the work departs from their theatricality: its meditative quiet and contemplative Eastern sensibility temper these dynamic gestures with a restrained, inward energy. The painting engages in a transnational dialogue with Abstract Expressionism, articulating a distinctly Korean emotional tenor—an embodied aesthetics through which Moon, as an outsider to the New York scene, reinterpreted Western modernism in a manner both globally conversant and deeply personal.



**Fig. 1** Mi Ae Moon, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 122 × 153 cm, 1960s. Whanki Museum, Seoul, South Korea © Moon Mi-ae

In 1965, a year after Moon's arrival, Byung Ki Kim moved to New York with support from a Rockefeller Foundation grant, following his representation of South Korea at the São Paulo Biennale. Settling in Saratoga Springs, he began his *Mountain Studies* series, in which dispersed mountain forms heightened spatial tension. They echo the lyrical spatial visions of An Gyeon, the fifteenth-century landscape painter of the Joseon dynasty, whose compositions conjured space through scattered rather than seamlessly joined forms—now transposed into the language of modern abstraction. In later works, including *Spatial Response*, executed in 2015, Kim reimagined the bold gestures of Abstract Expressionism through the embodied rhythm of Korean calligraphy. Each mark, shaped by breath and bodily movement, merged Western painterly dynamism with the contemplative cadence of Korean brushwork. His paintings create a lyrical field where space and silence temper energy, forging a distinctive synthesis of modernist form and Korean sensibility. Here, East and West do not merge into a single form, but remain in productive tension, each inflecting the other in a field of ongoing becoming.

### **Second-generation Korean artists in New York**

The 1970s brought a new wave of Korean artists who, unlike the post-war pioneers, arrived in New York when the city was already an established crucible of global contemporary art. Many—among them Woong Kim, Choong Sub Lim, Tchah Sup Kim, Il Dan Choi, Myong Hi Kim, Il Lee, Soo Yim Lee, Jung Hyang Kim, and Mi Kyung Kim—completed MFA studies in New York and chose to remain, drawn not only by its vibrant art scene and institutional networks but also by its dense, unrelenting artistic energy.

For Woong Kim, who settled in 1970, this energy took form in what might be called a hypertextual sensibility. Working with thick impasto, collaged fabrics, and cut-out shapes, he built semi-abstract surfaces in which Eastern and Western visual languages do not merely meet but

interpenetrate. The result is not a casual blend but a deliberate act of reassembly—fragments from disparate traditions recomposed into new visual wholes. These works carry the tacility of Korean material sensibility while also absorbing the layered rhythm of New York’s cultural life. Through this, hybridity becomes less a stylistic label than an embodied practice: a method of making that acknowledges difference yet resists reducing it to contrast.



**Fig. 2 Choong Sup Lim, *Worincheonji*, thread, wood, model, and video, 304.8 × 609.6 × 457.2 cm. 2012, Courtesy of the artist.**

In 1973, Choong Sup Lim moved to New York upon receiving the Max Beckmann Memorial Scholarship from the Brooklyn Museum Art School. Through the 1970s and 1980s, he worked primarily in the idiom of Minimalism. In the 1990s his focus shifted to installation, and in the 2000s he extended his practice to assemblage using found objects. Since 2010, he has expanded his terrain to include monochrome object masses and high-relief works. Across these developments, Lim has explored identity in relation to Korean history.

*Worincheonji* (Fig. 2)—literally, “the moon illuminating all corners of heaven and earth”—an installation exhibited at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in 2012, was conceived as a bridge between heaven and earth, uniting them as one. This gesture enacts a state of being in the interstice between culture and nature, extending into a mode of existence, or thought, between East and West.

The following year, in 1974, Tcha Sup Kim secured a Rockefeller Foundation grant, enabling him to relocate to New York. After studying etching there, he produced a series of self-portraits probing his own identity, alongside works reinterpreting modern civilisation. The hallmark of Kim’s oeuvre lies in his ability to absorb the diverse idioms that flourished in the New York art world while constructing a singular, independent vision. His etchings were included in *Prints: Acquisitions ’73–’76*, a group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1977. This institutional recognition was further consolidated in 1995, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired one of his oil paintings, reaffirming his presence in the New York art scene.

In 1975, Il Dan Choi moved to New York. Her works are characterised by meticulous, finely rendered line drawings that, upon closer examination, reveal a synthesis of cultural elements from both East and West, drawn from his own lived experience. These works are at once conceptual and speculative, yet tinged with strangeness. The precisely depicted objects—varied in origin and cultural reference—are intimately intertwined, unfolding into enigmatic narratives that resist resolution. This style embodies a concentrated abundance, an expression of Choi’s intense desire.

Won Sook Kim, arriving in 1976, took a markedly different path. Her paintings—peopled with women, birds, flowers, and dreamlike landscapes—unfold in a lyrical register far removed from the city’s harder edges. Critics have likened her work to the poetic surrealism of Marc Chagall, yet for Kim the imagery is not an art historical citation but

a direct distillation of lived experience: childhood in Korea, artistic formation in the United States, and a worldview shaped by Biblical narrative. Memory here is not static recall but a generative space where recollection and imagination fold into each other.

When Myong Hi Kim moved to New York in 1975, she entered the city's art world not as a detached observer but as someone intent on fully inhabiting it. Her later decision to transform an abandoned school in Naepyeong-ri, Gangwon-do, South Korea, into a studio—dividing her life between that rural site and her studio in Manhattan—mirrors the structure of her art: an ongoing negotiation between places, histories, and modes of seeing. Her early work traced the scars of industrialisation, the displacement of communities, and the quiet endurance of land and memory. Using the blackboard as a medium, she layered and erased chalk marks, creating palimpsests—records of thought and time in continual becoming, where inscription and disappearance are inseparable.

Arriving in 1977, Il Lee stepped into a New York still reverberating with the aftershocks of Abstract Expressionism. His sweeping black lines might recall Pollock's kinetic fields, yet their pulse is different: beneath the gestural immediacy lies the measured breath of *qi yun sheng dong*, the rhythmic vitality central to East Asian painting. In his canvases, these two lineages do not merge into a seamless hybrid; instead, they meet in a charged interval, each refracting the other. The result is a painterly field where Western spontaneity and Eastern attunement remain distinct yet inseparable—an intercultural assemblage that keeps both traditions alive in the act of their encounter.

If Il Lee's work stages the encounter of East and West through the tension of line, Jung Hyang Kim explores a different path. Moving to New York in 1977, she began with the cool rigour of Conceptualism and Minimalism before softening into semi-abstract florals—forms that function less as representation than as invocation, opening a space of shared being between nature and the viewer.

Mi Kyung Kim, who arrived in 1979 to study ceramics, soon expanded into conceptual and installation work, bringing together Minimalist reduction and Korean ritual symbolism. Works such as *Stone Heap Landscape* and *Pile-Strata 5-2* join the measurable and the ineffable, tracing invisible rhythms that bind body, memory, and place.

What binds this second generation is not a shared style but a mutual condition: working within an established global art network while carrying with them the textures of Korean sensibility. Their works form assemblages in which calligraphic line, symbolic form, and tactile materiality are not ornamental “markers” of identity but active forces within the gesture itself. The encounter between Korean visual tradition and international modernism is never a simple overlay; it is a reframing, an ongoing becoming in which multiple languages remain distinct yet intertwined, sustaining their differences in the very act of connection.

### **Third-generation Korean artists in New York**

It was not until 1981 that South Koreans gained the freedom to travel abroad, following the revision of the passport law that allowed all citizen to obtain a passport and cross borders freely. This policy shift coincided with the nation’s growing economic strength and the era’s drive for international exchange, marking a sudden expansion of the field—one that set in motion new flows of people, images, and ideas. For artists, it meant a more direct encounter with the global art scene and its shifting rhythms.

Korean contemporary art’s first major appearance in New York came that same year with *Korean Drawing Now*, curated by Gene Baro at the Brooklyn Museum. Forty-seven artists from Korea and abroad were gathered in a single space, their works tracing how the pencil—at once the most immediate and the most portable of tools—could bridge Eastern lineages and Western modernism. That same year saw

a wave of arrivals—Sang Nam Lee, Chong Gon Byun, Joseph Pang, Soo Im Lee, Sung Ho Choi, and Chan Seung Chung—each threading their own trajectory through the city’s dense artistic network.

Sang Nam Lee arrived in 1981 after three years working across Japan and Europe, his relocation catalysed by his participation in *Korean Drawing Now*. His practice bends painting toward architectural space, integrating circles, lines, and symbolic forms into what he calls the *algorithm of landscape*. In his hands, the fixed grids of Western modernist geometry are modulated into cyclical patterns—spatial scores attuned to the recursive pulse of perception.

Chong Gon Byun’s path to New York followed an unusual and politically charged trajectory. In 1978, he won the grand prize at the first *Dong-A Art Competition* with a painting of an abandoned American military airbase—politically charged under a regime wary of dissent. The work drew controversy, and Byun left Korea as a political exile under the newly liberalised travel policy. His assemblages of found objects stage an unguarded plural configuration, deliberately sidestepping a singular cultural identity in favour of a universal aesthetic that moves between materials, histories, and symbolic registers.

Joseph Pang, who had immigrated to the United States as a teenager, was by 1981 already woven into New York’s art circuits. His collages gather fragments—paper, photographs, printed matter—allowing chance to act as co-composer. In these layered surfaces, heterogeneous elements find unplanned harmonies, small events of visual accord.

That same year, Soo Im Lee relocated to New York, situating herself within its energetic art world while holding to a quieter register. Her figurative paintings distilled the solitude, unease, and longing of living in a foreign land. With their plain composition and realist clarity, they invite sustained contemplation. Since 2010, she has shifted toward non-figurative work, her brushstrokes becoming coarser,