

Chapter 32



Korean Contemporary Art as an Educational Resource for the American Secondary Art Classroom

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Korean Contemporary Art in the American Classroom

In the current international artworld, there are a considerable number of Korean artists who are working very actively with successful careers. These artists—who include Sung-Dam Hong, Atta Kim, Shin il Kim, Dongi Lee, Hyungkoo Lee, Kyung Won Moon, Do-Ho Suh, and YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES [sic]—create various types of artworks, including video, installation, and Internet art, as well as painting and photography. Although they utilize contemporary processes and methodologies, many of their artistic practices are based on the philosophical and historical foundation of the Korean cultural tradition and heritage. In addition, one of the reasons they have been successful in attracting global audiences, including acclaimed American art critics, may be that their works provide viewers with opportunities to reflect on the evolving world that surrounds them, with its ever-changing cultures, societies, and communities.

To some extent, Korean art introduced to American art classrooms has been limited to particular genres of traditional art. As evident in some Korean artists' current success in the American art scene, Korean contemporary art has a great potential for engaging and communicating with American audiences, including students at the secondary school level. For example, *ART: 21 (Art in the Twenty-First Century)*, an educational program created by the Public Broadcasting Service, introduced Do-Ho Suh's sculptures and noted that they “continually question the identity of the individual in today's increasingly transnational, global society” (n.d., ¶ 1). The artistic practices of Korean contemporary artists who employ free expression without conceptual limits or stereotypes about cultural contexts

can inspire students to be creators of culture rather than consumers of culture (Goodman, 1996; Marshall, 2002).

Focusing on the artwork by Korean-born artist Shin il Kim, this chapter examines Korean contemporary art as a resource for teaching and learning in the American secondary art classroom. Kim utilizes digital technology in his artistic practices, and this chapter explores the possibilities of using his artwork to educate students in America today who are surrounded by digitally based visual culture in their everyday lives. This curricular approach incorporates Kim's artworks, concepts, and ideas into art instruction for school students in grades 9–12.

About the Artist

Shin il Kim is a conceptual artist who uses the computer for his animated videos and attempts to create new meanings and unique images by striking a balance between the visible and the invisible. Currently living and working in New York City, the Korean-born artist earned his MFA at the School of Visual Arts, New York, and BFA from Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea. Kim has presented solo shows internationally, not only in the United States and Korea but also in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Milan, Italy; and Berlin, Germany. He also participated in mainstream international art festivals and exhibitions such as Seville Biennale (Spain, 2008), Singapore Biennale (Singapore, 2006), and Gwangju Biennale (Korea, 2004). Kim's work is featured in the collections of the Queens Museum of Art (Queens, NY), ALTOIDS Curiously Strong Collection at the New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York, NY), and Arts Council Korea (Seoul, Korea).

What differentiates Shin il Kim's digital artwork from other computer-generated images is his focus on hands-on activities that mimic his own breath and human gestures. This human aspect makes his digital animation pieces seem to be non-digital. Most of his works are visually minimal. According to his artist's statement, Kim (2005) is interested in examining the "limitations" that appear in modern art history and in creating visual "barriers" in his artwork (¶ 1). This may be why he is called a conceptual artist rather than a video artist or digital artist (Fox, 2005). The ideas and concepts that Kim wants to examine through his artistic practice seem to be more important than what he visually presents. But unlike many minimal art pieces, his visual outcomes still attract viewers, mainly because his works focus on familiar, everyday objects—TV, famous artworks, cultural products, and human gestures such as watching, opening a door, and washing hands—that are often personally experienced by the viewers themselves. All of this means that Kim is successful in creating a personal connection between his artwork and his audience, which helps to expand each viewer's scope of interpretation and understanding of Kim's work.

Kim's video installations also show his keen interest in light. Regarding the importance of light in Kim's artwork, Noé (2008) stated, "Light is the boundary between the whiteness of the materials Kim uses (paper, plaster, polycarbonate) and the texts or images they convey, including the human body as anatomical structure" (p. 30). In Kim's "drawing-videos," which will be described in detail here, light plays the essential role of liaison that underlies the relationship between the invisible and the visible or the conceptual and the visual, as all of his pressed lines unveil themselves only through the use of light. Samuele Menin (2007), who curated Kim's solo exhibition in Milan, Italy, explained that Kim had declared that "the video is nothing but light" (p. 1).

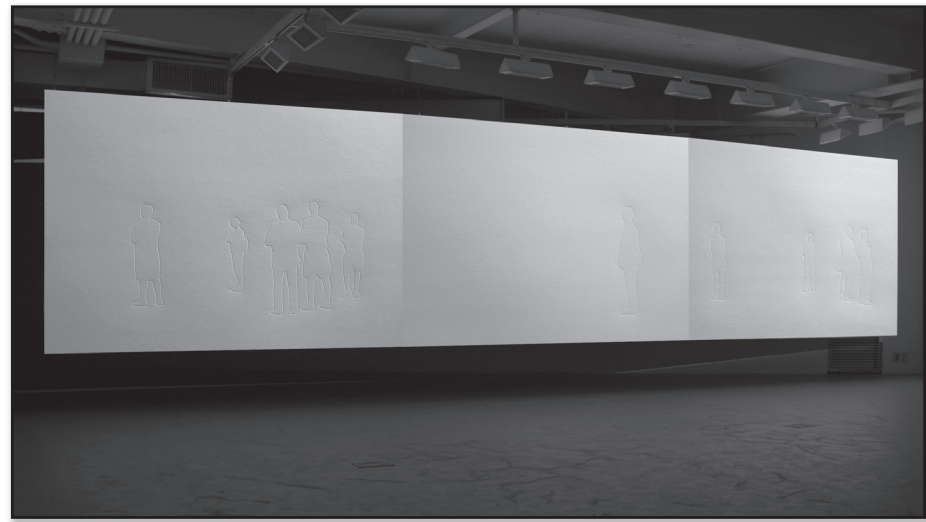


Figure 1. Shin il Kim, *Invisible Masterpiece*, three video projectors, three DVDs, installation view at Insa Art Space, Seoul, Korea, 2004. Used with permission.



Figure 2. Shin il Kim, *Invisible Masterpiece* (base images of Figure 1), three video images on paper, 26 x 40 inches, 2003. Used with permission.

Drawing-Video: Intermixing the Familiar and the New in Both Visible and Invisible Ways

Shin il Kim invented a new technique for his digitally animated videos that is called “drawing-video.” He first creates pressed-line drawings through a laborious, hands-on process and then uses these images as the basis for digital animation. To create the drawing-video, Kim films an action or an object and, using an inkless pen, imprints the action captured through shooting, creating a series of white-on-white, silhouette drawings (Fox, 2005). He then employs video again to animate the action, using hundreds of these pressed-line drawings. Kim (2005) explains the drawing-video making process:

The pressed line on paper embraces visual emergence and disappearance simultaneously with the angle of light. After making hundreds of these drawings, they are animated at 30 drawings per second. I start with an image that is then traced frame by frame. I go from video to drawing back to video. In this process, I endeavor to combine the main aspects of each of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th dimensions, as in painting, sculpture, video, and light to see other possible forms in the art. (¶ 1)

Many art critics who attempt to interpret Shin il Kim’s drawing-videos emphasize the relationship between the visible and the invisible that emerges in the videos. Fox (2005) described his pressed lines as “white-on-white” and “ghostly” drawings. Noé (2008) focused on the “invisibleness” of his delicately engraved lines, which are perceptible only when illuminated by a particular angle of light. Through the terms *ghostly* and *invisible*, both art critics describe Kim’s attempt to limit visual perception in his drawing-videos, without employing any complicated combination of artistic elements like color.

As previously explained, the concepts of limitation and visual barriers play important roles in Kim’s artwork. This is because, through the processes of minimizing, removing, and deleting, Kim reconsiders the relationship between appearance and disappearance, seeking to create new meanings out of familiar, ordinary human gestures (see Figure 3). Noting the familiarity evident in Kim’s unusual drawings, Reisman (2008) stated that the gestures of figures in the drawing-videos suggest “both culturally specific and universal conditions” (p. 29). Menin (2007) described how actions we make many times every day are portrayed in Kim’s videos:

In his first “drawing-videos” like *Door*, *Sphere* and *Water*, all made in 2003, ordinary actions like opening a door, handling a sphere and washing one’s hands are represented in their essentiality, to the point where the object of the action—the door, the sphere, the hands—disappears while we retain an awareness of its presence thanks to the clever use of sound: creaks, swishes, drips. (p. 1)

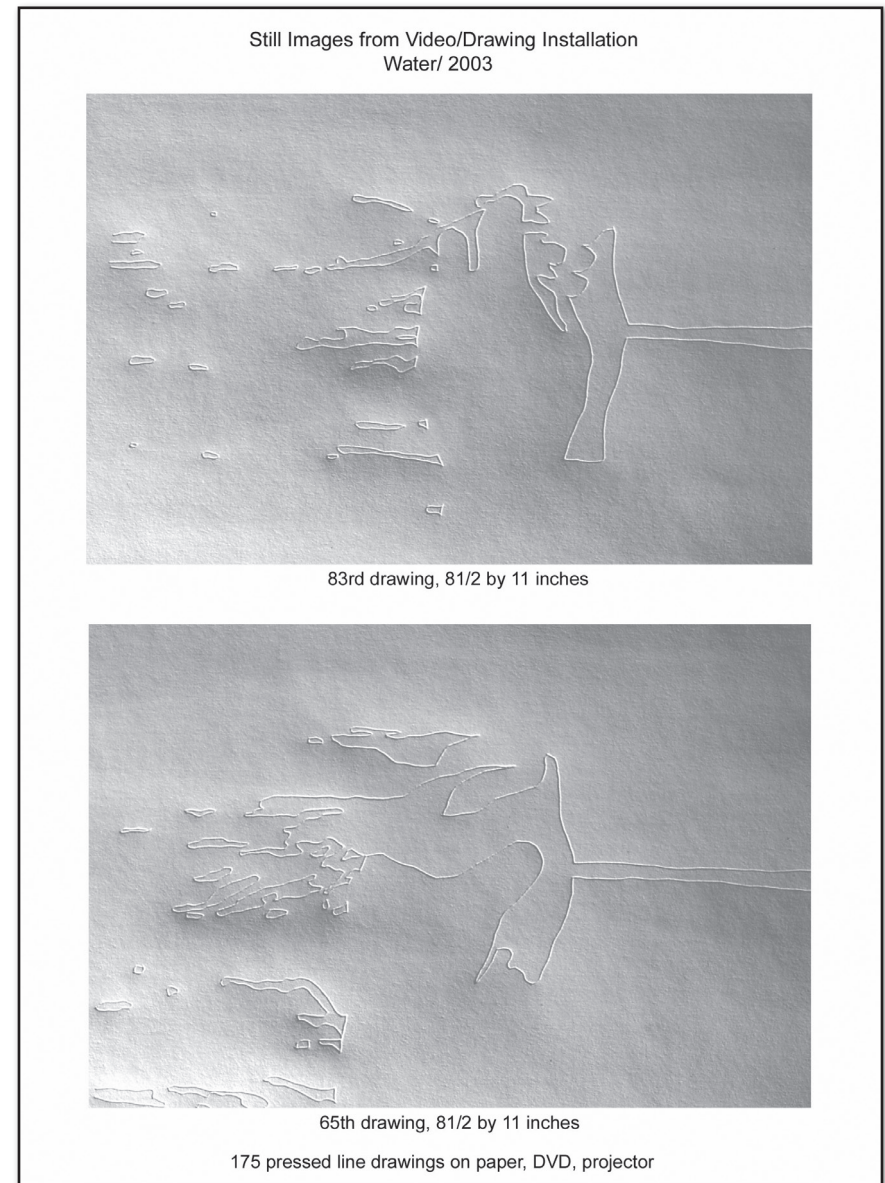


Figure 3. Shin il Kim, *Water*, still images from video-drawing installation, sound, loop, 175 pressed line drawings on paper, DVD, projector, 2003. Used with permission.

Through his drawing–video technique, which has recently extended into text–based wall works and sculptural forms, Kim endeavors to demonstrate that, ironically, his visually limited lines can show the core and essential quality of our human actions and possibly of the world in which we live.

In Between: Searching for Harmony and Balance and Influences of Buddhism

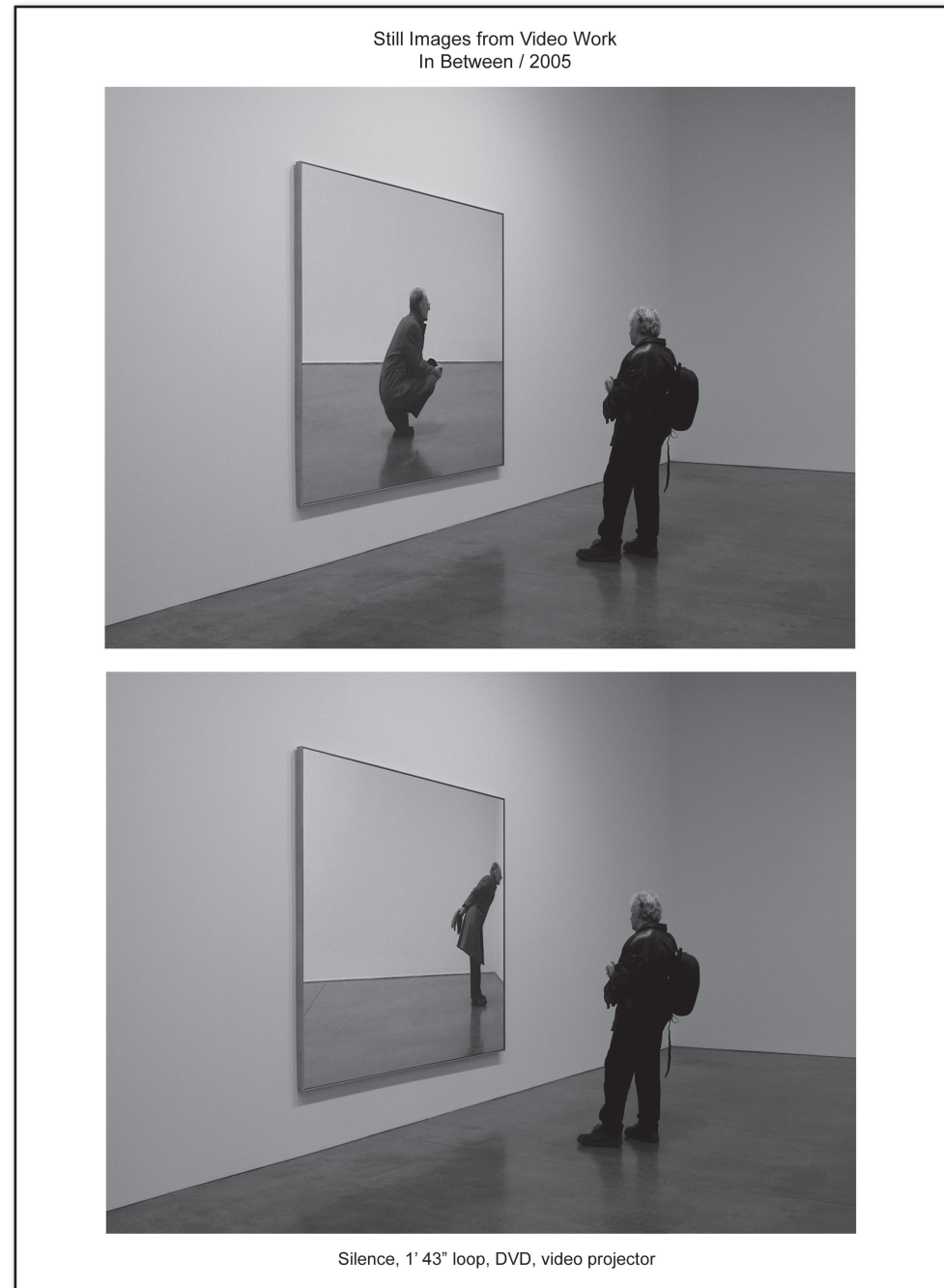
Shin il Kim attempts to visually present his interest in harmony and balanced life through his videos. To some extent, he wants to create digital artwork that investigates such humanist values, and he finds many parts of the philosophical framework for his art practice in Korean and Eastern philosophies, particularly in Buddhist theory. Two concepts from Buddhism that Kim most often examines in his art pieces are the Golden Mean—generally known as the Middle Path—and emptiness. For example, without any color or character, single pressed–line drawings present the idea of emptiness and the reduction of form. Fox (2005) viewed Kim’s artwork as “video meditations on life and death, presence and absence, identity and self–effacement” (p. 30).

Shin il Kim (2005) illustrated his interest in concepts from Buddhism and in human interactions and relationships with relation to his video installations:

This method [drawing–video] allows me to transfer objects to the idea of existence and non–existence together at the same time, based on the idea of Buddhism and “the Golden Mean,” one of the Eastern philosophies. The definition of the Golden Mean is a balance between two opposing positions, ideas, etc. I express this idea by depicting human interactions with other entities—the most common thing between us—within the details of everyday life. Therefore, I observe relationships between people and other people, people and objects, and myself and the other. (¶ 2)

Kim explained that he tries to visualize a balance between two opposing positions or ideas and conceptually utilizes the Golden Mean in developing his visual images. His artwork titled *In Between* (2005) very clearly portrays his interest in the interface between two opposing positions (see Figure 4). This large video projection, described as a witty work by critics (Fox, 2005), focuses on a man standing in front of

Figure 4. Shin il Kim, *In Between*, still images from video, silence, 1’ 43” loop, DVD, video projector, 2005. Used with permission.



a painting in a gallery, while another man in the painting frame is in motion. A tourist filmed from behind in a motionless image observes a painting in which appears the video of a second tourist who is scrutinizing a blank wall. A sense of ironic humor is created in between the two persons who look alike.

The idea of “in between” can be a helpful guide in understanding Shin il Kim’s artistic interests. His conceptual goal in artmaking lies somewhere between the following concepts:

- Visible and invisible
- Idea/concept and visual image
- Message and media
- Cognition and perception
- Artwork and viewer
- Hands-on and digital
- Originality and virtuality
- The East and the West

These seemingly contrasting concepts are not always oppositional. Rather, they often appear to be intertwined, mixed, and melted together. This is why Kim emphasizes the space of “in between.” For example, this Korean-born artist borrows not only from Eastern philosophies like Buddhism for his conceptual basis; the Middle Path theory from Buddhism, the modern art theory of Clement Greenberg, and the cold/hot media theory of Marshall McLuhan have been equally critical in developing his artistic practice. In this way, the artist shows his own unique way of creating “harmony” and “balance” in life.

An Artistic Journey through Digital Technology, Global Cultures, and Personal Reflections: Educational Implications

Shin il Kim’s success in the US gave him an opportunity to explore other parts of the globe. He travelled to many countries for his solo and group exhibitions, staying and working in countries like Germany and Japan for his artist residency programs. This helped Kim become an open-minded, global citizen brave enough to expose himself to many different cultures. As a result, Kim was able to expand and deepen his interest in human interactions as it relates to messages, images, and technology (see Figure 5). Particularly, he witnessed the changing cultures of today’s world due to globalization and technological development.

I think that Kim’s inclusive perspective enables his artwork to help American students expand their understanding of cultural changes and cross-cultural

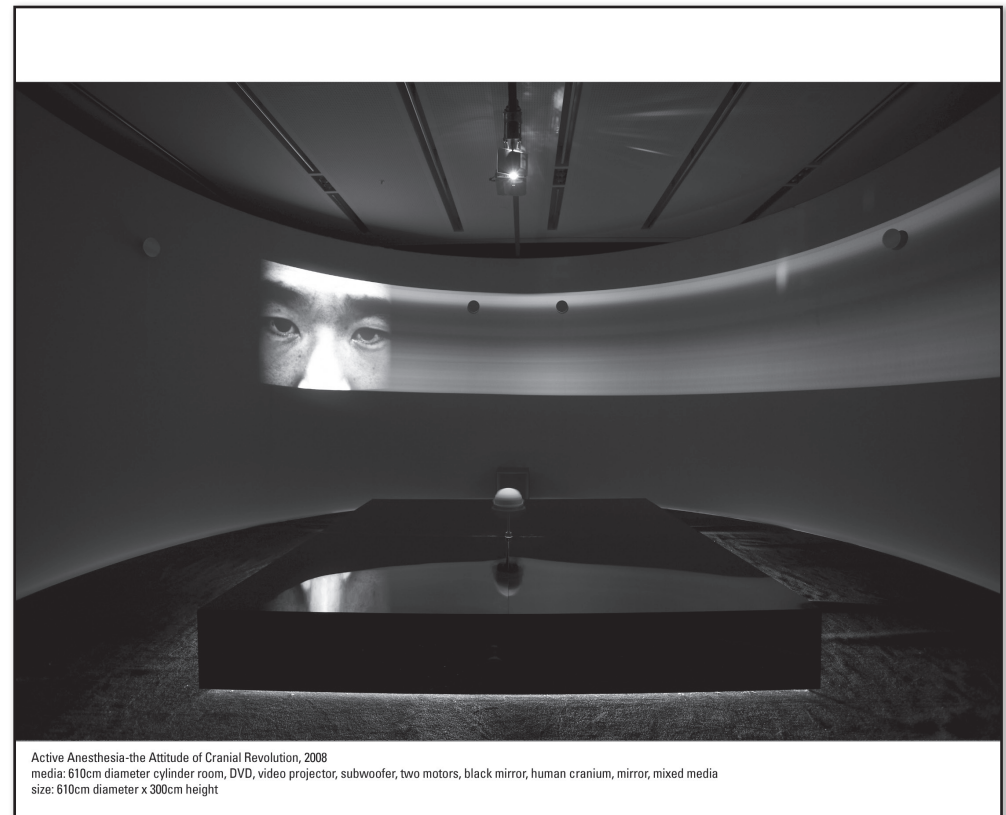


Figure 5. Shin il Kim, *Active Anesthesia—the Attitude of Cranial Revolution*, 610cm diameter cylinder room, DVD, video projector, subwoofer, two motors, black mirror, human cranium, mirror, mixed media. 610cm diameter x 300cm height, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and Foundation d’entreprise Hermes. Photo: Kiyong Nam. Used with permission.

movements in this age of technology and globalization. American students can find a personal connection between their everyday lives and the concepts that are examined in Kim’s digital artwork. This is not only because Kim has lived in the US for a relatively long period of time, but also because boundaries among diverse cultures are currently collapsing to some extent. Therefore, an examination of Kim’s artwork can encourage students to reflect on their own societies, cultures, and traditions. In some sense, they can become travelers who find themselves in “another person’s world” (Nyman, 2002, p. 65). Indeed, I believe that creating this personal connection should be an important goal of multicultural art education in this country.

Art teachers can also encourage their students to redefine their cultural identities by engaging with Shin il Kim’s artwork. Kim defines his cultural identity as a mixture of Eastern and Western cultural values and believes that he can find a new cultural identity by repeating the process of cultural mixing (Song, 2008). He noted the changing natures of culture and cultural identity as they relate to globalization and the development of digital art:

[Cultural] identity cannot be characterized only based on history and culture of the past but should be examined under the contexts of the past, the present, and, if possible, the future. That is, identity changes just as time changes.... In this age, so-called globalization blurred cultural and philosophical boundaries among nations.... Therefore, I think that the scope of cultural identity presented in the artworks that use digital technology has been expanded, compared to other art genres that are based on particular locations and cultures. However, compared to the short history of globalization—only a few decades—the culture of each ethnic group has a far longer history, and this suggests that there still exists a unique cultural identity of each country and people. Therefore, I think that, as time goes by, hybridized cultural identities will emerge. (Kim, cited in Song, 2008, pp. 196–197)

Instructional Activities

The curriculum resources introduced in this section aim to incorporate educational implications of the art of Shin il Kim into classroom activities for American students in grades 9–12. The main goal of these activities is to encourage the students to personalize their aesthetic and conceptual experiences of Kim’s artwork, which attempts to strike a balance between Eastern and Western cultural influences, and the hands-on and digital artwork. His work will motivate the students to rethink the world they live in by discussing critical concepts about today’s cultures and societies. The students will be involved in a group discussion using index cards, pressed-line drawing creation, and writing.

In Between Two Concepts: Index Card-Based Group Discussion Activity

This group activity can help the students understand concepts that appear in Shin il Kim’s work by focusing on the relationship between two seemingly contrasting concepts. Place a dictionary in the classroom and create a set of four index cards. Each card should have a set of two words, which teachers can select from the following list: visible and invisible; idea and image; artwork and viewer; and hands-on and digital. First, let the students view *In Between* (see Figure 4). Then, if possible, divide the students into four groups. Each group selects an index card, and the group’s members should discuss the concepts written on the card, based on their personal interpretations of the video piece. Encourage the students to examine what “in between” means when understanding the two seemingly

opposing concepts. Once each group has finished investigating the assigned concepts, declare that they are now “experts” on those concepts; and each expert group needs to give a brief presentation to the class to explain what they found through their group discussion. When the students have finished viewing all of the group presentations, they can understand all four of the concept-sets related to Kim’s artwork. Use the following questions as a discussion guide:

- What do you see in *In Between*? What is happening in it?
- What are the definitions of the two words written on your card? Use a dictionary.
- Have you thought about the relationship between the two concepts? If so, what did you think about it?
- Can you find the two concepts in this art piece or in Kim’s other artworks that you viewed in class? How are they interpreted in Kim’s work?
- Do you find any difference between your understanding and the artist’s interpretation of the concepts on your card?
- What do you think “in between” means for understanding these two seemingly contrasting concepts on your card? Is there anything in between the two?

Exploring Eastern Philosophy through Drawing-Video: Dialogue and Studio Activity

This activity introduces two concepts from Buddhism—the Middle Path and emptiness—which serve as a conceptual foundation of Shin il Kim’s drawing-video. Initiate class discussion by showing the students Kim’s drawing-videos and explaining the unique art technique and process. Let them also view which photographic images—taken from initial video filming of human actions—were used as the basis of the drawing-videos (see Figures 1 and 2). Then discuss how Eastern philosophy, particularly Buddhist theories, helped the artist develop his artwork. Explain that, influenced by the Middle Path theory, Kim does not want to lean only on Eastern cultural values, but to strike a balance between the East and the West. In relation to the concept of emptiness, encourage the students to discuss the limited artistic elements that the artist uses, such as white-on-white line drawing, which is hardly perceivable without the use of direct light.

After the class discussion, the students will create their own pressed-line drawing. First, let them choose one everyday life action, such as washing their face, playing ball, or typing on a computer. The students should take a picture of the action. Using tracing paper, follow only an edge of the figure in the photograph. With an inkless pen, imprint the contour line onto a piece of white paper. After the pressed-line drawing is finished, the students can shine light on their drawing to get a shadow of the lines, so the figure’s action can emerge visually. Dividing the students into groups and using a table lamp for each group are recommended. The students can discuss their pressed-line drawings as a group and,

after the discussion, write a one-page reflection paper about what they learned from the pressed-line drawing project. When engaging the class in discussion, encourage the students to answer the questions below.

- What is the Middle Path? What does emptiness mean in Buddhism?
- Do you see these two concepts in Kim's work? How does the artist express his interest in these concepts in his drawing-videos?
- What does "striking a balance in life" mean to you? Do you find a sense of harmony and balance in Kim's work? If so, how?
- What do you find intriguing about Kim's pressed-line drawings? What kind of human actions do the drawing-videos represent? Why do you think the artist chose to use white-on-white, silhouette drawings?
- Compare the base photographs and pressed-line drawings. What do you learn from the comparison?
- What kind of role does computer technology play in Kim's digital videos? What kind of relationship between hands-on activity and computer generation do you find in his drawing-videos?

Conclusion

To propose the use of Korean contemporary art as an educational resource for American students, this chapter explores Shin il Kim's artwork and ideas. His drawing-video installations are a unique outcome of his personal interest in how to strike a balance in life. His works examine a balance between the visible and the invisible, concepts and images, artworks and viewers, and the hands-on

and the digital. All these ideas imply that we should not focus only on the use of technology or technical skills when we explore digital art. As a philosophical and theoretical foundation, Kim partly uses Buddhist theories; but at the same time he attempts to create harmony and strike a balance between Eastern and Western cultural values. Therefore, exploring Shin il Kim's artwork and artistic interests offers secondary-level American students an opportunity to reconsider how they understand their everyday life experiences. The students can learn both how to find meanings from familiar, usual, and ordinary daily actions, and why this meaning-making can enhance their understanding of the quality of their lives.

In addition, Shin il Kim's artwork can be utilized as a helpful resource for cross-cultural art education. The instructional activities focused on creating a personal connection between Kim's artwork and the students. When a multicultural or cross-cultural art curriculum focuses only on differences and "otherness," students hardly can personalize the lesson and learn something and grow from it. Therefore, the curriculum resources suggest that the students can learn about their own culture and discover their inner self by learning about artworks from other cultures.

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