

SNUAC Asia Square Brown Bag Seminar Series, Fall 2023

Articulating the Aesthetics of Democracy and Women's Liberation: The Quest for a Decolonial Art History in South Korea

Sohl C. Lee

Swept up by a nation-wide democracy movement in the 1980s, South Korea witnessed its streets, public squares, and art galleries occupied by a radical aesthetics of politics. During the “minjung art movement,” as it had come to be known by the mid-1980s, the subjectivity of “minjung” (literally, “common people”) signified a utopian horizon of popular sovereignty and liberation from the US-backed authoritarian regime. This was accompanied by wide-spread recognition among artists that the authoritarian regime’s reformulated neocolonial relations with Japan during the global Cold War continued to shape the institution, discourse, and historiography of the art world, as much as they affected the production of reception of art in South Korea. From the earliest days of the movement, many of the participants had been women, but the articulation of an aesthetics for women’s liberation emerged only in its later years. At stake was the formulation of precise terms under which the demands of women’s liberation would be fundamental to the political project of an alternative nation-building, which, as I argue in my forthcoming book on the minjung art movement, strived for democracy *and* decolonization simultaneously. This talk at SNUAC, which stems from the book project, explores individual and collective art productions by the women artists of the movement who re-envisioned the processes of democratization and decolonization on their own terms. Historicizing this quest for the feminist aesthetics of decolonial democracy in South Korea, I argue, has broader implications for moving beyond the epistemology of Cold War politics in art history. While addressing the often-lodged criticism of the prodemocracy social movement’s reliance on heroic masculinity—stances embraced by both male and female participants—this talk will bring to light the core origins of a feminist collectivism whose questioning of democracy and decolonization still resonate with us today.

Sohl C. Lee is a Visiting Scholar at the Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) in Fall 2023, and an Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Art at Stony Brook University (SUNY) whose faculty she joined in 2014 after receiving a PhD in Visual and Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester. Her first book project, *Reimagining Democracy: The Minjung Art Movement and the Birth of Contemporary Korean Art*, forthcoming from Duke University Press, traces the multifaceted process by which a particular decolonial aesthetics of politics emerged during South Korea’s democratization movement. She curated *Being Political Popular: South Korean Art at the Intersection of Popular Culture and Democracy, 1980-2010*, an exhibition of Korean contemporary, and edited the eponymous catalogue in 2012. Her current research tackles the global history of North Korean art and visual culture at the intersection of socialist international friendship, Third World solidarity, and decolonization projects across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Her other research interests include Buddhist modernism, Global Asias, feminist collectivism, eco-feminism, and pedagogical curating. Her work has appeared in *Art Journal*, *Art History*, *Yishu*, *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, *Journal of Korean Studies*, and *Global Sixties*.

Date & Time: November 14th, 2023 12:00-13:00
Venue: SNUAC Room 304 (3th Floor)

Image caption: Jung Jung-yeob, artist's archive with photographs from July 1987. The notation reads: commemoration of the June Uprising in 1987; Democracy Citizen Festival; production process of a hanging picture by "Women's Art Research Society"; sketch by "Women's Art Research Society," coloring by citizen participation; Yun Sök-nam, Kim Chöng-rye, Kim In-sun, Jung Jung-yeob, Choe Kyöng-suk, Ku Sön-hoe.



1987년 6월 항쟁 기념
 '민중시민대동제'
 '여성미술연구회' 걸벽그림 제작 과정
 여성미술연구회 걸벽그림, 시민참여제작
 (윤석남, 김홍례, 김인순
 정정임, 최경숙, 구선화)

