

***Off the beaten track: the artistic meanderings of Sung Neung Kyung***

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New York



Sung Neung Kyung, *Reading newspaper - printable film*, 1976 (detail)

Lehmann Maupin is pleased to present *Off the beaten track: the artistic meanderings of Sung Neung Kyung*, the artist's first solo exhibition outside of Korea. This exhibition comes on the heels of *Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s–1970s*, a monumental retrospective group exhibition surveying the Korean avant-garde. In 2023 and 2024, the exhibition traveled from the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. *Off the beaten track: the artistic meanderings of Sung Neung Kyung* is a retrospective of the artist's decades-long artistic career, featuring works from the 1970s to the present. Recognized as a pioneering figure in South Korean avant-garde art, Sung is known for his exploration of unconventional mediums including performance, photography, and archival methods to examine the construction of knowledge and power, often in response to sociopolitical friction. On Thursday, October 24 at 5 PM, Sung will stage performances in the gallery space featuring the artist's ongoing series *Fanning the fire of poetry and Drawing performance*, followed by an opening reception.

As a key member of the influential art collective 'Space & Time' throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Sung's artistic practice was shaped by conceptual art and the political turmoil of South Korean democracy. His work often features everyday objects and deconstructs established forms, using his body to engage the public and transform the mundane into the provocative. Sung's practice is process-oriented, focusing on ephemeral works and unique performances documented as photographic installations.

*Off the beaten track: the artistic meanderings of Sung Neung Kyung* unites crucial pieces of Sung's artistic practice. As one of the first Korean artists to embrace photography in the 1970s, Sung's interest in the medium began while working with newspapers; he staged performances where he cut out the text of articles, leaving only ads and images. In *Reading newspapers*, presented in the gallery as a printable film, Sung cuts out headlines from local papers until only skeletal frames remain. This act demonstrates that meanings are shaped not by fixed definitions, but by their public usage and expression.

Initiated in 1979, the artist's acclaimed *Venue* series demonstrates his long-standing interest in the dynamic between language and power. Here, the artist carefully arranges close-up shots of press photographs that contain

graphic symbols (like dotted lines, arrows, circles, and triangles), then adds additional symbols to their surfaces with ink. In this way, Sung critiques media censorship and suggests alternative modes of knowledge production and information sharing. In *Venue 2* (1980), the artist photographs a press image of a taxi driver with an arrow pointing to the taxi fare meter, chosen to reference the controversial government policy on taxi meter replacements and fluctuating fares. Drawing arrows on the 18 film negatives, Sung directs attention to different locations from those highlighted by the original newspaper editor, disrupting the intended messages of the original images. Through this act of alteration, Sung challenges editorial authority and the political implications embedded in the newspaper's narrative, using the same tools that shape public discourse to subvert and deconstruct it.

Works from the artist's *Everyday English* series, which he began in 2003, transform everyday objects using newspapers that have been delivered to Mr. Sung's door. In these works, Sung meticulously annotates the "English Review" pages of these daily papers, integrating his English language studies into his artistic practice. Each year since the inception of the series, Sung has produced approximately two hundred collage-drawings from these newspapers. This routine challenges both traditional definitions of art-making and the artist's role while underscoring the continued significance of newspaper reading in his work. For Sung, *Everyday English* embodies the intersection of his art, life, and studies, representing what he views as a 'sacred trinity' of his existence.

Anchoring the exhibition is *An upside down map of Die Westlichen Erdteile* (2024), which reimagines traditional cartography by using perspectival shifts to challenge understandings of geography and cultural narrative. Based on the latitude and longitude grids, a map of the Americas is divided into rectangular sections measuring 19 x 15 cm each, resulting in a total of 285 pieces. The pieces are then randomly rearranged to disrupt the cartographic layout and render it 'illegible.' Through this disarray, Sung reveals how geography has misconstrued public perception and highlights the fictional nature of the world, drawing attention to the politics of cartography.

Sung has significantly advanced the hybrid performance genre throughout his extensive career, exploring themes of knowledge, power, bodily expression, and the reinterpretation

of daily life. A record of his 1998 performance *M.V.G.W.* at the Kumho Museum of Art in Seoul is on view in the exhibition. *M.V.G.W.* is an acronym for a series of noteworthy events that Sung experienced that year, including his road trip in a Jeep to the Maguryeong road<sup>1</sup>, a controversial Viagra incident<sup>2</sup>, a major downpour during the summer referred to as ‘Guerrilla rainstorm,’ and the shocking failure of South Korea’s national soccer team in the 1998 World Cup. In his more recent performance *Fanning the fire of poetry*, which Sung will perform during the opening reception, the artist begins by inscribing a prayer on a fan and lighting it on fire, evoking an ancient ritual of new year wishes. He invites the audience to participate in his unique ‘fan blessing,’ gently fanning the flames among viewers.

In line with his exploration of daily life and performativity, Sung challenges traditional notions of photography. In *Art is the Shadow of Delirium: Kitchen* (2001), he photographs everyday spaces in his home—such as the bedroom, kitchen, and living room. Using a Cibachrome printing technique, he employs a B shutter setting and fires about 200 flashes in front of his subject, creating a distinctive shadow of the flash on the image.<sup>3</sup> This technique highlights the interplay between the subject and the photographer, showcasing how the photographer’s actions contribute to the performance aspect of the work. Additionally, Sung experiments with color here, marking a shift from his earlier focus on conceptual art and returning to color as an act of signifying a reconnection with painting.

*Off the beaten track: the artistic meanderings of Sung Neung Kyung* represents a pivotal moment in Sung’s artistic career, offering a space to critically examine the connections between art, politics, and daily life. This exhibition encourages viewers to immerse themselves in Sung’s creative techniques—from

his inventive use of everyday materials to his performances. By questioning traditional narratives and fostering public engagement, Sung reshapes the artist’s role in society, urging viewers to rethink their relationships with media and language.



Sung Neung Kyung, *Reading Newspaper*, 2024

1 Maguryeong road is prominently steep hills of Sobaeksan Mountain, celebrated for their historical importance as challenging routes for traveling people. The name “Maguryeong” comes from the fact that merchants used to drive their horses through this pass.

2 Viagra, the “magic blue pill” for male erectile dysfunction, was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in March of 1998. In the same year, 130 people were found to have died from taking the pill, and the FDA ordered the drug maker to strengthen warnings about the risks to people with heart problems. The artist became aware of this news since it was widely reported across Korea at the time.

3 A dye destruction positive-to-positive photographic process that is used to reproduce film transparencies on photographic paper. This method prints on a stable polyester base instead of traditional paper using thirteen layers of azo dyes sealed in polyester; the prints resist fading, discoloration, and deterioration over time.

Sung Neung Kyung (b.1944, Yesan, South Korea, lives and works in Seoul, South Korea) works across non-traditional media, including performance, photography, and archival practices, to examine constructions of knowledge and power. Working at the intersection of representation and the real, Sung's oeuvre intervenes in the processes of communication, dissemination, and transmission. Through his resistance to traditional discourse, he seeks to challenge and dismantle various authorities, including political and artistic canonical systems. His practice is intrinsically process-oriented and deals in ephemera, frequently involving one-off events or performances; his work is often archived as photographs or contact prints and exhibited as a variety of photographic installations.

Sung is known for his involvement in the avant-garde Korean art group *Space & Time* (ST), an art and study collective active throughout the 70s and 80s that responded to both Western art and theory and a period of political turmoil in South Korea. Throughout his work, Sung engages hallmarks

of Conceptualism; exploring dematerialization, text-based practice, and informational aesthetics, and he reformulates Conceptual tactics for a climate of urgency and unrest. In his seminal *Newspapers: from June 1, 1974, on* (1974), Sung carefully removed blocks of text from Korean newspapers with scissors, displaying the removed text alongside the cut pieces of newspaper. In his subsequent performance *Reading newspaper* (1976), Sung carefully "reads" the mangled remains of the periodicals. By performatively removing discursive context from the newspapers and rearranging text to suggest potential new meanings, Sung critiques government censorship of media. As he intercepts modes of dissemination, Sung thwarts long-held notions of language and power, and he cultivates alternative channels for knowledge production.

A pioneer of the South Korean avant-garde, Sung has played a key role in expanding the hybrid performance genre in the global art historical discipline throughout his decades-long career. In his ongoing performance work, Sung engages his



own body as an artistic medium—often as a direct conduit for fine arts tools like drawing utensils or a paintbrush. Self-exaggeration, excessive noise, and disorder are often key elements of these performances, highlighting the disconnect between the chaotic and messy creative process and the polished final product. Disrupting and denaturalizing the white cube space, Sung’s oeuvre often operates in the realm of institutional critique. In one such “drawing performance,” titled *M.V.G.W* (1998), the artist rubs planar surfaces with shaving cream—creating a series of works from everyday material—while chanting an ancestral prayer. In his more recent performance *Aluminum-Foil Man* (2001), Sung wraps his body in swaths of aluminum foil and has portraits taken while holding various martial arts poses. The portraits were displayed at life-size scale, along with the installation of a table made from aluminum foil, seamlessly merging art and life across material and conceptual registers. In doing so, the artist continues to challenge the boundaries of traditional media, advancing contemporary thought regarding Korean art through his trans-genre practice.

Sung received his B.F.A. from Hongik University in Seoul, South Korea, in 1967. Solo exhibitions of his work have been organized by Gallery Shila, Daegu, South Korea (2024); Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, South Korea (2023); Zaha Museum, Seoul, South Korea (2023); Baik Art, Seoul, South Korea (2023); Korean Culture and Arts Foundation (ARKO), Seoul, South Korea (2001); Samduk Gallery, Daegu, South Korea (1991); Cheongpa Theater, Seoul, South Korea (1998); and Kwanhoon Gallery, Seoul, South Korea (1985).

Select group exhibitions featuring his work include *Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s–1970s*, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea (2023); traveled to Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY (2023); and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2024); *Masquerade*, National Museum of Contemporary Art Korea, Gwacheon, South Korea (2022); *New Acquisitions 2020*, Daejeon Museum of Art, Daejeon, South Korea (2021); *Catastrophe and Recovery*, National Museum of Contemporary Art Korea, Seoul, South Korea (2021); *CORPUS GESTUS VOX*, Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, Ansan, South Korea (2021); *Dear My Grandchild*, Hello Museum, Seoul, South Korea (2019); *The Square: Art and Society in Korea 1900–2019*, National Museum of Contemporary Art Korea, Gwacheon, South Korea (2019); *Drawing: Korean Modern and Contemporary Drawings*, Seoul Olympic

Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2019); *Awakenings: Art and Society in Asia 1960s–1990s*, travelled to the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, South Korea; and National Gallery Singapore, Singapore (2018-19); *Frames After Frames: Modern Photography Movement of Korea from 1988 to 1999*, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu, South Korea (2018); *Digital Promenade*, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2018); *Dor-raemitabul*, Zaha Museum, Seoul, South Korea (2018); *Renegades in Resistance and Challenge*, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu, South Korea (2018); *Reenacting History: Collective Actions and Everyday Gestures*, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, South Korea (2017); *Asian Diva: The Muse and The Monster*, Buk-Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2017); *Rehearsals from the Korean Avant-Garde Performance Archive*, Korean Cultural Centre UK, London, United Kingdom (2017); *Samramansang: From Kim Whanki to Yang Fudong*, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea (2017); *Ha-Neul Bonpuri*, Zaha Museum, Seoul, South Korea (2017); *Public to Private: Photography in Korean Art since 1989*, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea (2016); *As the Moon Waxes and Wanes*, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, South Korea (2016); *Living Together, Happy Together*, Namsangol Hanok Village, Seoul, South Korea (2015); *Closer to Contemporary Art II – Abstract Art is Real*, Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, Ansan, South Korea (2013); *Mapping the Realities*, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2012); *Jack-of-all-trades: Korean Historical Conceptual Art 1970–80s*, Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, Ansan, South Korea (2010), and more. Sung’s work is held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, South Korea; Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul; ARKO Art Center, Seoul; Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, Ansan, South Korea.

Artist portrait by Netjjae.

**LEHMANN MAUPIN**

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has permanent locations in New York, Seoul, and London, as well as team members based in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and Palm Beach. In recent years, with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.

**NEW YORK**

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