

The Soft Documents of Kang Hong-Goo

Everywhere but Nowhere: Seoul Through the Eyes of Kang Hong-Goo
Art Archives, Seoul Museum of Art (02/05/24 – 04/08/24)

On a platform in gallery one of SeMA Art Archives' *Everywhere but Nowhere* is a photograph of a red satin handbag. The bag, pristine and upright, rests on a cushion of snow, atop two bricks and against a faded concrete wall. The image is a strange one, its constituent elements out of step: untouched and decaying, of the interior world and of the exterior. Bringing them together is the hand of Kang Hong-Goo (b. 1956), a photographer and artist whose interventionist practice “soften[s] the documentary medium” to record the changing face of twenty-first century Seoul.ⁱ



Untitled. From “Bulwang-dong Record Work” by Kang Hong-Goo, exhibition view.

Everywhere but Nowhere is a sprawling exhibit of Kang’s enormous corpus, presented as urban record and personal collection: “Kang Hong-Goo’s Seoul Archive”.ⁱⁱ The exhibition demands time and attention: dozens of works – from photographs and maps to multi-panel digital prints – laid out generously across two gallery spaces. The handbag, in the first of these, is one of several hundred abandoned objects from Bulwang-dong, a neighbourhood transformed through aggressive redevelopment in Seoul of the early 2000s. Wandering through city spaces in various stages of demolition, Kang makes a subject of the remnants of habitation: a frog figurine, an action figure, a child’s careless scribble on a wall. Dwarfed by the scale of the destruction that surrounds them, the objects in the artist’s compositions serve as reminders of what precedes redevelopment, and what, in some, spectral way, might outlive it.

Like many of Seoul’s residents, Kang came to the city as a migrant, moving from the small island of Shinan, at Korea’s southernmost tip, to pursue a career in the arts. Seoul became, for the young artist, “a pronoun for all cities”, at once particular and broadly representative, everywhere but nowhere.ⁱⁱⁱ The act of image-making is, therefore, also one of learning for him, marked by a continual awareness of his outsider-ness, and of his place in the work. Kang is, significantly, an

accidental documentarian – his work beginning as a simple exploration of his neighbourhood before being transformed, through the violence of redevelopment, into a crucial document of a disappearing landscape. In confronting this sudden significance, the artist’s approach is to sidestep the fraught boundaries of reality and fiction, relying on careful staging and digital manipulation to produce “photographs that oppose documentary”.^{iv}



Fig. 2. “Mickey’s House” (2005-2006), by Kang Hong-Goo, image courtesy Korean Artist Project

In “Mickey’s House” (2005-2006), described by the exhibition catalogue as the “most representative” series of his oeuvre (and certainly among the exhibition’s most compelling), Kang places an abandoned yellow play house against incongruous backdrops: first a patch of sunlight on the bare floor of a dingy room, then a clearing among towering piles of rubble.^v To see the playhouse is to see the life that once contained it, to wonder at where the child is now, to ask what we choose to abandon when we are forced to leave. At once disconcerting and tender, Kang’s compositions permit a moment of rest in the ceaseless forward march of urban development, a turn away from the city’s future and towards its particular, and human, past.

Among the most rapid in the world, the story of Seoul’s urban development is both triumph and tragedy. The city dizzying journey to megacity in the half century after the Korean War offers an example of urbanization at hyper-speed, and of the pitfalls of unchecked development. In recent years, amidst a real-estate boom, Seoul has been shaped by what the research collective Listen to the City describes as a “destroy-all, rebuild-all” approach to city-making: towering, near-identical apartment blocks (*apateu* 아파트, in common parlance) replacing neighbourhoods, homes, and communities.^{vi}



Fig. 3. *Hwanghak-dong 2* (2004) by Kang Hong-Goo image courtesy Art Archives, Seoul Museum of Art.

Kang's work is, in many ways, an answer to the brutal logic of the *apateu*. In *Hwanghak-dong 2* (2004), a roughly three foot by eight foot digital print, a woman stands with her back to the camera, looking out over the ruins of what is presumably her former neighbourhood. A composite image assembled in inexactly aligned panels, *Hwanghak-dong 2* is evidence of Kang's location "somewhere between photography and painting".^{vii} The work was printed in black and white and then painted over, splashes of colour guiding the eye to select points: the woman's bright red jacket, blue tarp over a half-demolished home. In this, as in much of Kang's other work, there is both an insistence on witnessing and a refusal of the presumed order of the urban. Mirroring the woman in their orientation, the viewer is asked to look to the city, but to see her first.

In its location, and its perspective, *Everywhere but Nowhere* offers a particularly capacious view of the document. The Art Archives at SeMA are styled as a space of preservation and display, a place where "art records and artworks coexist".^{viii} It is this in-betweenness that permits *Everywhere but Nowhere* its breadth, so that the viewer is invited to consider Kang's work not in glimpses, or in thoughtful selections, but in its insistent fullness. It is also what permits an attention to the role of the artist as archivist, recasting image-making as a practice of committed, and highly particular, preservation. Kang's works assemble objects, image fragments, and lives, affording care and longevity to versions of the city that are often presumed to be already-past. To be sure, constructing an archive of a city is a mammoth task, and perhaps not one that *Everywhere but Nowhere* completes in full. But perhaps this is the point. In a video interview that accompanies the exhibition, Kang expresses a hope that his work will help the viewer to ask an important question: "what would my Seoul archive look like?". In the work of Kang Hong-Goo, the right to be remembered is extended to every resident of the city. With *Everywhere but Nowhere*, so is the right to remember.

ⁱ Wall text in *Everywhere but Nowhere: Seoul Through the Eyes of Kang Hong-Goo* at Art Archives, Seoul Museum of Art, 2024.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Eunseon Park "Resisting Seoul's brutal apart-ization", <https://www.listentothe.org/filter/publication/Resisting-Seoul-s-brutal-apart-ization>.

vii Wall text in *Everywhere but Nowhere: Seoul Through the Eyes of Kang Hong-Goo* at Art Archives, Seoul Museum of Art, 2024.

viii Art Archives, Seoul Museum of Art brochure.