

# Rethinking Korean Modern Art: Kim Ku-lim's Experimental Film

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## Abstract

In the twentieth century, Korea forcibly went through times of turbulence against Japanese colonization and the Cold War superpowers. The experience of the warfare and colonialism left the economic struggles and political divide on the Korean peninsula so building Korean modernity was an important task. The development of intellectual interchange in constructing art historical discourse generated philosophical inquiries regarding identity shifts and social change in the post-war period. In this vein, this paper examines why Kim Ku-lim's work remains undertheorized and claims a reappraisal. Recognized as the first experimental film in Korean modern art history, Kim Ku-lim's *The meaning of 1/24 Second* (1969) contributes to re-evaluating Korean modern art by rejecting hierarchies in art, ideas of western modernity, and propaganda art in the post-war period.



Figure 1: Kim Ku-lim, Leaflet of *The Meaning of 1/24 Second*, 1969.

## Selected Literature Cited

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## Rejection of Hierarchies in Art

Kim Ku-lim experimented with various modes of representation and expressed his concerns on identity shifts in the 20th century. Although painting as a medium was considered as the most superior art, Kim tried to go beyond mainstream art movements and rejected rigid hierarchies in art by deconstructing the classification of modern Korean art. By producing the first experimental film in 1969, *The Meaning of 1/24 Second*, Kim planned to project a 16mm colored film but could not actualize his plan due to a lack of support from film industries.

Instead, he projected his film to human bodies and explored the notion of interaction between the audience and the art work itself. As such, Kim Ku-lim and his companion artist Jung Kang-ja in white tights turned out to be a moving screen and they completed their film performance in front of the projectors. The 10-minute-long film depicts Seoul in the late 1960s Korea and the fragmentary urban landscapes of the city quickly pass. He keeps changing the scene by one second, showing the railings of the overpass, the buildings that seem to fill the screen, the smoke of the city, the showering man, and the crowds passing by the streets.



Figure 2: Kim Ku-lim and Jung Kang-ja, *Untitled*, 1969.

## Deconstruction of Western Modernity

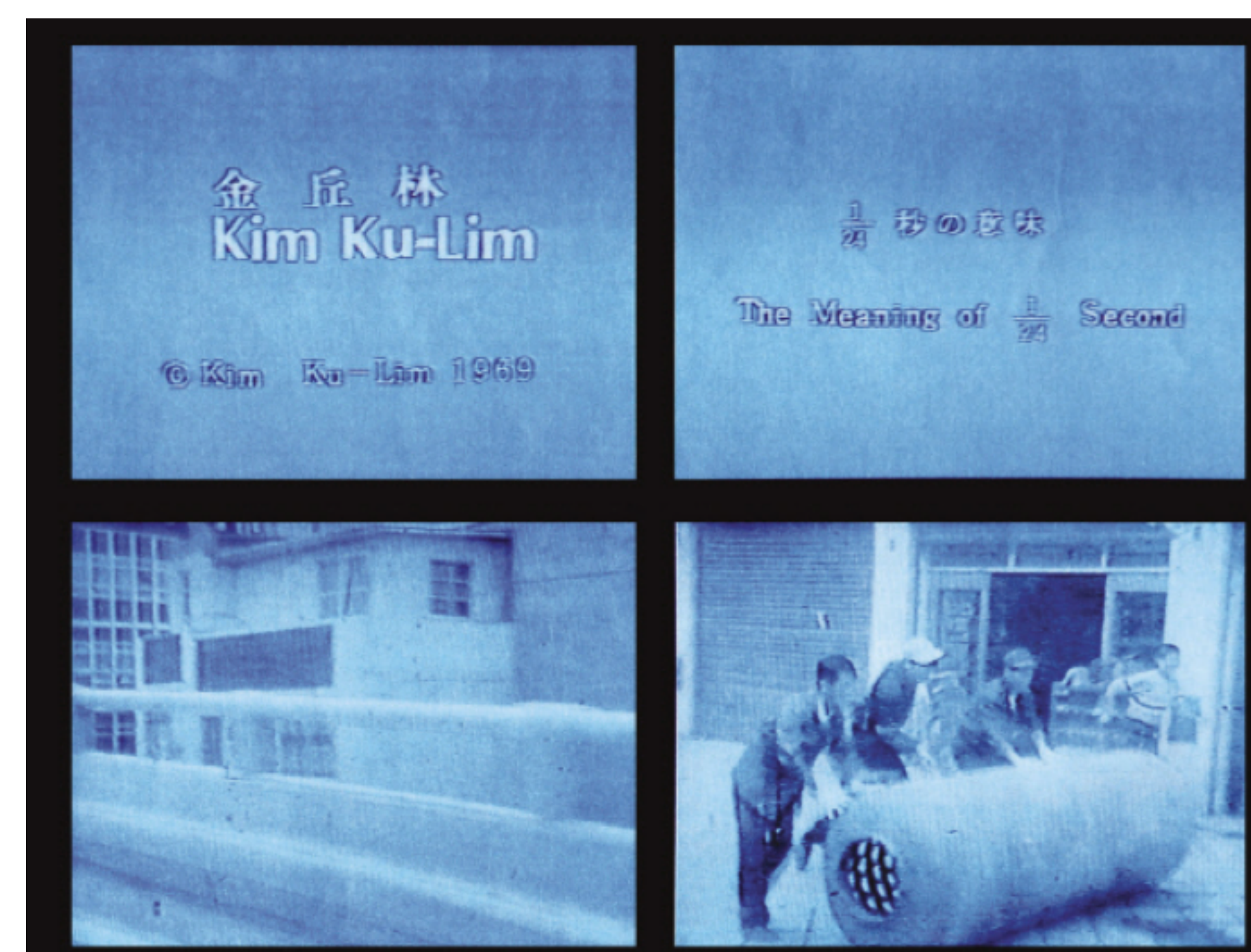


Figure 3: Kim Ku-lim, *The Meaning of 1/24 Second*, 1969. Exhibition Catalogue of SeMa Green, p.109.

Kim Ku-lim claimed the death of an artist and refused a Western modernist idea of artists showing their names and existence with linear evolutionary styles. According to Yun Nan-jie, in *Kim Ku-lim's Deconstruction*, she maintains that the artist's subjectivity is involved in the context, and the individuality of an artist, regarded as first person, is an illusion. Kim Ku-lim, who works in various forms and themes, reveals that original creation is impossible and that all creation is in fact re-creation and a copy of everything.

Moreover, Kim took a pedestrian view in contrast to a bird eye's view when depicting the city Seoul. In the late 1960s, Seoul went through a transformation to encompass architectural and technological developments but still, a lot of places remained antique and undeveloped. Because Kim chose the pedestrian view, he was able to capture this mixture of landscape where modernization and antique culture intermingled in one city, depicting how citizens worked and led their lives in Seoul. According to Michel de Certeau, the bird's eye view generates a perspective which is disentangled oneself "from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make oneself alien to them." Rather than being disentangled from the scene, Kim Ku-lim tried to encapsulate everyday life of citizens by taking a pedestrian view.

## Opposition to National Identity



Figure 4: Kim Ku-lim, *The Meaning of 1/24 Second*, 1969. Exhibition Catalogue of SeMa Green, p.109.