

## The "Power of Women" Existing throughout History

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It was a hot sunny day in the beginning of August, 2008, when I visited Yun Suknam's studio which is located in Suwon, in the South of Seoul to view her new work. Until then I had visited twice Yun's studio, which is as large as a small factory. Other than the first floor which is her workplace, on the second floor, in the wide space like a gallery, her works from the past to the most recent pieces of work were displayed, some of which were in concord and some of which were separately displayed. It was more like a private museum where one could see Yun Suknam's works as a whole. However, this time, her studio had totally changed. We were welcomed by heaps of numerous dogs, dogs and dogs.

The statues of women that I saw at several exhibitions were placed in the corner of the wall, and the other space was all covered with a numerous sculptures of dogs. I wrote "numerous," but to be precise they were 1,025 dogs. These dog sculptures were made by cutting wood as thick as ten centimeters and on the corner of the back, there is a plate with Yun's signature and serial number, so one is able to know exactly which number the dogs are and the total number of the dogs. When I visited there this time, already 1,025 dogs were completed, and other than that, several dozens of dogs were additionally being produced. And, Yun told me nonchalantly that she was going to finish 1,500 dogs in the end.

I have said they were statues of dogs, but Yun's dogs are not sculptures carved in the round. All of the dogs are made from rectangular parallelepiped wood with almost the same thickness, and from there, she cut out the silhouettes of the shapes of each species of dog, and painted the face and body of dogs on the surface with colors. One can say that they are thick wood in shapes of dogs. The height and the width vary in accordance to the shapes of the different types of dogs. However, they are larger than the real dogs. The large works are more than one meter high and the small works are about thirty to forty centimeters high. In common, almost all of the dogs are facing the front, and they are especially focused on the facial expressions. Some of them have only the upper part of their body cut with emphasis on the face. And, taking advantage of the viewer's unpreparedness when facing these rows of dogs, the gaze of all the dogs face towards me, the viewer. Yun paints the dogs' eyes upward and as a result, the dogs' eyes all at once direct towards the human being standing face to face with the 1,025 dogs.

What are they, the dogs, looking at? It goes without saying that they look at the owners/human beings, who provided shelter, gave orders, and provided food and love. The dogs, which have grown proliferously into pets, have been born helplessly to come to love human beings. However, their gazes all appear sad, and it is as if one can almost hear their pitiful howling. The reasons of their expressions come from the incentives of Yun Suknam who came to produce these dogs.

It was when she held the solo show of her new works at the Kamakura Gallery in Japan and Ilmin Museum in Seoul, Korea from May to October 2003. Yun Suknam, until then, had been producing the images of women of her mother's generation who have been repressed and suffered within the history of patriarchy in Korea as the subject. It was when, at this solo show, she received a new evaluation by producing the images of women who live in the contemporary world including herself as the main theme, and expressing the figures of such women who strongly live with suppleness even if they are hurt and carry a heavy burden. At that time, Yun read an article of a woman in a newspaper. This article was about a woman who protected and took care of abandoned dogs in the countryside by the suburbs of Seoul. People who heard the news about her had begun to abandon their dogs at her place and the number had increased to 1,025 dogs. Yun found this article very interesting and sometime after the solo show, she allowed herself to actually make a visit by car to this woman's house taking care of dogs. There, Yun met the woman, who was in the latter half of sixties, whom she found out to be two years older than Yun, herself, who was born in 1939, and the woman was just an ordinary old lady who had nothing that is unique in particular. While she lived in a small bulk container with the weak and sick dogs, the big dogs were unconfined outside of the house. The walls of the container looked black at first, but later, Yun came to realize that they were covered with numerous flies. Probably the body smells of the sick dogs were attracting the flies. Yun had especially been moved by that fact that the woman, who looked as if she is self-sacrificing within this abnormal and filthy environment, was just an ordinary woman.<sup>1)</sup>

Yun Suknam thought that the act of taking care of other living creatures such as human beings and animals, without wanting any return, is truly the act of what women bore throughout history, and symbolizes a type of power typical to women. Does not the woman, who takes care of the dogs, symbolize the power of tenderness of such women? Yun had decided to express such 'power of women' and taking five years since then up to present, has been busily devoting herself in

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1) The motive and concept of the new work are from the interview taken on the day when the writer visited Yun Suknam's studio (August 8, 2008), and the answers to the writer's questions sent by email from Yun (August 18, August 27, 2008)

producing dogs. She decided to create 1025 dogs, the same number of dogs that the old woman in reality has. After that old woman's action had been reported on media, the number of dogs has been increasing furthermore. That is the reason why Yun plans to produce up to 1500 dogs.

When one looks at this, one comes to understand that the new work of dogs by Yun Suknam is a symbolic existence that goes beyond the attribution of just dogs. At the installation of the 1,025 dogs which will be exhibited at this show of her new works, the massive amount is vital before anything else, and what emerges by the appearance of the massive amount of dogs is the existence of one woman, who does not exist at the show, and provides shelter to the dogs. This is what is called the 'woman' who goes beyond that one woman in reality, and who, endlessly, protects and loves all living creatures in this world, the others, with ultimate tenderness of self-denial in every respect.

One must not misunderstand here that the ability as a protector that Yun Suknam regards as the 'power typical to women' is not the one-way pamper or forgiveness that men usually expects in women. To begin with, let us now look back at the career of Yun Suknam as an artist. In 1985, as a member of the Yomiyon Women Artists' Group, which started as a women's division of the Minzok Art Association, one of the organizations of the Minjung Art which was popular in Korea back then, she began to expand her activities as an artist.<sup>2)</sup> They were also called the 'October Group' taken from the title of the group exhibition held that year.<sup>3)</sup> Being against the modernism art which followed the Western influence, which was far from their real life, they continuously held their group show <Women and Reality> (1987, 1988, 1992, Min Art Gallery, Seoul). According to Kim Insun, one of the core members of the Yomiyon Women Artists' Group, the activities of the Minzok Art Association at that time were concentrated on the democratization of the Korean politics and the unification of North and South Korea, however, the women artists who gathered at the Yomiyon Women Artists' Group were dedicated in producing works with focus on the "women and their lives, who led their way through the harshest path among the history of modern Korea, namely the division of North and South Korea, the Korean War, and under the military dictatorship."<sup>4)</sup>

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2) Kim Hyeshin "Contemporary Art by Women in Korea: The Creative Work of Yun Suknam," lectured at the Fifth Chino Kaori Memorial 'New Visions' Lectures, December 1, 2007, published by Medieval Japanese Studies Institute, Kyoto 2008. I would like to thank professor Kim Hyeshin who kindly provided me with the text for the lecture before it was published.

3) Um Hyuk (critic), "An Asian feminist Resolution: the art of Yun Suknam," catalogue of Yun Suknam Exhibition, Kamakura Gallery, February 26, 1996. "October Group Show," Kwanshoon Art Gallery, Seoul Korea, 1985.

4) Kim Hyeshin, op.cit., P.34. regarding Korean Minjung Art from the 1980s, it was first introduced in Japan at the exhibition, "Art toward the Society: Realism in Korea Art 1945-2005" (toured the Niigata Bandaijima Art Museum, and four other museums, 2007-2008). One work by Kim Insun was

In Yun Suknam's work *Even if I Had 10 Hands*(1986) of this time, the figure of a mother who hardily peddles with a large basket placed on her head, while carrying two children in her arms is depicted. The theme of 'Women's Labor' is in common with the other members, however, her expressions possess dynamic and lively lines, which go beyond realism, and a uniqueness of a kind of humor that even blows away the severe reality. Such theme of her early works is indeed the power of woman as a protector, and the power of that woman has the generosity and caliber of the ever so strong, kind and big-hearted mother. The original form of such woman also derives from the mother of Yun Suknam herself.

Thereafter, from the 1990s, Yun began to draw her attention to the theatrical characteristic of installations that structure space, and transformed her genre to installation by sculptures. From the title <The Eyes of Mother>(1993, Kumho Art Museum, Seoul) of her second solo show, one can see that her theme 'Woman = Power of Mother' was consistent throughout her art. From this show onwards, in her works, Yun Suknam chose a method that leads to present, the method of sculptures expressing the bodies of women by combining scrap wood. Yun Suknam paradoxically made use of the defects that regular sculptors hardly use, such as rough gnarls, holes, blackened stains and cracks of scrap wood, and expressed the pain of the hearts or the inconvenient and limited actions of the women who were suppressed twice under the patriarchy and military system, with an exquisite effect as the wounds of the body. As a solo show with her new works added to the works exhibited at the show of <The Eyes of Mother> was also held at Kamakura Gallery in Japan during February and March of 1996, Yun's works were introduced to Japan instantaneously around the same time in Korea and added to the collections of Japanese art museums.

These works collected by Japanese art museums include works such as: *Son, Son, Son*(1993, Mie Prefectural Art Museum), which combined wood figures of several women of different sizes, expressing the torture of women forced to give birth to sons; or *Genealogy*(1993, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum), in which there is a woman hanging herself and a young woman, wearing a chima chogori costume, who sits with a severe expression on her face, in front of a family tree; and *Bench*(1992, The Tokushima Modern Art Museum), with three elderly women sitting on a bench close to each other. The Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, to where the writer belongs, owns *Lotus*(2002)<sup>5)</sup>, which was exhibited at the solo show held at Kamakura Gallery in 2003.

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exhibited, however, the works by other members and information of the Yomiyon Women Artist's Group were not printed in the exhibition catalogue.

5) This work expressed the community and solidarity of the pain going beyond the periods of the women of the past and the present.

Furthermore in 1996, an exchange exhibition between Japan and Korea, <An Aspect of Korean Art in the 1990s>, was held at The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan (September 25 - November 17, 1996), which was a joint project with The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea. Yun Suknam joined this exhibition and showed her latest work, Pink Room. The installation of covering the floor with pink beads placing a pink sofa with claws growing on the seat, a woman who is merged as a chair, and another woman in the shape of a wood, thereafter became a series that continued in the early 2000s. Until then, Yun Suknam had depicted the suffering and the power to bear such circumstances of the women of her mother`s generation. From this series, she completely changed her style into depicting women of her generation, and expressed the inner side of the women who are inconvenient with their actions and minds restricted, even at this present world just like the women of her mother`s generation. In this Pink Room series, there are no hardness and power of women of her mother`s generation. But, by the eccentric fluorescent pink color, the beauty and vanity of the self-assumption of women? clothes expressed by the satin cloths and the sparkling wood with mother-of-pearl inlay, and the beads scattered on the floor, the unstableness of tripping and falling down is accelerated, and rather the vulnerability of the inner side of women, the sufferings that leads to madness are emphasized.

However, at the solo show, The Seeding of Light held at the Chosun Ilbo Art Gallery, Art Space Seoul in November, 1997, the following year, Yun Suknam`s techniques and theme went through another large transformation. Her new work, 999, which was exhibited there, was an installation of 999 wooden sculptures of women, as in the title. Yun painted the wooden pillars, which were as high as thirty centimeters and in different shapes like firewood, with beautiful colors such as red, blue, green and pink, and on top of them, she depicted the figures of full-length women dressed in chima chogori costumes of vivid colors. The small women are laughing, looking smugly, appearing sad or even dancing. These are not carved, but they resemble the naïve Buddhist sculptures produced by the priest, Enku (1632-1695), of Japan. There are such wood-carved Buddhist sculptures in Buddhist temples of Korea, and it is said that they also resemble 'jangseung,' a Korean folk figure that stands at the borders of a village to protect the village<sup>6)</sup>.

In that work, included are many wooden pillars that have the outline of women`s face in Chinese ink on the bare wooden surfaces. These figures of women with only the face are expressed as the present women, and by being placed among the group of historical women figures in the chima chogori costumes, the link that exceeds the time between the present women and the women of her mother`s generation is visualized. In the foreword of the catalogue of this solo show, Beck

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6) Kim Hyeslin, op.cit., P.39

Jee Sook regarded Yun`s expression to pursue a link between the women that exceed different generations as a resemblance of the collaboration of quilt-making by the women, who called out for the solidarity of women from the consciousness of feminism, and indicated that one can call Yun`s *The Seeding of Light-999* an installed quilt and quilt sculpture.<sup>7)</sup>

Furthermore, according to Beck Jee Sook, this number, 999, is obviously one less than a thousand, and one thousand is a countless large number and a state of fullness in Buddhism. In order to reach the full number, one more number is inevitable, and that one piece was exhibited in a different room, and any one of the 999 pieces can become a substitute.<sup>8)</sup> In other words, the fact that every single one of the women symbolized by the small wooden sculptures is an inevitable existence in order to make this world fulfilled is expressed extremely significant by this installation work. After the show at the gallery, these thousand women figures were sold separately and literary dispersed in this world. This act of distributing to the world is equivalent to *The Seeding of Light*, the title of the solo show. Such hope of the artist that each of the women figures will become a small light in the life for the owners is implied in the title.<sup>9)</sup>

Also, what one can image from the thousand sculptures by Yun is the 'Sentai Butsu,' a thousand Buddha, produced throughout Japan from Heian Period to Edo Period in the Japanese Buddhist Art. Enku has also carved out a thousand Buddha many times, and the Sahasrabhuja-arya-avalokitesvara (Thousand Armed Kannon) of Sanjusangen-Do(Rengeo-in, the official name which can be translated as Hall of the Lotus King) in Kyoto is well-known. Sentai Butsu indicate the thousand Buddha that appear in the Present world, among the three periods of Past, Present and Future in Buddhism, however, they are filled with prayers for well-being by the orderers/creators(lords of the domain or Buddhist monk) of the Buddha figures. Are there such examples in Korean Buddhist Art as well?

Here, I would like to return to this time`s new work by Yun Suknam. The installation of 1,025 dogs is obvious that it is a work that links to the installation 999 ten years ago and it seems as if the prayer for the thousand Buddha is also even reverberated. The dogs that count more than the countless large number of a "thousand" make us realize again, with their amount, the hopeless number of dogs

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7) Beck Jee Sook, "Yun Suknam`s Eyes and Light," *The Seeding of light*, catalogue of exhibition, Chosun Ilbo Art gallery and Art Space Seoul, 1997, pp.26-27

8) Beck Jee Sook, op. cit., pp.25-26. Kim Hyeshin. op. cit., p.39

9) Actually, at the solo show at Seoul, it is said that one woman figure was solely exhibited in a room separate from the installation of the other 999 women figures. "The seeding of Light" was also exhibited at the Taipei Biennale "Sight of Desire," and the solo show at the Kamakura Gallery in Japan, the following year in 1998. Beck Jee Sook, op. cit., pp.25-26, 38.

that just one woman protected. Furthermore, what make these dogs different from the past small wooden figures of women is the huge size, larger than the real dogs, and the realistic expression of each species drawn separately. Yun Suknam carefully drew the dessins of dogs over and over again, with reference to the photographs of the dog picture books. The dogs are miniature dachshund, Labrador retriever, beagle, Dalmatian, Boston terrier, Doberman, Scottish terrier, bull terrier, Shiba-inu, Alaskan malamute, greyhound, etc. The pets popular in Korea that decorate the dog picture books. This is common in Japan as well. However, Yun did not simply draw the dogs appeared on the picture books, but she drew the dogs that the old woman actually protects. They were once sold at high prices in pet shops, but they were abandoned probably because they grew too big afterwards or the owners became bored with them.

Yun Suknam told the writer that she wanted to depict the dogs as real as possible. This is greatly different compared to the simplified and skillfully abstracted expressions of the wood-carved figures of women until now. The reason is probably because more than 1,025 abandoned dogs exist in reality and to emphasize the irreplaceable life of each dog in the same manner as that of human beings. At the beginning of this essay, I wrote that Yun expressed in this new work the self-denial power of the woman who takes care of these dogs, but in addition to that, probably the anger towards the selfish arrogance, unmercifulness of the people of today, who throw away the dogs, which are living creatures, as if they were garbage is also expressed. There are sorrow and isolation of the beings whose love were rejected lying in the eyes of the dogs glancing up towards human beings. In this work, there is a group of small dogs with a round hole just right through the position of the heart, and this is directly expressing the pain of their hearts, and literally the heart of the viewer is struck by the piteous situation.

However, not all 1,025 dogs are given a realistic outward appearance. Other than the group of the realistic dogs, of which the body hair are colored with the same color as that of real dogs, there are also dogs, of which the base colors are separately colored in three colors of white, reddish brown, and black, with the outline of the facial expression depicted in thick lines, and dogs like shadow with just the outline of the figures cut out and all sides are equally painted and only in greenish gray color, with no outline of the face drawn. The dogs with outlines only and the last 'shadow dogs?' have the techniques of the women figures by Yun Suknam as in the past, effectively utilizing the gnarls and scars of the wood splinters. Among them, especially one dog, with eyes, nose and mouth like ink blurs on the wood splinter with many scars and stains, was impressive in particular to the writer. That dog is the pitiful solid object, in which as if the sorrow of all the dogs is concentrated.

In the installation at the Arko Art Center, among these dogs, the group of the realistic dogs and the group of the outlined and shadowed dogs will be exhibited separately inside the exhibition rooms of the underground and the first floors. The writer cannot see this exhibition now, and there is a frustration of writing this essay without seeing the completed form of <Yun Suknam 1,025: With or Without Person> as an installation work. On the other hand, beside the writer`s hand, there are photographs that were taken when the dogs that Yun produced were installed on the grass field near the studio in Suwon. There is indeed a realness that recalls the scene of the house of the woman taking care of 1,025 dogs within the group of realistic dogs placed on the grass field, and Yun Suknam`s 1,025 can keep enough intensity as a work even if they are exhibited in open air, outside the white cubic space and artificial lighting of the museum, and one can imagine they will have a different appearance as well. In this sense, it goes without saying anew that Yun`s work easily goes beyond the vulnerability of modernism sculptures protected inside the white cube in the museum.

As a sight specific installation that is based on the historical characteristics provided to a 'place,' Yun Suknam placed seven women figures, such as a widow, a mother, a bride who was sold at the age of nine, a female poet who committed suicide, in the village hall, 'whesajung,' which was used especially for the patriarchs of the village where no women were admitted, and its surroundings.<sup>10)</sup> By September 2004, when the writer visited there, the figures of women made by scrap wood, which was the regular technique of Yun, were exposed in the weather with the colors faded, about to assimilate with the wooden floor of whesajung and the green grass of its surroundings. However, Yun Suknam was already well aware of the fact that they would become that way, and by that, she created a meaning of unifying the bodies of the women within the architecture and landscape bearing the historical meaning of "the repressed women under the patriarchal system," and having them obtain a place to where they belong.<sup>11)</sup>

In this way, how would this more than 1,025 dogs become installed in what kind of place, to begin with the Arko Art Center, and manage to maintain the life as that piece of work? The joy of imagining such state is endless. No matter what kind of 'place' they would obtain, Yun`s dogs go beyond the fact that they are abandoned dogs in reality, and would surely be a work that symbolizes the 'taciturn weak(or the weak who cannot say anything),' that are consumed and easily abandoned

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10) "The Breath of House," April 3, 2004 - October 29, 2004 at the Yeongam Pottery Culture Center, curated by Yun Nanjie, coordinated Park Miyeon.

11) Reiko Kokatsu, "Ba/Art/Joseise(Sight/Art/Femininity),"("diatxt." 14, first published in January 2005), Mayumi Kagawa / Reiko Kosatsu, "Kioku no Amime wo taguru: Art to Gender wo Meguru taiwa (Drawing into the of Memory Networks: A Dialogue on Art and Gender)," Saikisha, 2007, pp.91-99. Also referred to kim Hyeshin, op. cit., pp.42-44.



among the present capitalistic society where the worship of money has reached its height. In Japanese, there is an unpleasant word, 'makeinu(literally 'underdog'),'<sup>12)</sup> which is used to call dropouts of such society. The massiveness of the number of that weak of society! Amidst the proceeding of the negative globalization, in which the competitive society of the American model overspreads the whole world, it has been a while since the rooms of the heart to be considerate of and to tenderly treat the others and living creatures have been lost, in both Korea and Japan.<sup>13)</sup> The art of Yun Suknam that started off from the conscious awareness of feminism does not remain in the accusation towards the discrimination of gender, but there is a strong trust towards the affectionate power of women throughout her art. Yun believes that it is the 'power of women' who takes kind and tender care of the others that can modify and save the modern society that came to end in the worship of money. 'Of women' is a metaphor and obviously the 'men' are not exempted from the act of loving and taking care of the others that the women have historically been bearing.

It is Yun`s tireless work of continually producing over a thousand dog figures for five years that truly accepts, traces, and practices such historical labor 'of women.' As a result, she produced a 'work' that provides a deep impact for and leaves a profound impression on those who live in the present society. One can say that this new work, <Yun Suknam 1,025: With or Without Person,> is the very work of a true 'artist' of the 21st Century, who is aware of her social role and responsibility.

[translated by Rumie Sakiyama]

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12) In recent years in Japan, there was a trend of making fun of single women over thirty years old by naming them "make-inu (underdog/lose)," which the media created, influenced by the best-selling book, "make-inu no Toboe(literary, The Howling of Underdog)," by Junko Sakai (Kodansha Ltd., 2003). This has a gendered characteristic of the bashing of highly-educated women by the men-oriented media.

13) Michiko Ishimure, who has been supporting for a long time the patients of minamata disease(a type of poisoning caused by industrial mercury pollution) by standing close to them, and publishing the Kugai Jodo -Waga Minamatabyo(Pure Land-Poison Sea, My Minamata disease) in 1969, etc., published the following words on the newspaper of this summer in 2008. "...And as a result, (Japan) has aimed to become a 'tournament' society. And everyone came to believe that money is the highest rank of this world. But what would become of the losers? Would there be no meaning for them to live? The mental issue has been left behind. There are many people who have worries. I sincerely hope that there will be more people who can understand the sufferings of other people. ...." Michiko Ishimure, "Natsuni Kataru. "Hirosama" Omoiyaru Kokoro Torimodoshite. Minamataga Seotta Kindaikano Tsumi(Words of Summer. In Hope to Recover the Considerate Mind for "Other People." The Sin of Modernization that Minamata Carries as a Heavy Burden)," The Asahi Shimbun Newspaper, August 18, 2008