

**WE  
WHO  
FEEL  
DIFFERENTLY**  
INTERVIEWS

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**An Interview with KIM Sungjin**

June 2, 2010  
Chingusai Office, Seoul, Korea

**KIM Sungjin:** My name is KIM Sungjin. I have been working as a culture coordinator in Korea for about 10 years. I usually plan and produce festivals and events. A couple of years ago I started doing projects in the gay community. I conducted, at *Chingusai*, a program where members express themselves through photography and painting. Presently I am making a book with a collective of gay men.

**Carlos Motta:** Could you describe the Korean cultural production scene, as it pertains to the LGBT community in Korea? What is the kind of work that is being done, what are the issues being addressed by artists and what are the kind of exhibitions that you are making regarding these issues?

**KS:** Korea is practically barren of LGBT art or culture. This is one of the most mortifying facts that I came to realize after coming out and entering the gay community. There are a couple of photographers who made public their sexual orientation, but other than that, there are almost none dealing with LGBT issues.

But more than artists carrying out exhibitions on their own issues, I think the most significant factor of art is that it makes possible for common people to reveal their real selves by means of it; in other words, coming out by the means of art. The work I wish to keep up in the cultural area also involves this. My former two projects at *Chingusai* were the first step; the outcome was quite optimizing so I'm planning to extend these in the future. It is like creating a cultural space where individuals can tell their own stories.

**CM:** What is the relationship in the Korean art world to gay issues? Is there a history of addressing, directly, issues of identity or gender, and if so, could you mention some of the ones that are relevant to you?

**KS:** There must be some action, though faint, in painting, photography, installation or popular art; but none of them appealed to the public nor have been a social issue. As I mentioned above, a couple artists using photography are currently producing works. But I haven't had a chance to see their works. Only if they had a catalogue or website, I could explain more...

**CM:** What about other works that deal with the subject matter in a more concealed or subtle way?

**KS:** I'm not an expert on this, but I've never heard nor seen any.

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

**CM:** So what kind of art exhibition do you wish to organize?

**KS:** What I want to do at *Chingusai* is to tell stories of ordinary gays, just casually and naturally, stories of ordinary people, of diverse individuals. I don't want to spilt people in two, into heterosexuals and homosexuals, and differentiate between them. I want to show that everybody exists equally as individuals, that they live their lives with their own characteristics, styles and life values, that being gay is just one small piece of a person. At the same time, since it is difficult in Korea to be oneself, I want to show the sad reality where people are not able to express that last piece. All these stories will build up and form one huge picture. I really adore Nan Goldin; it is like her documentary photos, but just done by ordinary people.

**CM:** But it seems, from what you are saying, that this is hypothetical, that you haven't been able to do such a thing? What is holding you back? Why are you not able to do this?

**KS:** This sort of work begins with ordinary people stepping up and telling their own personal stories. So a lot of Korean gays are afraid to participate, unless they already came out publicly. They feel uneasy taking photos of themselves or of their friends. I am assuming that we will need much more time to achieve a certain level, similar the works of foreign artists. Korea's cultural and social circumstances can be one reason; but the bigger reason is the fact that the subjects are not artists, but ordinary people.

In these circumstances, my last two years' projects were done with only several people and the resulting works were shown to a very limited group of people. The participants went through a lot of changes, and still cherish the project as a valuable experience. I want gradually expand this project, over the borders of the gay community. It will become something like a collective coming out; not spotlighting one individual, but clustering together diverse stories of diverse persons.

**CM:** So the work that you've done here and away is internal, to help people socially with their experience of coping with their sexual orientation.

**KS:** Yes, that was my first intention. This program was initially titled "self-expressing project"; the exhibition came after, with the results made during the program.

**CM:** Is Korean society ready for something like this? And how can you make it happen? Can you approach educational institutions, art schools, or any other institutions to promote this kind of work?

**KS:** This is the part that always seems unusual to me: many gays are still afraid to come out of the closet and the public in general is still homophobic and prejudiced; but when they come into the realm of art, they suddenly all become more tolerant. My aim is to become a mediating link between the art scene and the Korean mentality. But making big issues by some large-scale exhibition is not really my concern; I want to organize small but diverse ones, based on all kinds of relationships.

*Chingusai* offers many educational programs, lectures and seminars. Not much of them are related to art though; it doesn't have enough resources to carry it out systematically. However, contrary to normal assumptions, there are quite many local organizations that are favorable to these works. We can apply for the government's culture and art funds, which is

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

awarded according to the project's content. I believe that there is no particular discrimination of sexual minorities.

**CM:** Maybe there is a lesson to be learned from the women's movement and the feminist artists in Korea? I know for an example Incheon has the International Women Artists Biennale and it presents work that deals with gender and sexuality from the perspective of women. Are you aware of those initiatives, and can you perhaps collaborate with them or the university programs for example, to bridge those gaps?

**KS:** I also think that it is possible and achievable; but we have just taken our first step. What really surprises me is that there are almost no cultural resources or activity in the gay community. There are so many social issues to take care of, which require immediate action, that they have no time for art and culture. We also lack human resources. So my last projects were more focused on making a perceivable outcome within the gay community.

Nowadays, however, I came to comprehend that we need a more active and outgoing culture in order to truly communicate with society and public. I believe that only if we gather more people in the community who share the same thoughts, social action and collaboration will be applicable.

**CM:** Is there anything you would like to talk about that you haven't already? Something that is urgent for you to discuss?

**KS:** Korean culture in general suffers poor conditions. When it comes to Korean LGBT culture, it is worse than poor. LGBT culture or art is almost non-existent. It seems to me that, to make this flourish, the first step to take is coming out to others; starting from oneself to the whole society. This is the foundation where diverse LGBT culture can grow. I'm planning to focus on this subject—coming out—for the time being.