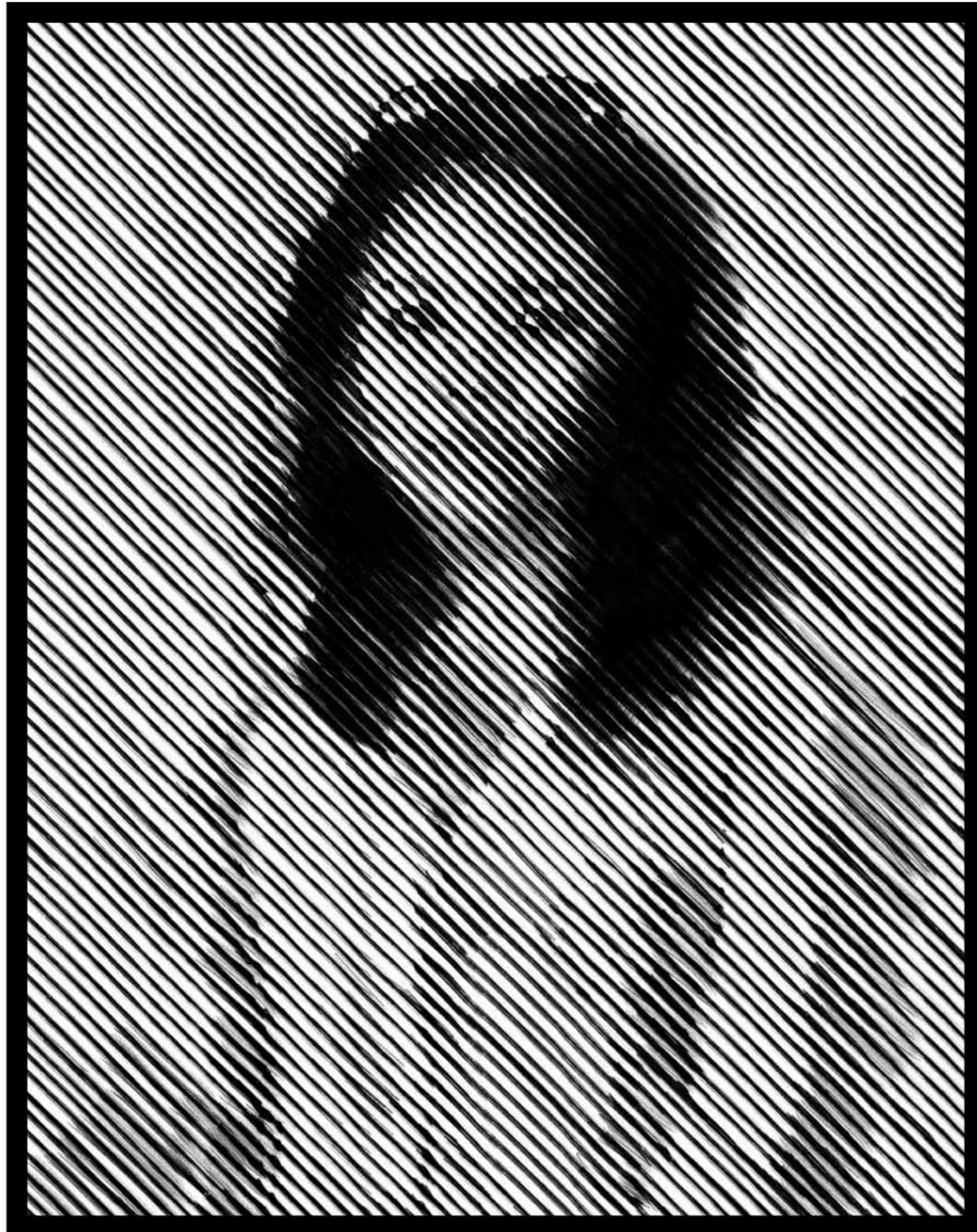


BELIEF & TRUST

AS SHE PREPARES FOR MEDIA CITY SEOUL, CLARA KIM REFLECTS ON THE NUANCES OF THE ARTIST-CURATOR RELATIONSHIP.

BY JENNIFER S. LI



CLARA KIM plans to take Media City Seoul beyond the explicit concerns of new-media art.

Talking to *ArtAsiaPacific* in the REDCAT gallery's lounge and café in early June, Clara Kim, curator since the nonprofit gallery's 2003 inception and director since 2007, admitted that in an increasingly cynical art world she stands out as a bit of a romantic. Thinking back to her first curatorial job, an internship at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1999, where she worked on the print exhibition, "Edward Ruscha: Editions 1959–1999," she recalls the influence of her colleagues. "I learned from a brilliant team of curators who were smart, tough and generous. I witnessed what great leadership and provocative thinking can get you. Their ideas are still with me today, and perhaps they have always made me idealistic." Kim believes in blurring boundaries and traversing traditional categories to encourage cross-cultural dialogue and the creation of experimental, interdisciplinary art, with a focus on emerging and midcareer artists, particularly from the Pacific Rim.

"Categories tend to simplify and are limiting," Kim continues. "They are necessary for organization, but artists don't work in this way." She developed this outlook during her graduate studies in humanities at the University of Chicago, where "every professor was doing something wacky outside their own discipline," she says. After her internship at the Walker and a position as curatorial associate in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Department of Painting and Sculpture, where she oversaw the Museum's presentation of the 2002 traveling retrospective "Yes Yoko Ono," she moved to the smaller REDCAT. Kim explains that she "wanted to be closer to the art-making process, in closer dialogue with artists to help shape the direction of contemporary art rather than oversee an art-world hall of fame, as you tend to find in the traditional structure of museum departments."

Kim's direction of REDCAT has earned the nonprofit space broad recognition within the Los Angeles art milieu. Its program of about five exhibitions and two or three artist residencies a year results in original commissioned artworks and art publications sponsored by the gallery. Kim encourages artists to go beyond the limits of what is expected, often resulting in surprising moments of transformation in their careers. It was at REDCAT in 2005 that Kara Walker moved beyond her trademark black silhouette cutouts into the use of projected shadow puppets, live performance, film and video. For his exhibition at REDCAT in 2009, Walid Raad segued from his 15-year devotion to The Atlas Group archival project about the Lebanese Civil War into his new body of work, "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World / Part I. Volume 1. Chapter 1," a critical look at the rapid rise of new art fairs and biennials across West Asia.

Kim is currently one of four co-curators of the sixth Media City Seoul, opening in September. Since the biennial's inauguration in 2000, its organizers have defined it as a celebration of technologically advanced art. In Kim's view, past editions tended to glorify technology uncritically as indisputable advancement and progress.

Together with this year's team—comprised of independent curator Sunjung Kim; Nicolaus Schafhausen, director of Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; and Fumihiko Sumitomo, deputy director of Arts Initiative Tokyo—Kim felt it was time for a reexamination and perhaps a deemphasizing of the label of "new-media art" for this year's edition.

A range of figures—some not typically considered media artists, such as conceptualist Tino Sehgal and photographer Catherine Opie—have been invited to participate under the abstract, enigmatic title "Trust." This choice of theme arose during discussions among the co-curators, including Kim's research into ideas raised by Benedict Anderson's 1983 book, *Imagined Communities*, in which the Cornell University scholar proposes that nations are bound together by the fragile yet crucial quality of trust among populations of individuals, most of whom will never meet each other. Sunjung Kim, the artistic director of Media City Seoul, is asking participating artists to respond to the uses and abuses of trust. Among them, Park Chan-Kyong will present a version of his film *Sindoan* (2008), named after the mountainous region within Korea's Gyeongongsan National Park that has a diverse history, from being the rumored new capital during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) to the site of various shamanistic and folk religions during the Japanese occupation (1910–45). As Kim explains: "Belief and trust are bedfellows. Religious or spiritual beliefs are possible through trust in individuals and ideas. This is also true of politics." Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi will present *Satellite Geography: As Long as It Is Aiming at the Sky* (2009), a video about Iranian television stations in Los Angeles. Kim describes this work as being about "a trust in community, in diaspora, in connecting with the motherland, and of real and imagined communities linked by common national identity through satellite TV."

Among the 70-odd artworks that make up this year's Media City Seoul, video work by artists including Yael Bartana, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Walid Raad and Abraham Cruzvillegas will dominate, though interspersed throughout will be some "low-tech" artworks. Los Angeles-based painter Mark Bradford has been commissioned to create collaged billboards and "merchant posters"—based on the brightly colored printed advertisements for services such as auto repair and cash payments for homes, which are plastered on South Central LA's walls and fences, targeting the city's lower-income residents—the artist's rumination on truth in advertising, or perhaps the lack thereof.

When asked about her own take on this year's theme, Kim is mindful that trust lies at the heart of the relationship between a curator and an artist, especially at a gallery such as REDCAT, which focuses on commissioned work. "You don't know what you're getting, so trust is crucial at REDCAT. You can't embark upon a project like Media City Seoul without faith." It seems Kim has faith in herself as well, and her methods reflect her philosophy: "For me, curating is very instinctual and intuitive. With that comes coherence."