Humour in Minjung Misul: Trans-medium for Reconnected Senses & Bio-social Metabolism

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For the purposes of this article, humour in Minjung Misul is largely categorised into three areas of exploration: “Why humour?”, “What is humour?” and “How was humour realised in Minjung Misul?”

The first area of exploration traces how the artists of Minjung Misul examined the art, culture, and realities of society in that era and their aesthetic and intellectual responses to it. This area of exploration involves a process of revising historical assumptions bestowed on Minjung Misul’s original motivations and considers how humour has been neglected and minimized in conventional approaches to Minjung Misul.

The second area of exploration aims to find fundamental attributes of humour. Humour, despite the significant role it plays in culture and human life in general, has rarely been examined as an object of philosophical investigation. Amongst some possible points of references including Sigmund Freud, Henri-Louis Bergson, Jiha Kim (b. 1941, Korean poet and thinker) and many post-Marxist psychoanalysts, this paper specifically takes Bergson’s speculation on humour as a frame of reference.

The third area of exploration attempts to grasp distinctive attributes and mechanisms of humour discovered in Minjung Misul. These attributes and mechanisms may or may not conform to the humour of Bergson. The purpose of this study may lie in seeking that point of difference.

Lastly, this article aims to extract a conclusion about what function did humour play in Minjung Misul. The function, in this case, refers to a conceptual modification of consciousness and senses rather than pragmatic function in everyday life.

Why humour? Why not humour?

How did historical Minjung Misul artists in the 1980s view the art, culture, and society of the era? We will review the literatures of five sub-groups which formed the main aesthetic clique (the so-called aesthetic

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1 This study has supplemented my lecture entitled “The Aesthetics of Blithe: Some Notes on the Comical in Korean Art from 1980 to 2000 in reference to H. Bergson” (Gyeonggi Creation Center, 2013) with its focus trimmed down to Minjung Misul. This manuscript is a shortened version of the 11 page-long original paper which included analysis of 30 artworks.

2 “Minjung Misul” is defined as a variety of identities and categories by different researchers. In general, Minjung Misul refers to art that emerged in correspondence to political and social reformation in Korea of 1980’s, with two strands: “Aesthetic Minjung Misul” and “Minjung Misul as a Movement.” Aesthetic-Minjung Misul refers to aesthetic aiming at the formation of Korean modern realism against abstraction in the 1970s and “Minjung Misul as a Movement” loosely refers to activities by hundreds of small art groups as counter-action to direct political confrontation against the central Government of Korea (Soyang Park). However, this divided identification disregards the fact that artists, either as individuals or groups, have followed two kinds of activities simultaneously. It also has produced unconscious bias against the second strand as an inferior form of propaganda art.

Considering the liquid nature of art as continuous flow of ideas, the author uses the distinction of “historical Minjung Misul (Minjung Misul in a narrow sense)” and “Minjung Misul as Ethos (Minjung Misul in a broad sense).” Historical Minjung Misul literally refers to tangible and intangible artworks and activities conducted by individual artists and groups within the temporal and spatial range of Korea in 1980’s. Minjung Misul as Ethos refers to solidarity and variation of critical realism (ideas, awareness) regarding the history, reality, and art surpassing the temporal and spatial boundary. The strength of this perspective lies in the fact that it can encompass diverse art schools in the same era that refused the title of Minjung Misul due to the difference in artistic method although they shared the same motivation. They include Feminist Art, Baggu art (aka Nature Art), folk art, performance art, theater, cinema, commercial art, the study of ancient art within academia (Yongsuk Park) and the third world art studied by the producers of historical Minjung Misul. The same ethos is also extended beyond the timeframe of the decade, to the conceptual art of the 1970’s and varying attempts of the 1990s and 2000s.

The turning point when Historical Minjung Misul is transferred to Minjung Misul as Ethos is thought to be the accomplishment of direct democracy in 1993 and the beginning of the Segyewha (Korean globalisation) policy by a civilian government. The first crisis of the Minjung Misul as Ethos occurred at the wake of the IMF crisis of 1997 and the Sewol Ferry Disaster of 2014 is said to shake it from its roots.

The subject of discussion for this article is limited to historical Minjung Misul, which however covers an immense volume of artworks produced in numerous media and forms, ranging from painting, collage, banner, flag, engraving, mural, sculpture, and photography, to experimental forms mixed with comics, graffiti, folk art, calligraphy, crafts, rituals, and icon paintings. The task of identifying the full definition of the term Minjung itself, and drawing related idea maps and chronologies has actually taken up a big part of historical discourses on Minjung Misul, which is still ongoing.
frontline) of Minjung Misul including Dureong\(^3\), Reality and Utterance, Yimsulnyeon, Seoul Art Community, and Seoul Museum. The diagnosis of these subgroups converges on four common points: Western-biased principles of reasoning and sensory systems (materialism, visual-centered principles) which stemmed from the imbalanced order of world capital; addictiveness of consumption-centered culture; isolation of the high-end-art in the 1970s from reality; and domestic artists’ lack of post-colonial aesthetics.\(^4\) A variety of responses were undertaken by each sub-group based on this diagnosis, including inquiring on perception and sensory systems (Reality and Utterance), highlighting the significance of producing meaning and intermediary activities in art with regards to production and distribution systems, criticism and communication, and interface with the media (Misul Bipyeong Yeonguho Research Institute of Art Criticism and Seoul Museum), recovery of organic association between life, society, and art (Minjung Misul in general), experimentation in Korean hyper-realism (Yimsulnyeon), and revisiting historical folk art to search for lost traditional art language (Dureong).

Humour of that time was emerged on the frontline as ‘proto-strategy’ by Minjung artists. However, in regards to criticism on Minjung Misul, humour was lost in a dialectic vicious cycle\(^5\) of culture-political discourse and disparaged or misled due to three reasons. First, there was pure ignorance based on the lack of understanding of humour as philosophical and aesthetic intellectual behavior. Due to this misunderstanding, the reading of humour did not surpass the level of social and political emancipation. Second, it became helpless alongside the full-scale flow of “industrialized entertainment”, where the entertainment business produced “commercialized humour” influenced by North American capitalism and the military government set up an obscurant policy of “3 S Industry” (sex, sports, speed). Social humour, on the other hand, that enabled critique, ridicule, and cathartic emancipation barely survived. At the same time, epistemic humour that reorganised systems of thought and sensation was rarely noticed. Lastly, the overall condition of Korean society was entrenched in Confucian paternalism, internalized militarism, and intellectual elitism. They have excluded tacit knowledge extracted from intuitive, physical, and intrinsic sensation in the name of vulgarity and obscurity.

### What is humour?

Bergson stated that humour is not “fun” in Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic (1900). According to him, humour refers to “internal comedy” (the comical), and the essence of laughter is in absurdity and contradiction. The core of ontological absurdity and contradiction is rigidity overlaid onto people which includes automatism and insensibility. Humour is externalised when the rigidity is contrasted with flexibility, and laughter is its external implementation. Since internal comedy stems from the complete disassociation with the subject and it is an intellectual act presenting ontological, epistemic, and conceptual grief from its origin, superior humour “approaches to life”.\(^6\) By creating laughter, the rigidity self-operates and self-modifies to the

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4 No literature could be found from art archives of the era that put reformation of realistic politics and social reformation itself as top priority of art in the 1980s. Of course, this is due to the lack of information by the thorough media suppression that completely sealed the Gwangju Uprising and due to lack of direct suppression in art. Political suppression in art was witnessed through the <POWER> exhibition in 1985 where the incident of cancellation of the exhibition and confiscation of artworks took place.

5 This phenomenon came from Red Complex of Korea, which is a complex result of several grounds including collective expectations for political reformation, pro-active movement that grew within Minjung Misul, and excessive representativeness and ethical expectation to Minjung Misul. As political situation gets worse, there was a growing need of immediate response to realistic politics which narrow Minjung Misul only to political message and action. This of course resulted in blacklisting and censorship, which in turn brought forth a defense strategy in favor of Minjung Misul as well as resulting suppression and vengeance. When Minjung Misul was framed as anti-thesis against suppression, it became difficult to be released from the vicious cycle of suppression, resistance and vengeance. An attitude of anachronism on Minjung Misul after 2000 is not a criticism of art but an overall fatigue towards Red Complex presented by both parties of thesis and anti-thesis in a vicious cycle which continues to exist now.

6 In Bergsonian sense, there’s no such a genre as tragicomedy. When we feel the comical, it already implicates the Tragic. On the other
“living” by moving permanently, progressing irreversibly and standing individually. Bergson had conducted an in-depth analysis of humour by dividing humour largely into ‘popular comedy’ and ‘comedy of character’ and further dividing popular comedy into the comedy of form, body, and situation. Of course, it is unnecessary to interpret art accordingly with the technical categories of humour suggested by Bergson. However, his analysis is a very useful tool to grasp the complex and instant mechanism of humour.

In continuation with Bergson, I address humour within Minjung Misul as a lubricant to break down the boundary between states of rigidity and flexibility, an ephemeral medium between the two as well as a dispositive toward new directions without attribution to either direction. In this paper, humour works as a mutual understanding between borders, an illogical logic medium that switches between states of rigidity and flexibility, and a magic wand for rectification. Humour eventually is born on the site of total absurdity where the rational and irrational, legal and illegal, real and fictive are chaotically mixed.

**How was humour realised in Minjung Misul?**

The 1980s was the period when the contradiction and absurdity of Korean history after the liberation reached its critical point. The 1980s in Korea, which terminated twenty years of dictatorship with the assassination of the President, had its paradoxical opening with ruthless massacre. Although the smell of blood was thick in the air, there was not a clue yet of knowing where it came from. Murderous government gained power and capitalists rose to *Jaebol* (Japanese ジャイボル) promoting globalisation. The laborers and peasants who had been heavily mobilised in industrialisation after the Korean War strayed around the streets in bankruptcy or set themselves on fire. Questioning intellects were taken and never returned, and rebelling students were beaten to death. Middle class citizens competed in the market for their livelihood gagged with cheap sweets from advanced countries. Calls for basic human rights, democracy, decolonisation, and unification were ignored and considered tabooed as pro-North Korea conspiracy. The culture was split in a world realigned by three orders; Colonialism, Cold War, and Capital. Culture had already been divided from the post war period as ‘conservative versus liberal’, which was manifested by that time. For example, national art exhibitions were remnants of colonisation and Yushin, national and public art museums were servants of politics, private museums were imitations of Western art, commercial art galleries only took out lease on space, and academies were advocates of the mainstream. In such a circumstance, liberal artists were particularly poor. It was literature that took the lead of resistance culture, and visual art was usually called to support it. However, in daily affairs of visual artists in the liberal side, they participated in demonstrations in day time and had philosophical discussions over nights on reality, art, life, history, and specific action plans for the future.

The task of the era was clear. It was to overcome nihilism and propose integrated vision. This is what I read as socio-aesthetic integration. It is the integration of body, reason, mind and sense that was the key to get over nihilism and preparation on social reformation. In this circumstance, Minjung Misul attempted to propose a future-oriented and integrated vision with recomposing their lost culture and tradition. The artists figured out that humour could be the main tool for both practical and philosophical axis of criticism, knowledge circulation,
communication and visionary expansion.

From the outset of 1980s, social humour was poured out in the works of artists including Shin Hak-chul, Bulldong Park, Oksang Lim, and Son Ki Hwan. These artists physically joined in demonstrations with their works of collage, comics, posters and ensigns that directly criticised the society. These artworks used typical social humour that could be easily adopted by general public. However, this paper will explore beyond the surface layer of social humour and emphasise on philosophical humour in Minjung Misul.

1) Kim Jung Heun, Min Joung Ki, Won Hee Nho

Kim Jung Heun was an artist who bravely ridiculed empty and pretentious attitudes toward social reformation. Intellectual liberals of that time usually patronised the rural, the past and social consciousness without knowing "the actual situation in the field". On the other hand, Kim wanted to recover a realistic observation of the reality. In his works *Creating affluent world* (1981) and *Is there something cool in the refrigerator?* (1984), he boldly juxtaposed the contrasting poles together on a canvas; urban and rural areas, history and daily lives, and social consciousness and human instinct. He seemed to ask “Can’t you see the emptiness on criticism for the sake of criticism? What about human instinct? How about the convenience of urban life? And the value of everyday life?” His argument was about self-criticism of the criticizers and recovering the integrated insight of body, reason, mind and sense. He deliberately chose the term *Yasul* instead of *Yesul*(藝術). What he wanted to do was “poor painting” and “blunt joke” which were intentionally dull and naïve. Viewers were therefore discharged from seriousness and responsibility to gain the objective insight upon the situation, and Kim released “criticism trapped within the system”.

Min Joung Ki’s *Hug* expresses the division of Korea with a metaphor of a couple in love. In the painting, the lovers are embracing in an almost surreal scenery mixed with military fence and natural landscape. The irony can be found from the description of a couple happen to be entrapped in embracing arms of each other. It seems like they are almost buried under their own arms wrapping around themselves. In this perspective, this work is not a sad elegy but rather an awkward and somewhat ridiculous scene of love and hatred. Min takes a break at the emotional flow of conventional nostalgia between two Koreas and brings back a rational observation on complex reality.

Won Hee Nho is an artist well known for adopting "rumours", through depicting the effect of spreading gossips among the mass, including psychological fear. In *Main Avenue* (1980) and *On the Street* (1980), Nho brings reversed humor. She always depicts the ambiance of situational terror and individual phobia by the metaphor of heavy fog. The airy sceneries are dismal and perplexed situations that are at the same time humourous, because we can find certain holes that loosen and weaken the suppressed atmosphere. For example, television and radios in front of a line of frozen people in suits in *Breaking News* (1986) are facing outward from the canvas while the group of men only gaze at the back of monitor. Her humour evokes a change in recognition on certain sceneries so that you’re able to see the situation differently.

2) Joo Jae-whan, Sunam Baek, Choi Min Hwa

The three artists show different dimension of the effect of humour in transforming the human sensory system. The transformation of sensation in art has been addressed in the analysis of erotic fantasy in the fields of social psychology, psychoanalysis, and physiology. Joo Jae-whan is well known for the “Brechtian beggar’s aesthetics”, laughing at capitalistic customs and power of Western knowledge. *Mondrian Hotel*(1980), *Spring

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8 Bergson called this principle of humor the attribute of misunderstanding in popular comedy. Misunderstanding is general illusion and optical illusion that both stem from “inconsistency between different momentums noticed upon the insertion of artificial incident or fiction within temporal difference and reality of the past and the present”

9 Bergson expressed such situation as “situation in which everything falls unto the person who created the situation, dismay and reversal by his own wrongdoings.”
Rain Descending a Staircase (1980), American Gum Hymn (1980), Black-Bean Sauce Noodles Delivery (1998) are the examples of his social humour. However, artworks such as Let’s dance tonight (1998) and Sound of Laughter (1998), are beyond the aesthetics of material and satire and transcends social humour to the level of philosophical humour. These works cross over isolated realms of image, text, sound and body. Although there is Marxist reading that his aesthetic is “holy scribbles sent to hungry art and poor fellow artists of the era”\(^{10}\). I sense that Joo employs humour to recover wholeness of the body-material-idea and amplifies the holistic vision of body-society. Sound of Laughter in particular shows the repetitions of a letter condensed in the center and about to explore conception similar to the process of cell division. This moment is when the “sound gains body” and where the laughter of ridicule becomes a form of self-recognition. As Rosie Jackson once stated, this is the moment of approaching entropic transformation through the laughter of organism.\(^{11}\)

Sunam Baek has already created distinctive artworks that connects sensory system and the universe in surreal bio-symbolism since 1970s. In series of Nucleic Acid (unknown), Open Heart Surgery (1977) and series of Sinsi-Asadal, Baek develops his unique bio-symbolism idea throughout series of representations on DNA chain in hyper-realism style, miscarried embryos, underwater plants and explosion of galaxy. It may seem like a grotesque critique on advanced science and technology, but I read him as weaving a life cycle by images of nucleic acid, embryos, universe, mythical creatures and 90s constellation which circulates certain energy within the life channel he proposes.

If Sunam Baek attempts to connect body with biological system and universe with a logical imagination, then Choi Min Hwa disrupts the sensorial system. There it comes the notorious “pink.” of Choi. To Marxist cultural critics, the figures in his artworks are identified as social losers and lumpen who dropped out behind the rapid social change from 80s to 90s as well as failed middle class in IMF crisis of 1997. For those art critics, the color pink was interpreted as the sickness of society.\(^{12}\) At the same time, it was also interpreted as “Opportunity for reversal” (Yeongjun Lee). But I think this color pink is the color of humour that Choi senses as the humour from a state of unconsciousness, where people are melted into the air or perhaps when people and air become one. Here, this pink to me is rather a unique image representing a combination of materiality of flesh and breath of laughter. Furthermore, this pink becomes a channel of transmission that mediates viewer’s subjective sensibility and the physical canvas.\(^{13}\) Literature critic Dongsik Kim once analysed on “breathing” and “life” motive presented in modern Korean literature. “Breathing” is the pathway where people experience the world, the units of life, and the manifestation. Kim counted various types of breathing such as irregular breathing, passive breathing and breathing by only inhaling which are all termed as “breathing without breath”. So he expressed 1980s of Korea as the period of the “breathing without breath”. In the place and time where living a life is not naturally given condition, there must be constant need of confirming and becoming life. In such a place and time, there could be two strong kinds of obsessions of which one is the origin of life and the other one is the trivial metaphor of living.\(^{14}\)

Minhwa Choi’s pink is metaphorically a long breathing out for the first time in the 45 years of modern Korea.


\(^{11}\) <Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion>, Rosie Jackson, Translated by Sogang Society of Women’s Literature Research, Munhakdongne Publishing Group, 2004, p 97

\(^{12}\) Examples include “Cynical smile and self-torture of negative vagabondage” (Gwanghyeon Sim), “The space of regret mixed with azalea, light of red-light district, tender skin, anger and absent-mindedness, defiance, and grief” (Jee-sook Baek), “Tender skin of vagabond’s soul deserted to the vast wilderness” (Juhyeon Lee), “Passion of revolutionary vagabond emerged from the awareness on suppression and contradiction” (Gwanghyeon Sim), etc.

\(^{13}\) Bergson described such serial transformation and flexible transition as a particular trait of humor. This kind of humor pursues formative process of mental unconsciousness moving towards mutual adaptation between meta-physics and physical object.

\(^{14}\) “Concerning the unconsciousness of breathing”. Dongsik Kim, Examples of “the trivial and fragmentary metaphor of living” are ranged from some noble tropes such as sacred animatism, Nietzschean vitalism and Jiha Kim’s bio-philosophy to variety of health supplements cure-it-all. The writing of Dongsik Kim is the criticism on short novel by Unyeong Choi. In the novel, there is an elderly woman who regularly takes fraudulent cure-it-all as if it is sugar. Ironically, the name of drug which was sold in Korea until 70’s was “blithe”. <‘Blithe’>, Written by Unyoung Choi, Moonji Publishing, p 259–274.
Although little sickness is found in the breathing, because there’s the (social and cultural) exhaling that has been neglected for a long time, Choi captured a moment when we finally achieve full breathing of balance and circulation. In this pink, the sickness flips over to “becoming life”. In fact, Pink - A season in hell brings the image of the moment of a sole man laughing alone in pink. Art critic Jeesook Baik describes the moment as the reconciliation of past, present and future. Another art critic Gwang-hyun Sim specifies this moment as “art finally embodying the fundamental liquidity of culture that resembles multiple dynamism of life and humanity beyond simplified logics of the society.”

3) **Dureong, Oh Yoon**

A key notion in the humour of these two artists is *Sinmyeong*神明. The definition of “Sinmyeong” in the dictionary is a peculiar sentiment of Korea which signifies jolly excitement or fun. Sinmyeong itself is the collective and individual state of excitement. It is usually examined in the field of folk studies, psychology, neuroscience, shamanism, and anthropology. A state closed to Sinmyeong appears in Bergsonian humour as “driving force and mysterious impulse that triggers the wave of flexibility from oneself. The force and impulse creates peculiar “light” of naiveté inclining towards reflection and self-modification.”15 This light is the core nature of Sinmyeong which has certain tendency on awakening and self-reformation.

Dureong was an artist collective experimenting a kind of living cooperative art association in today’s term. Considering the social circumstance, their ultimate aim was to suggest a new life form and build a new human relationship. There were the social problems such as isolation of peripheries and class conflicts according to capitalistic order. They got rid of their “artist” badge and have distanced themselves from the art circle aligned by feudal conventions, government-propagandising modernism and capital order. Then, they moved their base to industrial complexes in the suburban or rural villages to become a part of living culture community. Art for them would be enough to be a tool and method of designing a new life form, and the ideal form of art they emphasised was the co-creation and co-production by crafts and folk culture. They called this “Living Art”. Specific activities of Dureong were banner painting and DIY prints for free distribution as a form they chose to practice, but not as an artistic genre. In the course of researching and developing folk culture, Dureong called forth the notion of Sinmyeong for their essential ethos of cooperation. They defined this ethos as “excitement opening three elements as life, consciousness and behavior.” To Dureong, Sinmyeong was regarded as a symbol and a driving force of new life form, and they performed Sinmyeong in public with big banner making, *gut* (shaman ritual), ensign and procession. Although I acknowledge the existence and effect of Sinmyeong examined in a general study of it, I would not like it to be limitedly defined by the vectors of nation-group-style directive.16 It is because Sinmyeong, regardless of brightness or darkness of emotional status, is a state of awakening, but not as much as nirvana. It is an open concept unlimited in application. When Sinmyeong is activated, in cases like *gut*, the actual social interaction is also occurred. In the occasion of *gut*, distribution and sharing of food, words, senses and emotions are happening. In the occasion of funeral, act of condolence and emotional cure are working. In occasion of labor, it enhances the cooperation and efficiency. So I think Sinmyeong needs to be more wildly considered as a medium of humour that defrosts rigidity, activates flexibility and chain reacts to each other as a light towards self-reflection.

As a singer, painter and son of a poet, Oh Yoon understood and focused on the mechanism of how Sinmyeong

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15 Bergson suggested that the humor, as a flow of imaginative intellect, exhibits “inclination toward reflection and rectification” by having good command of tension relief, intentional carelessness, peculiar confusion, odd combination, particular contradiction, unique derangement, momentum (light resistance to social life), and (not fair nor good) innocence and such inclination of humor was referred to as distinctive “sound obsession” of humor.

16 Most studies on Sinmyeong were mainly served for examining Minjung Misul as ritual in socio-cultural perspective. Such stances are found in studies by Dongsok Won, Beommo Yun, Yeol Choi, and Wonsik La in art criticism, Jiha Kim in literature and Heewan Chae in theater. They have mentioned Sinmyeong as a basis to support ritualistic aspect of Minjung Misul. Curator-critic Jonggil Kim even restated “Public Sinmyeong” that implicates combination of labor and play as its main factors and extended to the aesthetics of all Minjung Misul. “Practice of artists with a base on life”, <Post-Munjung Misul, Shaman Realism>, Jonggil Kim, Samchang Publications, 2013, p. 439–446
works between individual entities and pushed it towards non-anthropocentric association. Oh, therefore delivered Sinmyeong up to the level of creating a world view on holistic integration of object-concept-human-nature-object within his art. Hell Painting (1980) performs social humour and immediately transcends it to the state of Sinmyeong which can be closely examined with the case of Choi’s reversal of sensibility. In his works of Cheonjigut (Gut for Sky and Earth) (1985) and Gangjaengi Darjaengi (River Master Bridge Master) (1984), Oh brings an in-depth contemplation on how to activate the Sinmyeong to various movements and physical motions. Here we can see varied wave patterns and pictorial image which are generally read as “audio-spatial synesthesia”, but I’d like to modify this as a “symmetric energy” in association with the sense of cultural anthropological understanding of the era.17 Bergson also expressed “sound, motion and volume are symmetrically converted into mobility”. In Song of Sword (1985), the motive of trigram is appeared. In Mt. Jiri (1984), Chunmuin Chunmueui (Spring Dancer and Spring Dancing) (1985) and Boatman’s song in the Southern land (1985), this motive spreads onto agriculture community, natural landscape and divided land. His art continuously portrays instrument-body-community-nation-nature within the integrated status of Sinmyeong which finally reaches to the view on Nation. Oh Yoon’s artistic passage upon the cohesion of individual Sinmyeong and statehood was suddenly terminated by his early death at the age of 41 in 1986.

Humour rarely appeared in Korean modern art before Minjung Misul. Dominant features of Korean art for 40 years after 1945 were pathos worn out by the poverty, paternal stubbornness, metaphysical dryness, intellectual severity or conformist silence. Humour in Minjung Misul began the icebreaking of the subdued mood of society for the first time in the history of Korean modern art. It was a very refined and complex intellectual act, a proposal of integrated vision toward change in recognition and senses.

In Korean art history, Minjung Misul was a large-scale enlightenment which sophisticated simple art paradigm of creation and appreciation into complex set of production of meaning including the process of research, utterance, speculation on reality, education on history, awareness of society, interpretation, communication and distribution as a system. In this process, humour was a very practical tool for providing conceptual frame and source of energy to develop their thinking.

I have found that humour of Minjung Misul has coincidentally and fundamentally intersected with ideas of a philosopher a hundred years ago. Bergson in his conclusion stated “humour is foam” oscillating on the surface between tension and relaxation, so his humour is pathetic and nihilistic. However, humour of Minjung Misul constantly pushes the “foam” into life and thus creates certain structure, which connects with body, reality, nation, nature and universe. And I’d like to call this “humor as trans-medium of bio-social metabolism”. This is the example of so-called outstanding internal comedy closely imagined by Bergson.

There is no completion in humour. Humour does not set any theory. So humour was revived to Korean modern art by Minjung Misul which has continued through the works of Jeonghwa Choi, Seonghun Gong, Koh Seung Wook, Sangdon Kim, Jo Seub, Jeongho Ok, Mixrice and Yim Heungsun. It would be an important role for curators, critics, and researchers like me to develop further studies.

Translation: Jang Hye-jung, Kwon Jin