COLD COMFORT

SUNG HWAN KIM

BY
ASHLEY RAWLINGS

"The year was 1968. Tonight was a cold December night. The air was cold. This means that he closed his arms, just like birds, their wings on their heart. Only spiders have their legs away from their heart. But they walk fast to keep warm in the winter. You are a man, spread your chest and straighten your back." A ten-year-old Korean-American girl tells this simple but evocative story in a steady stream of words, her voice gentle but high-pitched and insistent. Her face is pictured in close-up against a gray, watery backdrop, while a man's hands appear and disappear, variously holding up a shimmering curtain of silver ribbons, spraying her in the face with a bottle of water and covering her head with a thin, transparent film. She goes on to describe a family eating together, the children complaining that they don't want to any more *kang naeng ee* popcorn and their father admonishing them. "Think of all the kids up north who are starving to death. They feed on roots and dirt. Didn't I tell you about the war, when your uncle had to cut out a slice of his hip to feed the children? How lucky you are."

The man's hands reach around and cover the girl's face momentarily with a red holographic photograph of the sun, and her story then takes a sudden turn toward the sinister. She talks of the family's son settling down to do his homework moments before men with guns barge into the house, demanding food and questioning whether he prefers the North or the South. "He opened his mouth. Cold air touched his tongue. His tongue naturally shrank from the sudden coldness. After hearing the words of his mouth, the man said, 'No. We should correct the habit of your tongue.' He pulled out a machete from the sleeve and ripped the right side of the boy's cheek, from the edge of his mouth to the start of his earlobe. What did the boy say? '*Nan kong san tang ee sil eu yo.*' [the subtitles read, 'I hate the Communists.'] These words were to be repeated by the many mouths that remained intact ever since then." After the girl concludes her story, the hands reappear and cover the her face with a photograph of a full moon.

So begins Sung Hwan Kim's haunting ten-minute video *Washing Brain and Corn* (2010). A disjointed set of images and vignettes ensue: in his own voice-over, Kim describes his brain being substituted for another that expanded until it deformed his head and outgrew his body; the young girl appears with wings projected onto the wall behind her while she utters the words, "I am endangered"; a man in a checked shirt moves haltingly through a summer house, his hands held up as if carrying a rifle; and people crouch in a cornfield to the hum of a mournful kazoo and lazily buzzing cicadas (a version of a passage from Claudio Monteverdi's religious musical score *Marian Vespers of 1610*, which is itself a reference to the end of Robert Bresson's 1967 film *Mouchette*.) Finally, to a moving acoustic guitar solo and plaintive vocals that sing *Nan kong san tang ee sil eu yo*, the video ends with the girl and the man being gradually drawn over by a scrawl of lines projected over their faces.

Such visually and aurally arresting non sequiturs, embedded with oblique historical and cultural references, are among the hallmarks of Kim's practice, which eludes simple categorization. Spanning performance, video, drawing, installation, poetry, bookmaking and album production, his works weave together disparate autobiographical accounts, fairy tales, hearsay and historical events, using narrative modes that range from exaggeration to intonation. Nothing is fixed. Agency frequently collapses in his videos, with characters appearing to stand in for each other. Many of his works contain a rupture that comes halfway through the piece; what start out as enchanting or upbeat stories typically plunge into something much darker. Through his collaborations with other artists, some of his chimeric artworks have splintered off into distinct but self-referential iterations of themselves. Bringing together such a diverse array of unrelated and interrelated stories and forms of storytelling, Kim explores the slippages and shifts among these multiple layers. Though the artist would resist such labeling, it is difficult to ignore the fact that his approach resembles that of a shaman, medium or sage—one who channels and recombines information in all its forms.

The process by which Kim makes these enchanting yet frequently jarring connections between subject matter, form and media can be thought of as a kind of conceptual and aesthetic synesthesia, akin to the neurological condition in which one type of stimulation evokes another, such as when hearing a sound triggers the visualization of a color. "Synesthesia is something that comes to me whether I want it to or not, but then I'm also interested in creating that process," he told me in a conversation at his New York studio in March. The synesthesia is the catalyst for his deliberately skewed form of storytelling. "I think it's the same thing as feeling that you are living inside history but also looking at it from the outside. You can be conscious of what you are a part of, but sometimes you are not a part of it and can only look at it from a distance."

Amid the myriad elements that coexist in Kim's work, one consistent theme is his exploration of the way information is distorted as it is retold or reformatted over time. *Washing Brain and Corn* was inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Leichen-Wäsche* ("Corpse Washing") (1908). "They had grown used to him. But when the / Tilley lamp was brought and threw / fitful beams into the darkening room, the stranger / grew unknowable. They washed his neck / and, as they knew nothing of his circumstances, / they wove a history for him from lies, / diligently washing," reads the poem, in which the tender gesture of washing a human body is usurped by morbid projections of the imagination. Kim amplifies this effect in *Washing Brain and Corn*'s visuals: the acts of covering the girl's face with both transparent film and images of the sun and moon hover between being a ritual, a game, a caress and an act of suffocation or obliteration. Likewise, Kim takes the tale of the North Korean spies slitting the South Korean boy's cheek—a story that has been retold among South Koreans for generations—and adds a new, ambiguous layer of meaning to it by having his own niece recount it. While in reality she is simply performing a role, in the context of such an enigmatic recounting of troubled subject matter—so far removed in time and place from her life in New York—it is as if she is channeling voices from another dimension altogether.

The breadth of Kim's interests was cultivated during the mid-to-late 1990s, when he was an architecture student at Seoul National University but left after his first year to study art and mathematics at Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 1996. When asked about the influence of these disciplines on his work, he says: "I see architecture and math as languages, in a way. If you know different languages you don't make them exotic. You don't worship them or quote them without really understanding. I was into number theory and integers—very abstract math that examines the relationship between natural numbers and negatives. I think that the influence shows in how I order my work, finding different ways to make it rigorous in its own way. Another way of thinking about it is as a machine that translates or delivers, bringing one world to another."

Kim diversified his fields of study in the following years, undertaking postgraduate courses in art history, literature, poetry and philosophy at Harvard University—where he studied film and video under performance artist Joan Jonas—and New York University. At Harvard in 1999, Kim forged a collaborative relationship with two fellow students, artist Nina Yuen and musician David Michael DiGregorio, which has been crucial to shaping the hybrid character of his work of the past decade. The trio was so inseparable that Yuen and DiGregorio joined Kim in Amsterdam when he moved there in 2004 to undertake a two-year residency at the Rijksakademie.

While in Amsterdam, Kim worked with Yuen (who also goes by the name "a lady by the sea") on *12 minutes* (2005), giving her 12 minutes of footage and a week to alter it under the condition that it remain the same length and retain essentially the same content. Both artists were allowed to restore any material that the other deleted during the five exchanges they made. The video begins with a gray screen displaying the words, "A man who dies at the age of 30 is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of 30." To a whimsical but halting soundtrack sliced up from Jean-Luc Godard's 1966 film

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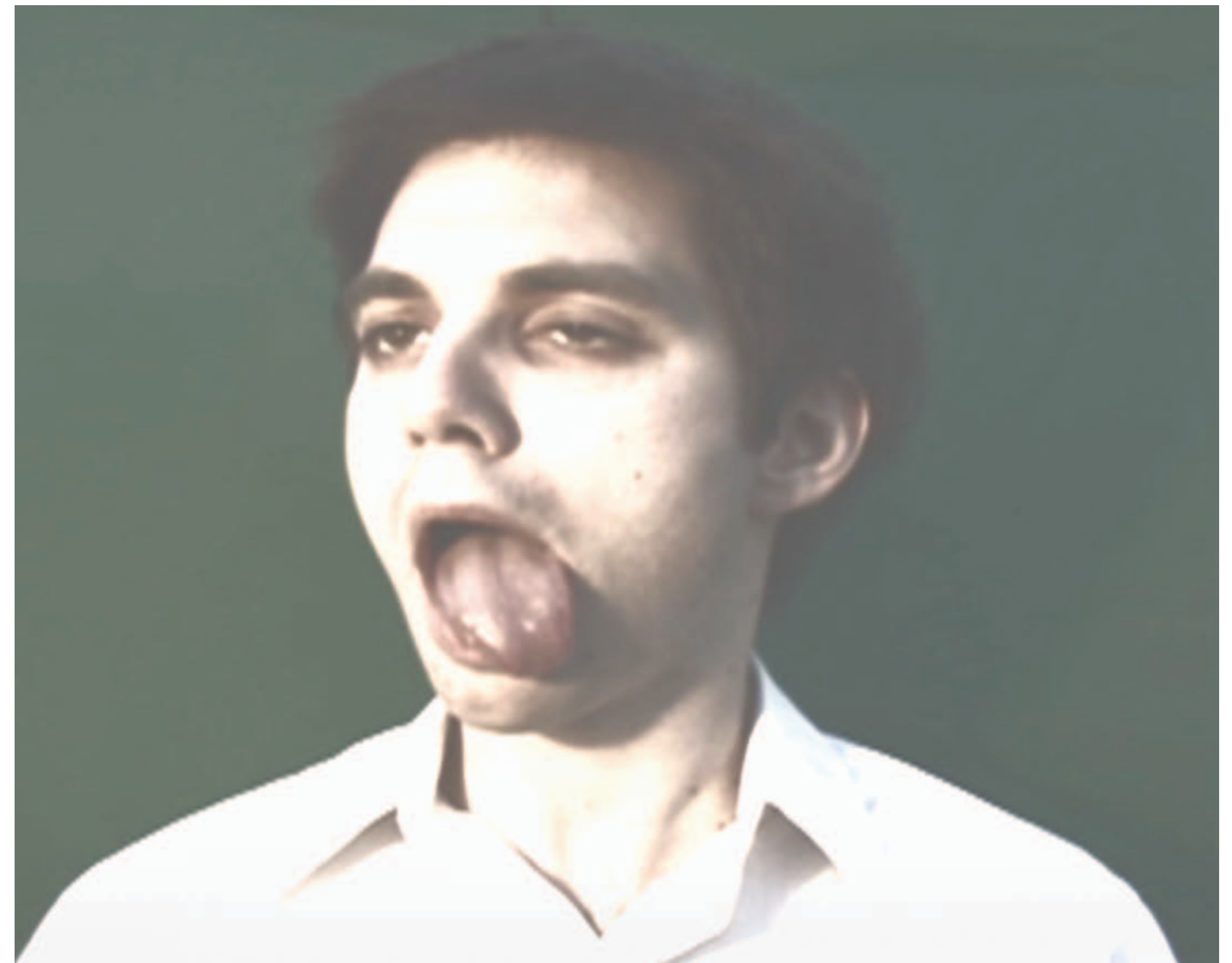
(Previous spread)
WASHING BRAIN AND CORN
2010
Still from video installation, in which a girl narrates a story about North Korean spies mutilating a South Korean boy. In this scene she is uttering the words, "I am endangered."

(This page)
FROM THE COMMANDING HEIGHTS . . .
2007
Still from video installation, showing David Michael DiGregorio making a variety of faces to the sound of organ music taken from torture scenes in the French film *The Battle of Algiers* (1965).

All images in this article are courtesy the artist.



(Above)
12 MINUTES
2005
Still from video installation, showing Nina Yuen in hypothetical positions in which she might be found dead.

(Opposite page, top to bottom)
DOG VIDEO
2006
Still from video installation, in which Kim (left) admonishes DiGregorio (right).

WASHING BRAIN AND CORN
2010
Still from video installation, in which lines are drawn over performers' faces.

Kim's videos are integrated into installations that consist of darkened rooms with folkloric imagery drawn in chalk on the black-painted walls and bisected by shimmering curtains of silver ribbons, suggesting a site for shamanistic ritual.

Masculin, féminin, we are told about a variety of disjointed subjects, ranging from Kim and Yuen's intimate but at times mildly abusive relationship, to her enthusiasm for a particular brand of bedsheets, how they would hide under them together, and how she taught him how to dress. The tone is simultaneously lighthearted, diaristic and confessional.

But thereafter the mood plummets. The screen goes gray again, displaying the words "You are / talking to me / in a voice / that I don't like / to listen to. / Cover me / with more clothes / in a safe house / and a warm house / and warm people / hugging me / always," while the voice of a man in great distress screams in thickly accented, broken English: "President Roh Moo-hyun, I want to live! I want to go to Korea. Please don't send to Iraq Korea's soldiers. Please, this is your mistake . . . Why do you send Korean soldiers to Iraq? To my all Korean people, please support me. Please push President Roh Moo-hyun. Please, I want to live. I want to Korea."

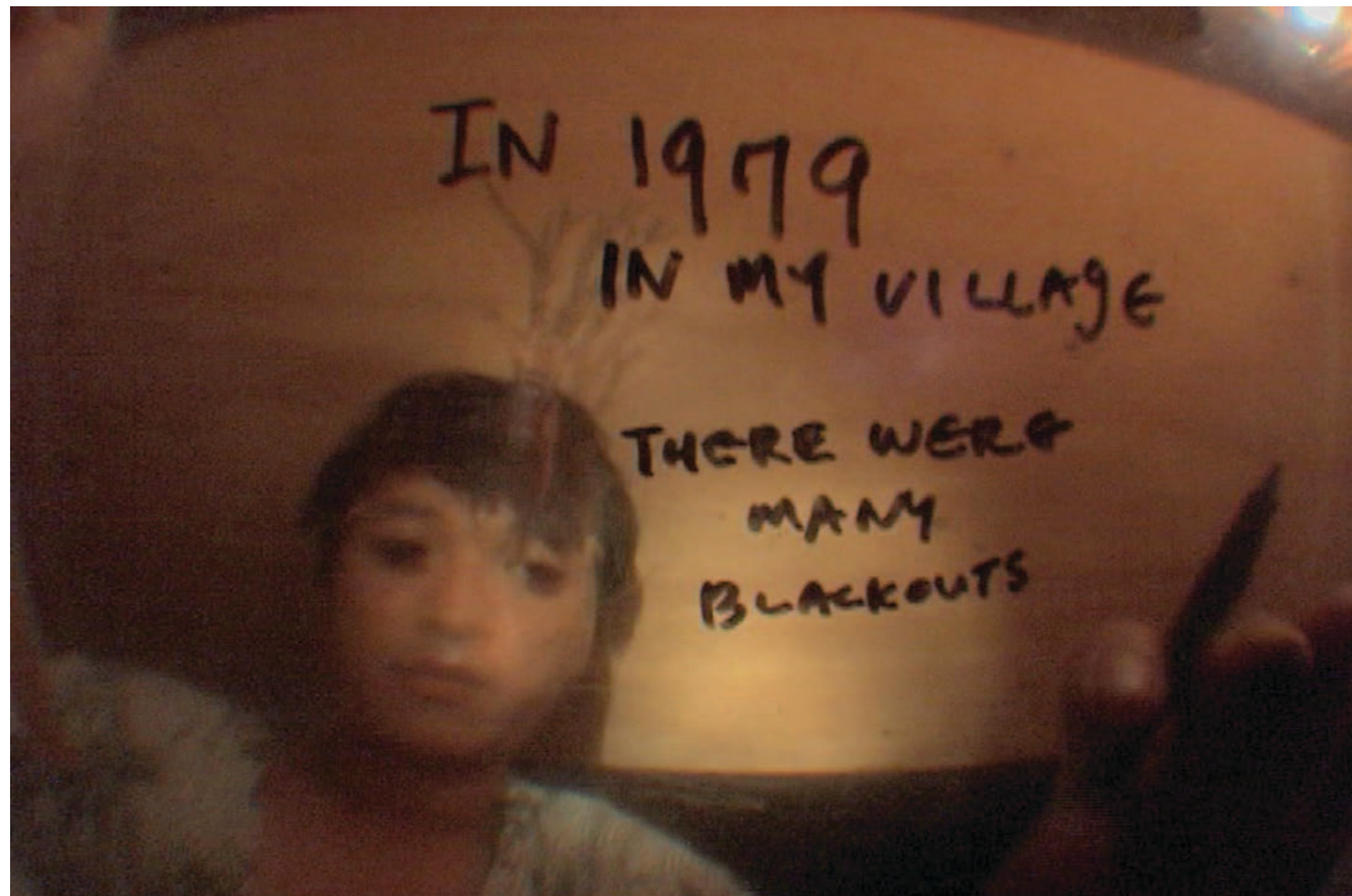
The man's cries are all but unbearable to hear. They are the last public words of Sun-il Kim, a 33-year-old Korean translator and Christian missionary who was kidnapped and later beheaded by an Islamist group after South Korea rejected their demands that Korean troops and military medics be withdrawn from Iraq. The execution occurred in the middle of the production of *12 minutes*, and Kim decided to introduce it into the editing process. "I was interested in how this personal situation, a personal death, was made public," he explains. "And also the fact that he borrowed a language that was not his own to deliver that message, but almost no one can understand him. Even the majority of English speakers can't really make out what he's saying. It's an act of speech that does not succeed."

Nevertheless, the terrifying desperation in the man's voice taps into something primal—it is a universally understood cry for help. And yet, while the personal moment was made public, the international coverage of Sun-il Kim's murder was diluted by the fact that it occurred at a time when hostages in Iraq were being beheaded on a very frequent basis. Because of this, several speculative questions arise: Would the media have given Sun-il Kim's predicament sufficient attention even if there hadn't been such a spate of atrocities taking place at that time? Would the Korean government even have acquiesced in order to save his life, or would the Korean public have mobilized forcefully enough to push their president to do so? Kim and Yuen's work is a disturbing, deliberately unresolved look at a moment of pitiful futility in which a man's most critical call for help was drowned out by circumstances beyond his control. The video concludes with Kim and Yuen adopting a variety of prostrate poses in increasing states of undress while the narrator hypothesizes about the different positions in which people might one day find them dead or dismembered.

Since *12 minutes*, Kim has refined a more consistent style of his own, through a series of five performances with DiGregorio (aka dogr), titled "In the Room" (2005–07) and staged both publicly and for private audiences in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Dublin, Cape Town, Toronto and New York. Kim's live performances are born from a hermetic creative process and are intended only for their immediate audiences, so he declines to show me any video documentation and explains instead that elements from these events evolved into his "In the Room" trilogy of videos, *Dog Video* (2006), *From the Commanding Heights. . .* (2007) and *Summer Days in Keijo – Written in 1937* (2007). Shown in various combinations in solo shows at venues such as Witte de With in Rotterdam (2008), Wilkinson Gallery in London (2009), Haus der Kunst in Munich (2010) and the Queens Museum of Art in New York (2011), these videos are integrated into installations that typically consist of darkened rooms with folkloric imagery drawn in chalk on the black-painted walls and bisected by hanging flags and shimmering curtains of silver ribbons, suggesting a site for shamanistic ritual. "You need certain environments to tell certain stories," Kim says. "Some stories can only be told at night. The black rooms refer to that mood. It's an immersive space where people can be completely engaged."

FROM THE COMMANDING HEIGHTS . . .
2007
Still from video installation, in which Kim reflects on blackouts at his apartment block during late 1970s, spawning rumors that the president was ordering the them so that he could go undetected while having an affair with an actress who lived there.

On the one hand Kim dismisses the importance of categorizing stories according to fact and fiction, but on the other hand he acknowledges that in narrating anything, the story takes on a substance of its own.



The seven-minute *Dog Video* begins with Kim's voice-over reflecting on how people would ask him about the differences between life in South Korea and the Netherlands. He talks about the different kinds of church bells he can hear from his residence in Amsterdam. A man appears, kneeling on all fours on the floor of a high-ceilinged room, peering into the camera while wearing a white, translucent paper mask with dog ears. This image segues into Kim's story of his childhood dog resisting his affection and his father's training of the animal. "My father, he was a strict man," the voice-over says while Kim dons a red paper mask with a gaping, fanged mouth painted on it. A short while later, still wearing the mask, Kim is sitting in an armchair, ordering the man in the dog mask (played by DiGregorio) to move back and forth in front of him in a series of domineering commands and admonishments. The setup is vaguely comical and yet makes for uneasy viewing.

The sharp downturn in this video's mood comes with an orange intertitle over which we hear a man's voice sternly saying in French, *vous devez en accepter toutes les conséquences nécessaires* ("you must accept all the necessary consequences"). We see shots of DiGregorio's face, now unmasked, in contorted, somehow unreadable expressions to the drone of funereal organ music. The sound clip comes from a scene in Gillo Pontecorvo's controversial film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), which reconstructs the intensifying cycle of attack and reprisal between the occupying French military and the Algerian National Liberation Front during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62). In a pivotal scene, a French colonel asks a group of soldiers, "Should we remain in Algeria? If you answer 'yes,' then you must accept all the necessary consequences." The consequences that ensue—to the sound of the organ music—are graphic scenes of French soldiers torturing Algerians with blowtorches, electric-shock treatment and partial drowning.

The context of the quote and the organ music remains totally obscure to most of *Dog Video*'s viewers, who either have not seen the French film or would not immediately make the association. In contrast with Kim's more up-front focus on the hostage's last words in *12 minutes*, here he makes the most oblique reference to violence by using a third-party soundtrack for the close-ups on DiGregorio's grimacing, leering face. When I ask about the interrelation of the multiple roles DiGregorio plays in the piece—as the man wearing a dog mask, as the unmasked man facing the camera, and as the unseen singer and musician—Kim says, "It's about the contraction of time. It's a short film, and it keeps changing. It's important that it doesn't get fixed." While these roles, images and musical scores may not be anchored to each other, as in the previous scene with the man admonishing the dog the underlying subtext here is of dominance, control and, ultimately, abuse.

At the beginning of *From the Commanding Heights. . .* , Kim is more explicit in declaring the slipperiness of his narrative style. He tells us, "I know that it doesn't matter if things are true or not," while placing transparent strips of acetate with those same words printed on them over the camera. He relates a series of fairytale-like vignettes—illustrating them by drawing on a sheet of transparent film—including one about a woman with a neck that is long, beautiful and yet so large that, while she was camping, a family of snakes thought it was a small cave and crawled in, causing her to lose her voice. These stories segue into DiGregorio singing in an atonal whine, "There is a place / a place on this earth / like hidden from the sky / she is hiding there / in the deepest well," while Kim leans in close to the camera with a strip of acetate hanging from his mouth, printed with the words, "Everything I say is real."

Indeed, on the one hand Kim dismisses the importance of categorizing stories according to fact and fiction, but on the other he acknowledges that in narrating anything, the story takes on a substance of its own. "There is reality behind all expression," he tells me. "I think the categories of truth and fiction are emphasized differently according to certain cultures and certain periods of time. At the moment, newspapers are considered to be a source of facts, but then we know that different newspapers in different countries write different stories, even when discussing the same topic. I was pointing to that kind of thing—the juxtaposition of rumors based on truth with reality."

The story at the core of *From the Commanding Heights. . .* is a compelling mix of autobiography, rumor and intrigue. Kim describes living in an apartment block in the 1970s, and finding out that a famous actress also lived there. We see a woman in a pearl-white shirt, her hair tied in a long ponytail with a red bow, her head turned away from us—the image, seemingly taken from a paused videotape, flickers, scratches and wobbles. Kim plays a recording of his mother talking to him on the phone, recalling repeated blackouts that hit the apartment block. Rumors that the actress was having an affair with the country's president began to spread among the residents, who suspected that "he made sure that the electricity in the whole town went out before he entered her house so nobody could see him. We had a fidelity law in those days so people having an affair were put into confinement." Kim's mother then says that the secret service took her and her sister away for questioning, forcing them to keep quiet. "'So this never happened, right?' 'And you never told anyone of this story, right?' This is what they wanted from us—that nothing happened."

The idea of truth being filtered or distorted is expressed by the very footage of the woman with her head turned away from us. The image flickers and wobbles because Kim took it from a rare VHS recording that he found in Amsterdam and converted it from European PAL format to NTSC, then DVD. "I maintain the format in spite of the shrinking and scratching in the image. It's about moving, delivering, from one place to another. Like taking the VHS world to the DVD world to my world."

In the following sequence, Kim lists three points. "One: I didn't really know this woman. Two: She lived nearby me. Three: In 1979, in my village, there were many blackouts." It is as if he is grasping onto the core facts of the story in an attempt to find some source of stability or comfort. The video's climax comes when the soundtrack plunges into a deep, vibrating drone punctuated by jittering electronic blips, while the camera slowly zooms in on the actress' face, which we see for the first time, barely moving in slow motion. "We didn't know her," DiGregorio sings in a drawn-out wail. "But how we knew her name / We didn't know this woman / What was she / What was she wearing? / Something so white and pearly / Whose woman was she? / Oh, these days / She doesn't pass by / Oh, these days / She doesn't pass by." The actress' hand slowly reaches up to her neck and she gives a faint smile. This slightest of gestures, made in the thick of such grinding music and exaggerated vocals, is incredibly moving.

The declaration that "we didn't know her" brings us back to the ideas raised in Rilke's *Leichen-Wäsche*. When faced with the unknown, the mind projects its own fantasies, desires and anxieties. Looking at the range of narrative modes that Kim employs in his practice, it is from the darker, more psychologically charged end of the spectrum that his work draws much of its strength. At its most fundamental level, Kim's work taps into primal, universal fears—the fear of the dark, the fear of the unknown. With its array of bizarre, sometimes malign archetypal figures, warped vibrating soundtracks and oblique references to half-forgotten atrocities, Kim's multilayered stories stir up the feelings of alienation and powerlessness one has when looking at history from the outside. How does a political ideology lead one human being to torture and mutilate another? What drives a captor to behead his prisoner? How does a society come to distrust its own president so much that he becomes a veritable bogeyman who creeps around in the night, ordering blackouts so that he can meet with his mistress and then have his security apparatus attempt to erase all trace? As the work of innumerable social scientists shows, the sinister underbelly of human behavior is not beyond explanation, but for many people it remains remote—the plight of faraway societies, the stuff of folklore and nightmares. Kim does not attempt to explain anything, but he tells and retells these haunting stories because he doesn't want you to forget.