Yi Sang à Paris:
Art of Repetition and Improvisation in 2010 Paris/Seoul

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【Abstract】
This paper examines modern Korean poet Yi Sang’s artwork and revisits the Paris-Seoul joint exhibition Est-ce que la ligne a assassiné le cercle? [Did the line murder the circle?], which was held to celebrate Yi Sang’s centennial in 2010. The exhibition showcased contemporary Eurasian artists inspired by Yi Sang’s originality as one of the most celebrated modern poets who also happened to be an architect, painter, and illustrator and whose work habitually crossed literary and non-literary boundaries. Nevertheless, Yi Sang’s visual artwork did not gain much scholarly attention until 2010. A few projects that analyze his illustrations have been published since then, yet his continuing legacy from the perspectives of contemporary art beyond Korea has never been addressed. Actively engaging in unconventional experiments with language and the visual, Yi Sang freely visualizes language and verbalizes images at once in his multilingual writing. He takes a multimedia approach to visual arts as well and uniquely employs text, creating a collage that opens symbolic possibilities for infinity yet also singularity. The 2010 exhibition was organized and curated by mathematician and sound artist Emmanuel Ferrand, who found aesthetic value in the translatability of Yi Sang’s works. This paper focuses on Yi Sang’s transmediality that is reinterpreted and re-created by the interdisciplinary arts presented at the exhibition, notably the installation and performance “Yi Sang Machine” among others, and investigates Yi Sang’s unique perception of space that translates not only between the verbal and the visual but also between 1930s’ Korean modernism and 21st century’s border-crossing art.

【Key words】
border-crossing art; Korean modernism; colonial modernity; multidisciplinary arts; interdisciplinary arts; digital art; spatiality
Multidisciplinary Receptions of Yi Sang’s Visual Poetics

Known as one of the most important modern Korean writers during Japanese colonial rule, Yi Sang (1910-1937) is not new to the contemporary art scene. Trained first as an architect, and also an award-winning painter, Yi Sang was a comprehensive interdisciplinary artist. He began writing while working as a draftsman for the architecture department in the Japanese Government General of Korea and actively engaged in unconventional experiments with language and the visual and freely used mathematical symbols, numbers, and geometrical figures as well as multiple languages including Japanese, Chinese, French, English, German, and even Latin. He visualizes languages and at the same time verbalizes images throughout his poetry, short stories, essays, illustrations, and cover designs—distinctions between media which matter little for him since he habitually crosses and overlaps genres and techniques. The formative properties of typography and the graphic representation of languages naturally led to multimedia receptions and interdisciplinary celebrations of Yi Sang’s work today.

In 2010, Yi Sang’s centennial was celebrated by both visual artists and literary communities. The Korean Society of Typography held their first exhibition Poetry:Poetry [Shi:Shi] and showcased forty-five contemporary designers’ works inspired by Yi Sang’s visual poetry. Gyoha Art Center in Paju also exhibited Swallow Café [Chebi Tabang] where young sculptors and plastic artists, including Kim Min, Kim Jeong-eun, So Mu, Yi Ji-ae, Hong Geun-young, Kim Do-hoon, and Kim Ji-sook, put their works on display and recreated the café space that Yi Sang used to run and where he used to meet with his fellow artists and writers. Moreover, Arko Art Center’s special exhibition Yi’s Emergence illuminated Yi Sang’s multidisciplinary art world from various perspectives including literature, visual art, architecture, design, and so on, along with the contemporary works of artists who also experiment with boundary-crossings, such as Byron Kim, Yeondoo Jung, Jeong Young hoon, and Cha Ji ryang. Many other exhibitions continued to celebrate Yi Sang’s multiple legacies, and there were also a number of theater and performance pieces inspired by his creativity and originality. In 2014, the exhibit Crow’s Eye View: The Korean Peninsula featured around two hundred works by twenty-seven artists and groups inspired by Yi Sang’s serial poem Crow’s Eye View [Ogamdo] at the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale, and this exhibit won South Korea its first Golden Lion Award.
Among all these celebrations of his work, the Paris-Seoul joint exhibition in 2010, *Est-ce que la ligne a assassiné le cercle?* [Did the line murder the circle?] demands particular attention for its transnational and transhistorical attempts to shed new light on Yi Sang’s unique perception of space and time, which lies at the heart of the complexity and opacity of his work. Organized and curated by French mathematician and sound artist Emmanuel Ferrand together with South Korean curator Kim Joeun, the exhibit showcased multiple genres including performances, lectures, installations, and concerts, by various contemporary artists from Korea and Europe at the multidisciplinary art space La Générale in Paris between June and July. The exhibit then continued at Space Hamilton in Seoul in August.

Emmanuel Ferrand reveals in an interview that he came across Yi Sang while reading Roland Jaccard’s novel *Portrait d’une flapper*, in which the line “*LA LIGNE A-T-ELLE ASSASSINÉ LE CERCLE?”* [Did the line murder the circle? (*chiksŏnŭn wŏnl salhaehayŏnnŭnga*)] is quoted from Yi Sang’s 1931 poem “A Strange Reversible Reaction” [*Isanghan kayŏkpanŭng*]. Afterwards, Ferrand discovered the aesthetic value and transmediality of Yi Sang’s works and naturally borrowed the inspiring line for the title of the exhibition.¹ According to Ferrand, the dots, lines, and symbols in Yi Sang’s poems contain profound meaning bearing on the mathematical as well as the scientific, and the main motif of the exhibition is to use these symbols as the *objet* and draw them into the area of formative arts.²

In fact, the poem “A Strange Reversible Reaction” employs dots, lines, and symbols to enable the visualization of reversible temporality through spatialization. The first part of the poem translates as the following:

A circle with any radius (the common idea of past participle)

A straight line connecting one point inside the circle and one point outside the circle

The temporal influence of the two kinds of being
(We are indifferent to this)

Did the straight line murder the circle?

A microscope
Under which the artificial was developed with no difference from nature³
The emphasized line in bold, “Did the straight line murder the circle?” fascinatingly visualizes a time seemingly arrested in the new modern era of the early twentieth century. The figure of a circle and a straight line laid over, connecting two points inside and outside the circle, can be drawn the following way (Fig.1):

![Figure 1. “Did the straight line murder the circle?”](image)

Whether the circle was there first in the temporal condition of a past participle, and the straight line was drawn thereafter, does not seem to matter. Or “we are indifferent” to this temporal order, for it will look the same even if the straight line appears first, and the circle comes later, as if the chemical reaction of the two would result in an equilibrium mixture in a reversible reaction. Whichever comes first between the two, the figure will always look like a straight line is murdering, or has already murdered, a circle. At such a stand still moment, time is strangely reversible.

In 21st century Paris, nevertheless, the figure indicates a pure potential. Ferrand proceeds with the figure of a straight line murdering a circle and presents the symbol of the empty set “∅” in the exhibition poster (Fig.2).

As if another line were added to continue connecting the points inside and outside the circle, the line in the above poster stretches out, slashing the whole circle, and rendering the figure resembling the symbol of the empty set “∅”. In mathematics, the empty set is the unique set having no elements, yet it is not the same as “nothing.” It is unique in that it is a set that has no members. Therefore, it is a concept that denotes something with nothing inside, provoking a philosophical and ontological curiosity. How can something exist that contains nothing inside? The possibility of such spatial being/existence indicates the pure potential, which
is a key to understanding Yi Sang’s singularity. Mathematical applications of Yi Sang’s poems have been discussed by scholars, and their design values are much recognized by artists as well. What is unique about Ferrand’s attempts is that he directly applies Yi Sang’s mathematical expressions to the objet d’art and takes the materiality to spatial formations for the multiplying potential. Ferrand mentions that he realized that the most effective and natural way to convey Yi Sang’s ideas in the 21st century was through dynamic interactions as in a performance. The exhibition accordingly showcased various artists working in theatre, performance, music, digital arts, plastic arts, installation, video, and so on, in the lieu of the multidisciplinary creation “La Générale” in Paris and “Lab201” in Seoul, which also enabled transnational and transcultural exchanges. Among others, the installation and performance piece “Yi Sang Machine” by Luna Yoon Kyung and Gérard Paresys pays particular attention to the transmediality of Yi Sang’s poetry and the pure potentiality for what I call “border-crossing art.” The rest of this article will thus take a close look at the transmedial process of the “Yi Sang Machine” created from one of the poems in Crow’s Eye View [Ogamdo] and then discuss
the formation of new perceptions of space in 1930s’ Korean modernism that connect Yi Sang’s artwork to the transnational, transcultural, and transmedial border-crossing art of today.

Transmedial Spaces from *Crow’s Eye View* to “Yi Sang Machine”

The “Yi Sang Machine” is a digital program that helps recite Yi Sang’s “Poem No. 3” [*Shi chesanho*] in Korean and French, from the serial collection *Crow’s Eye View* [*Ogamdo*] (1934). This cross-cultural multimedia reception first takes spatial translation, rather than just linguistic translation from Korean to French, and then finally transmediates that spatiality. First of all, the esoteric poem is written in one sentence without spacing and rhythmically repeats words and phonemes in present and past tenses, which makes it visually difficult to decipher and calls for reciting and resounding. Even to Koreans, the original poem in Korean is challenging and looks like a linguistic block, especially since it is written without spacing yet with frequent repetition:

싸ホーム하는사람은즉싸ホーム하지아니하던사람이고또싸ホーム하는사람은싸_HOME하지아니하는
사람이엇기도하나싸_HOME하는사람이싸_HOME하는구경을하고심겨든싸_HOME하지아니하
던사람이싸_HOME하는것을구경하든지싸_HOME하지아니하는사람이싸_HOME하는구경을하든
지싸_HOME하지아니하던사람이나싸_HOME하지아니하는사람이싸_HOME하지아니하는것을구
경하든지하였으면그만이다

Yet, a plain translation that focuses on semantics naturally includes spacing between each word:

The one who fights is thus the one who hasn’t fought and the one who fights has also been the one who doesn’t fight therefore if the one who fights wants to see a fight then the one who hasn’t fought seeing a fight or the one who doesn’t fight seeing a fight or the one who hasn’t fought seeing no fight or the one who doesn’t fight seeing no fight matters not.

Interestingly, at the 2010 exhibition, Cori Shim and Jean-Yves Darsouze translate the poem in French in a way that reveals its visual formation and plasticity through repetition and rhythm within the poem (Fig.3):
Central to the visual formation here are the two columns repeated each line: “celui qui” (the one who) and “se bat” (fights). The negative (“ne…pas”) and the tense shift (“bat/battait”) add the formative effect right next to those central columns, and the less frequently repeated elements show the plasticity of the poem in its structure. In the midst of this formative translation lies the perception of space and spacing. Shim and Darsouze’s translation displays different spacings and breaks than the ones inserted into the semantic translation of the solid block of the Korean original written without any spacing at all.

Luna Yoon Kyung and Gérard Paresys then collaborated and created a digital program that allows (non-Korean) French speakers to recite the poem in Korean and (non-French) Korean speakers in French by decomposing and breaking down the poem into irreducible phonemes. The individual phonemes of the Korean poem are first numbered for programming, which presents a numeric translation of the poem as below (Fig.4):

![Figure 4](http://yisangyisangmu.blogspot.com)
The artists then take a step further to chromitize the numeric translation and turn the poem into a visual artwork (Fig.5 and Fig.6):

Figure 5. Luna Yoon Kyung, “Traduction Chromometrique 1,” Image via http://yisangyisangmu.blogspot.com, credit to the artist

Figure 6. Luna Yoon Kyung, “Traduction Chromometric 2,” Image via http://yisangyisangmu.blogspot.com, credit to the artist

As the second chromitization (Fig.6) suggests, mere visualization goes blur without articulating the poem. The “Yi Sang Machine” thus asks for articulation of each phoneme and records it one by one. After programming the recordings in order, the machine recites the full poem.

With emphasis on the acoustic phonetics, the “Yi Sang Machine” frees the poem from the mother tongue. Therefore, writing each phoneme in a foreign language so that one can recite the poem in that foreign tongue is essential for this poetic machine. This way, the “Yi Sang Machine” invites an interaction not only between the digital artwork and the audience but also between the Korean language and a French audience and vice versa, as Luna Yoon Kyung not only displays the artwork but also provides the audience with the “Instructions for Use” of the “Poetic Machine”: 
1. Break down a poem
2. Resolve in irreducible phonemes
3. Digitize them and program in full poem
4. Write each phoneme in the foreign language
5. Visualize them one by one
6. Articulate and record one by one
7. Apply the recordings to program
8. Press the button “Recite the poem”

The digital program in Korean is thus created so that French speakers can recite the poem in Korean, and the French version is for Koreans, as below (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8):

Figure 7. “Yi-Sang-Machine-v1.2-kr” Image via http://gerard.paresys.free.fr/YiSangMachine/index.html (licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0)
By articulating each phoneme and programming the recorded phonemes in order, French speakers who do not know Korean can recite the poem in Korean, and Koreans who do not speak French can recite it in French. This “Machine” thus becomes not only a digital artwork but also a highly interactive form of phonetic game software. Paresys shares the video clips of the artists’ performance at the exhibition along with the one of them helping children program and play it together at a park on his website. The Machine can also be installed anywhere, reciting the recorded poem alone as Paresys includes a brief scene showing a computer placed by a canal, playing the recorded poem in the program.

The series of transmedial translations here—from Korean to French, from number to color, from phoneme to digital art, from performance to installation, and so on—shows how early 20th century modernism in Korea transitions to 21st century multidisciplinary arts. What is being transmitted in these translations is less the original meaning of the poem as a whole than the new spatial perceptions stemmed from the repetition as such. Shim and Darsouze’s French translation begins with the recognition of the semantic units being repeated, and the “Yi Sang Machine” breaks down the poem further into irreducible phonemes and identifies the smallest
Formation of Space in 1930s Korean Modernism

As shown above, the digitization of the 1934 Korean poem begins with a literal and figurative translation of space. Indeed, Yi Sang’s perception of space translates between the languages (mainly from Japanese to Korean), different media (from verbal to visual), and the disciplines (from architecture to literature to visual art) that constituted Korean modernism in the 1930s. Following his interdisciplinary engagement as a poet, architect, artist, and even art critic himself, then, one can trace a unique formation of traversable space in Yi Sang, which inspires future border-crossing art. The serial poetry *Crow’s Eye View* [*Ogamdo*] that includes the original poem for the “Yi Sang Machine” provides an efficient starting point. That the odd title is a pun on the architectural terminology “bird’s-eye view” is well known. In Korean, the Sino-characters for “bird” [비] and “crow” [쪽] look close enough to cause confusion: the latter is only missing a single stroke from the former. Prior to *Crow’s Eye View*, Yi Sang wrote a serial poem titled *Bird’s Eye View* in Japanese, which was published in the architecture magazine *Chōsen to Kenchiku* [Korea and Architecture] in 1931. The two series of poems are completely separate works, and none of the eight poems of *Bird’s Eye View* and the fifteen poems of *Crow’s Eye View* are directly related. Yet the later work in Korean with the odd title is far more widely known to the extent that eventually both works were for decades mistakenly known under the same title *Crow’s Eye View* until it was corrected in the 1990s. The wider reception might be due to the larger literary audience of the nation-wide Korean newspaper *Chosun Chungang Ilbo* than that of a causerie section of a Japanese architecture magazine. What is noteworthy, however, is that the interplay between the two works suggests the significance
of spatial perception in 1930s Korean modernism, of which Yi Sang was at the vanguard, starting from modern architecture and then proceeding to visual art.

Behind the opaque relationship between *Bird’s Eye View* and *Crow’s Eye View* exists Le Corbusier (1887-1965), a pioneer of modern architecture, who was introduced in *Chōsen to Kenchiku* in 1929. This was also the year when Yi Sang started working for the architecture department of the Japanese Government General of Korea and when he also won the first and third places in the cover design contest of the said magazine. The term “bird’s-eye view” was first employed in architecture by Le Corbusier when he developed the “Plan Voisin” in an attempt to redesign the 1920s Paris. According to him, the bird’s-eye view adds not only the third dimension to modern architecture and urban planning but also a new function that one had not sensed before. The new vision will thus enable cities to arise anew beyond the disorderly development of modern technology as he states:

THE BIRD’S EYE VIEW.

... THE EYE NOW SEES IN SUBSTANCE WHAT THE MIND FORMERLY COULD ONLY SUBJECTIVELY CONCEIVE.

... IT IS A NEW FUNCTION ADDED TO OUR SENSES.
IT IS A NEW STANDARD OF MEASUREMENT.
IT IS A NEW BASIS OF SENSATION.

... MAN WILL MAKE USE OF IT TO CONCEIVE NEW AIMS.
CITIES WILL ARISE OUT OF THEIR ASHES.12

The aerial view as a new additional sensation and measurement leads man to new perceptions of space and thus new aims for urbanism. At that time, the Japanese Government General of Korea was focusing on the urbanization of the colonial capital Keijō (read “Kyungsung” in Korean; present-day Seoul), and the 1929 issue of *Chōsen to Kenchiku* that introduced Le Corbusier was immediately followed by the special issue titled “Keijō Urban Planning” [*Keijō toshi keikaku*].13 Along with the urban designs of Western cities by Le Corbusier, the special issue includes the “bird’s-eye view of Keijō city streets” [*Keijō shigai chōkanzu*].14

Yi Sang’s 1931 serial poem *Bird’s Eye View* echoes Le Corbusier’s aspiration to a new sensation for the desolate earth to arise anew. For Yi Sang, what
manifests in the new visual dimension is the agency of spatial movement since the bird’s-eye view entails that which can rise up so high above the dreary land. The serial poem includes “LE URINE” in which he depicts a crow soaring up to sky: “A crow soars up like a peacock and possesses without boasting the half of the celestial bodies that disorderly flash scales...”15 Yi Sang’s pun of “crow’s-eye view” then alludes at once to Le Corbusier as the agency himself and the limited yet significant possibility for such an agency in colonial Korea. “Crow” in French is le corbeau, and the name “Le Corbusier” can translate to “the crow like one.” Born Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, the architect often drew crows in his design works,16 and he adopted the pseudonym by altering his maternal grandfather’s name Lecorbésier in 1920 when he published the first issue of the purist, avant-garde journal L’Esprit Nouveau.17 Interestingly enough, one of the most influential essays in art criticism in the 1930s, “The Cradleland of Modern Art” [Hyŏndae misurŭi yoram], which is assumed to be written by Yi Sang,18 continually advocates for “l’esprit nouveau” [esŭppŭri nubo (the new spirit)] as it focuses on new senses of space and spatial expression.19 The essay speculates on Western art history yet differs from other critical pieces in art studies at the time for its particular emphasis on Cezanne’s influence in modern art.20 Employing a neologism “Cezannism” that essentializes a unique understanding of space based on circular, conic, and cylindrical projection, the essay argues that all spatial existence is understood as an expression of a third dimension. The new spirit [esŭppŭri nubo], then, must emerge from the exploration of spatial structure. The modern is liken to an express train in the essay, and 1935 Korea demands the new spirit to move along.21

Instead of privileging European modernism, which was legitimized through the ideology of modernization by the Japanese,22 Yi Sang spotlights the agency of spatial movement for a new vision. In another poem included in the Bird’s Eye View series, “Movement,” the poet focuses on exploring spatial structure through the movement of going up and down, which reflects the rising and falling in the East and West:

Gone up above the first floor above the second floor above the third floor to the roof garden and seen nothing in the South and nothing in the North thus gone down beneath the roof garden beneath the third floor beneath the second floor to the first floor and since the sun risen from the East has fallen in the West and risen from the East and fallen in the West and risen from the East and fallen in the West and risen from the East and is now in the middle of the sky ....23
The roof garden appears to be the turning point of the movement, which alludes to architectural modernism as Le Corbusier, again, stresses the roof garden as one of the five points for a new architecture. Despite the dominant tropes of modernism associated with time (for the non-Western colony to catch up), the poet “flings away the watch” at the end of “Movement,” for the turning point of the sun that rises and falls each day stays in the middle of the sky between the East and West. That is to say, rather than getting obsessed with the modern that determines the old and new as a turning point, Yi Sang points to traversable space and promotes the agency of spatial movement.

In colonial Korea, the agency for the bird’s-eye view is materialized as the “crow’s-eye view” by Yi Sang. As a pun, its agency may sound limited, yet his 1934 Korean serial poem Crow’s Eye View adds a third dimension and suggests its own spatial agency in its interplay with his Japanese poems published in Chōsen to kenchiku. Among others, “Poem no. 4” of Crow’s Eye View repeats and improvises “Diagnosis 0:1” included in The Architectural Infinite Hexagon (Fig.9), which is itself influenced by Dutch artist, poet, and architect Theo Van Doesburg’s “Tesseract space.”

![Figure 9. Diagnosis 0:1’ of The Architectural Infinite Hexagon, Chosen to kenchiku, 1932 (left) and “Poem No.4” of Crow’s-Eye View, Chosun Chungang Ilbo, 1934 (right)](image-url)
What is interesting in these two poems is that the *Crow’s Eye View* reverses the whole set of numerical progressions with dots of the Japanese poem in *The Architectural Infinite Hexagon* in three-dimensional space, for the mirror image cannot be produced by simply rotating an image on the two-dimensional plane. The relationship of these two poems therefore directly reveals Yi Sang’s focus on space-time extensity through the third dimension and the subject movement.

Yi Sang’s visual artwork revolves around more than just spatial expression. Yi Sang’s cover design for *Chosen to Kenchiku* that won first place in 1929 shows a three-dimensional effect added to the typographic representation of the coordinating conjunction *and* [*と*] in Japanese (Fig. 10).

![Figure 10. Yi Sang, *The cover design of Chosen to Kenchiku 1930*, 2. Image via Arts Council Korea](image)

For Yi Sang, literary and non-literary arts are criss-crossed through the spatial expression of the materiality of letter, type, character, number, and symbol. Yi Sang also designed the cover of Kim Kirim’s book of poetry *The Weather Map* published in 1936. The cover simply contrasts two bright straight lines with the black background and presents the title and author in small print in the bottom left corner (Fig. 11).
A forerunner of modernism in 1930s Korea, Kim Kirim criticized sentimentalism and symbolism that focus on meaning in literature and stressed a critical understanding of form based on intellectualism. In his 1939 essay “Modernism’s Historical Location,” Kim attempts a scientific theorization of modern poetry as architectural engineering/design upon the multi-directional interactions between various values of words, such as the phonetic, the semantic, and the geometrical value from words’ visual shapes. It is not surprising that he names Yi Sang as the last modernist in Korea. Yi Sang’s cover design of Kim Kirim’s *The Weather Map*, which he also edited, exhibits Yi Sang’s modernism readily converging on the arts. The parallels of two straight lines in contrast with the dark plane suggest endless continuity, thus spatial-temporal extensity, beyond the edges by foregrounding the spatial materiality of the lines and plane.

At the 2010 Paris exhibition *Est-ce que la ligne a assassiné le cercle?*, contemporary Korean architect Changhyun Park further extends Yi Sang’s spatiality and invites the agency of audience. His installation “Pleinitude par les vides” [Fullness through voids] inspires the audience with an empty space full of straight lines (Fig. 12).
In this space that is empty yet full, the audience can freely explore between the lines and, through one’s movement and motion, create flexible spaces inside. Park’s installation rightly interprets Yi Sang’s perception of space extended from dots, lines, planes, as well as the bodily movement that adds a third-dimension, which effectively transcends time and space from 1930s Korea. Yi Sang’s focus on new perceptions of space does not simply embrace or celebrate the era’s hegemonic modernism. A third-dimension, newly brought to the fore by the bird’s-eye view, highlights the significance of one’s agency, and Yi Sang continually emphasizes spatial movement through repetition in his poetry. The movement further suggests extensity as seen in his designs of the blow-up of the coordinating conjunction and [と] and of the simple straight lines. In fact, these perceptions deeply concern and respond to the imperialist construction of space developed since the late nineteenth century. Yi Sang’s spatiality breaks the objectified space and looks into the possibility of border-crossing against imperialist expansion from the center to the periphery. By touching upon this point, the last section of this article will urge us to rethink the contemporary focus on border-crossings across the world.
From Colonial Modernity to Contemporary Border-Crossing Arts

The Korean modernism that rose to prominence in the 1930s during Japanese colonial rule was a complex product that emerged at the intersection of dominant European modernism, governing and mediating Japanese imperialism, rising Americanism, and a variety of ideological persuasions. Nevertheless, the major debates in the literary and art scenes since the 1920s had been “divided between the politically interested and the purely aesthetic.” A group of literary figures and artists influenced by socialist doctrines, including the writers Yi Ki-yŏng and Cho Myŏng-hi, the sculptor Kim Pok-chin, the avant-garde poet and film-maker Kim Yuyŏng, formed the KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federacio) in 1925 and initiated a proletarian art movement that considered cultural production a tool for political struggle. Yet, by the mid-1930s, the critical awareness of a conceptually diverse humanism arose and sought to confront the social crises that proletarian criticism had been unable to negotiate: “The dismantling of KAPF in 1935 by colonial authorities signaled a simultaneous freedom from the political-aesthetic binary… and a greater urgency to respond to the often oppressive changes wrought under colonial modernity.” Yet, the emergence of the modernist group following the collapse of the proletarian movement does not mean that modernism was one of the proponents of pure aesthetics against political engagement. As critics like Kim Kirim and Ch’oe Chaesŏ demonstrate in their essays, modernism in 1930s Korea developed along with various other movements and thoughts, including socialism and realism, without necessarily conflicting with one another. The avant-garde poet and film-maker Kim Yuyŏng, for example, was a KAPF member and joined the modernist group Kuinhoe (of which Yi Sang was also a member) after the KAPF. That is to say, modernism in colonial Korea required critical strategies to negotiate new ways of linking cultural production to social developments, and Yi Sang’s unique perceptions of traversable space stem from such consciousness.

The ultimate concern of Korean modernism, which is at once aesthetic and political, then involves a scientific approach to artistic media. Literature and art were considered a site of negotiation and mediation at an age of frightening anxiety. Yet as Hanscom argues, Korean modernism took part in a “crisis of representation” and, in doing so, engaged with the colonial context in complex ways. Questioning language as a medium of representation, therefore, modernist writers experimented with different literary forms and styles. And critics “approached the
chaos of the modern period and attempted to construct a scientific basis for a method of analytical interpretation and critical judgment.”31 Thus that the movement was “characterized by a sophistication of language and the pursuit of an aesthetic technique”32 does not necessarily signify its apolitical character or a turning away from the social materials associated with realism. Rather, modernism’s focus on and experimentation with the medium comes from an emphasis on science. Ch’oe Chaesŏ even argues that realism can be expanded and deepened by the objective manner in which the modernist writers Pak T’awŏn and Yi Sang view their object and subject.33

Both in metropole and colony at that time, science was indispensable for modernity. Since the object of a science must be integral and concrete as a self-contained unity for a systematic theory, imperialist ideology adopted the propositions for this objectification as the nature and function of the imperial objects. Language was thus institutionalized as the national language in the metropole and used as the basis of assimilation in the colony.34 A correlation between imperialism and modernism35 emerges in the spatial gap between the subject and the object, for modernism is “at one with the contradiction between the contingency of physical objects and the demand for an impossible meaning.”36 Fredric Jameson offers the hypothesis that the representational dilemmas of the imperialist world system may have led to the emergence of a properly modernist “style.”37 As far as imperialism focuses on territorial expansion via colonization, the imperialist’s world map will remain cognitively incomplete. When reality is no longer representable, language cannot structure any meaningful narrative. It is for this reason that modernist style manifests “a new spatial language” that “becomes the marker and the substitute of the unrepresentable totality.”38 Yi Sang’s most well-known story “The Wings” narrates the sickly urbanite’s meaningless wandering through the colonial capital and thus provides a kind of spatial language that delimits a narrative character, i.e., the “imperial type.”39 When language fails to be the medium that represent reality as such, Yi Sang turns to spatial expression and the spatial materiality of language as a medium.

A concept of the urban is significant in that it contains and motivates all the encounters and intersections that are crucial to the modern.40 Therefore, Yi Sang’s interest in spatial language and expression never turns to nature. This is especially the case because the science of objective space also took form along with the European imperialist construction of space as colonial space, which in turn was based on landscapism in the late nineteenth century. Kristin Ross explains: “Landscapism was not to be confined to a purely aesthetic debate; a veritable
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Science of landscapism, the science of objective space par excellence, university geography, took form during the era of the Parnassians.41 Space in both poetic and geographical landscapes during this time is posed as a natural referent that “offers up to the eye [to] look at.”42 Ross argues, “To conceive of space in this way is to occult the social and economic contradictions of which space is the material terrain.”43 The subject and “the eye that sees” (i.e., bird’s-eye view) are entirely excluded from this objectification of natural space. Yi Sang’s spatial focus, then, always involves the movement of the subject’s body or the motion of physical matter. Japanese Marxist philosopher Tosaka Jun writes in 1936, “Space, or the concept of space, has emerged as a specific problem in practically every philosophy and every field of thought. Space has become an issue even in theories of painting and sculpture and in theories of the theater and cinema. Indeed, our sight, touch, and hearing, this world—the actually existing world—cannot be separated from some spatial determination.”44 According to him, space cannot be separated from the materiality of physical matter and movement, for “space itself enters into a dialectical relation and unity with time, movement, and philosophical matter; that is, it is definitely analogous to the case of physical matter and physical space.”45 For Yi Sang also, the concept of space is constituted with movement as well as with the spatial materiality of any artistic medium, i.e., the physical and spatial existence of materials, such as texts, numbers, dots, lines, symbols, and so on.

Yi Sang’s illustration work directly shows the interplay between his visual materials and his literary style. Experimenting with the spatial materiality of his medium, Yi Sang uses texts in the images and treats language as an artistic medium for its physical materiality, rather than for its representation of reality. The following illustration from “The Wings” displays texts and images in an organic manner (Fig.13).

Figure 13. Yi Sang’s illustration in “The Wings,” Chokwang, 1936.
The image of an unfolded package resembles the wings, the title of the story, and each tablet out of the package inscribes each letter of the author’s name, “I, R, S, A, N, G.” Other than that, the texts do not carry any more meaning, for the ingredients of the medicine or the description of the medicine called “Allonal” hardly mean anything to the reader. The texts matter for their physical and spatial materiality as a visual medium; indeed, they are arranged along with the lines and circles. According to the direction of each side of the unfolded package, the texts shift the directions as well, and each circle contains a letter.

The second illustration from “The Wings” also includes texts in a banner (Fig.14).

![Figure 14. Yi Sang’s illustration from “The Wings,” Chokwang, 1936.](image)

The repetition of “ASPIRIN” and “ADALIN” conveys the sickly protagonist’s confusion and suspicion about his wife for giving him “Adalin” instead of “Aspirin.” What makes this illustration effective is the visual pattern of the repeated letters, for both medicines begin with the letter “A” and end with “IN.” Here again, Yi Sang inserts the initials of his name “R” and “S” in circles at the end of each line. Finally, the repeated image of a half-open book stands on top of the image of a body lying down. The sleeping body that lacks movement lies flat whereas the standing books achieve a three-dimensional effect with half-open pages.
Yi Sang’s illustrations demonstrate his experimentation with language/text as a visual medium and his focus on materiality and movement for a new perception of space. Against the imperialist focus on territorial expansion towards infinity, Yi Sang’s spatial perception foregrounds the movement of spatial beings. His boundary-crossing between language and art not only celebrates the typographic element of modern art and architecture but also allows numerous possibilities in contemporary multidisciplinary arts. The “Yi Sang Machine” exhibited in Paris 2010 takes this a step further and incorporates language into art as a sound medium as well. This is how Yi Sang’s attempt at border-crossing in 1930s Korean modernism meets what I call “border-crossing art” in 21st century collaborations among multinational artists’ multidisciplinary works.

Border-crossing has been, explicitly or implicitly, an essential motif in modern literature and art since the emergence of modern nation-states and colonial imperialism. Unlike the imperialist’s infinite expansion, border-crossing acknowledges the existing borders yet challenges the notion of border through the very movement of crossing. Yi Sang’s focus on spatial materiality and movement precisely explores the moments of border-crossing and converges literary and non-literary arts at once. This article does not attempt to mythicize any further Yi Sang’s legacy or create it all anew. Modernisms and post-modernisms (notice the hyphen, and notice the plural) of both colonial and postcolonial times that move against national boundaries and imperialist mappings naturally lead to border-crossing literatures and arts. Digital media in the 21st century allow even more creative border-crossings beyond national boundaries, on multiple levels, in diverse ways, as seen in recent scholarship on digital synesthesia and interactive digital arts.46 The 2010 Paris/Seoul joint exhibition highlights what pierces through 1930s’ Korean modernism and contemporary multimedia art, from “the eye that sees” to what can be called “the art that moves.” Beyond multiplicity in discipline and media, it is transmedial movement and interaction that ultimately cross borders in both time and space. Revisiting the concept of space in Yi Sang’s artwork through the contemporary approaches to multidisciplinary interactive art exhibited in 2010 Paris and Seoul allows us to unpack the ideological formations of scientific space in early 20th century modernism in Korea and urges us to rethink the perception of space in the multimediality of today’s transcultural arts.
Notes

2. Ibid.
5. For philosophical discussion on the set theory and empty set, see E. J. Lowe (2005, 87) and George Boolos (1984).
6. For mathematical applications of Yi Sang’s poems, see Shin Kyunghee (2016); Kim Myung-hwan (1998); Kim Yong-woon (1995); Kim Ji-sook (1998), among others.
11. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 166.
18. The essay was published by Kim Hae-kyung [金海慶] in Mael Shinbo in 1935. Yi Sang’s real name Kim Hae-kyung [金海卿] only differs in the last Sino-character, and the essay was reprinted in Munhak Sasang in 1976 as one of Yi Sang’s newly discovered writings. Afterwards, it had been included in complete collections of Yi Sang, but since Kim Ju-hyun raised the question regarding the uncertainty of the author in 1999, the latest collection by Kwon Youngmin does not include this essay. Kim Mee-young tries to identify the author by comparing the characteristics of this essay with Yi Sang’s other writings and concludes that it is highly plausible that the author is Yi Sang himself. See her article “An Essay on Making a Definite Decision about Who Had Written “The Craddleland of Modern Art,” Ōmullonch’ong 52, Korean Literature and Language Association, 2010, 6, 127-158.
28. Ibid., 166.
35. Strictly speaking, the fall of the proletarian art movement and the prominence of modernism coincide with the heightening of the Japanese imperial machine between the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and the Second Sino-Japanese War that broke in 1937.
37. Ibid., 59.
38. Ibid., 58.
39. Ibid., 58.
40. Ibid., 62.
41. See Kristin Ross (1989, 85).
42. Ibid., 86.
43. Ibid., 87.
45. Ibid., 35.
46. See Katja Kwastek (2013) and Gsöllpointner, Katharina, et al. (2016), among others.
References


_____. 1932. “Shindan 0:1” [Diagnosis 0:1]. *Chosen to kenchiku* (July): 25.


