Close Yet Far — *Haribo Kimchi*

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On *Performance Art Review*

Performance: Haribo Kimchi (超辛奇小熊軟糖) 11/02/2025 14:30

Jaha Koo, now visiting Taiwan for the third time, brings his new work *Haribo Kimchi* [1]. Although the piece is again built around his personal life, it departs from the accusatory and even angry tone of *The Hamartia Trilogy* (悲劇三部曲) [2], and instead conveys a softer feeling shaped by constant movement and continual relocation. Formally, Koo adds taste and smell to his usual storytelling performance. But with changes in both form and tone, the question becomes: does this new piece open up new interpretive space within the ongoing trajectory of his artistic practice?

When the audience enters, they see a Korean street-food cart with a red roof (포장마차). Projections of high-rise buildings brighten from night into dawn across the cart's semi-transparent plastic sheets, and through an eye-height camera perspective, we seem to stroll through back alleys. The cart on stage overlaps with the idea of a cart in real life. Dressed as the vendor, Koo invites two pre-selected audience members to sit on metal stools beside the cart as his "diners." He pours drinks and begins preparing dishes. The main course—his stories of migration—is served on this small, self-contained stage-world.

The first episode tells of a snail Koo once caught and kept when he lived in Seoul. Hoping it would recover its strength, he eventually released it back to the snail colony along the Yangjae Stream (양재천). A snail carrying its home on its back prefigures Koo himself—or the journeys of many South Korean migrants moving from Asia to Europe, unable to detach themselves from the heavy burden of "home" or "nation."

The second episode follows Koo on his one-way trip to Germany, carrying kimchi his grandmother made. After landing, the kimchi was still fermenting and finally exploded inside his suitcase. On stage, the smell of freshly cooked kimchi pancakes spreads through the theatre; it is a pleasant aroma, yet also recalls the "dead cat" odor that a German couple once mistakenly accused him of producing. Here, Koo returns to one of the strategies of his earlier works: he repositions everyday objects not only within the theatre but within broader historical frames. The making of kimchi is traced back to the end of the Little Ice Age, when reduced sunlight and salt shortages pushed it from its earlier salted yellow form to the vivid red we know today, a shift marked by the color of blood.

Life in Europe is not easy, filled with frustrations similar to those he felt in South Korea. He consults a Korean doctor for medication to relieve his anxiety; he falls asleep on a tram, eating gummy bears, only to discover his bag missing—and is told by staff, with a discriminatory tone, that he "smells like garlic." Whether in Europe or South Korea, he notes that he "can only ever be a foreigner." There is nowhere left to retreat, nowhere left to escape.

The third episode takes place in his hometown in Gochang (고창). Thanks to an old friend, Koo visits an eel farm. Watching the eels swarm and wriggle, and hearing about their migration from the deep sea to the shores of the Yellow Sea, he reflects on yet another animal metaphor for diasporic life: eels have no fixed home; home is the journey itself.

From snails to eels, from kimchi to gummy bears, the artist travels farther and farther from home. Home is no longer simply "wherever oneself is"; the idea of settlement ("home" as concept) becomes the act of movement itself—an attitude of making peace with wherever one happens to be. As the narrative continues, Koo shifts from being the obedient grandson who eats kimchi with rice—a relatively stable Korean identity—to the itinerant artist who casually chews German gummy bears while traveling across Europe. "Home," along with the meanings of South Korea or Asia, is compressed into a set of sensory stimuli—colors, sounds, smells, and tastes—placed upon the stage.

Yet the stronger the sensory impact, the more Asia becomes stylized and abstracted. Centering the stage around a street-food cart further strengthens the effect of "Asia as the Other." When the two diners step forward, they do not meet a middle-aged vendor running a cart in Euljiro 3-ga (을지로3가) or Seomyeon (서면); they meet Koo, a seasoned performer who has lived abroad for years. After tasting the food, they respond warmly to his friendly Taiwanese greeting, "Is it tasty?" But the story that follows is no longer the private, offhand talk of a street-food stall—it is a carefully edited, repeatedly revised, thoroughly rehearsed script, polished through texts and video, complete with subtitles. The diners become part of the stage mechanism: witnessing the cooking process, helping distribute scents, confirming the edibility of food, and assisting in collecting "props." No matter where the performance is staged, the street-food cart always attracts eager diners, reassuring audiences that the stories and experiences presented are "Korean enough," "Asian enough."

We could even say that the diners function similarly to the fried chicken in the performance. The chicken serves as a loose link between Koo's father, the Gwangju Uprising (광주민중항쟁), and the Asian Financial Crisis (아시아 금융 위기). Yet this memory of his father flashes quickly and disappears as the narrative shifts to the eels. The connection is not intended to continue the mockery and sympathy found in Cuckoo; nor is it trying to construct a multi-layered critique of family, authoritarian politics, or capitalism. Instead, the chicken—served at that moment—turns the sensory memory of Gwangju's victims into a flavor-based footnote in Koo's personal history. Even when the narrative moves from kimchi to the poverty of the Joseon era, or from cold seaweed soup to the Cold War story of miners and nurses sent to West Germany, the loneliness and powerlessness felt in one's own life do not naturally accumulate into a critique of world history. Food and diners alike function mainly to sketch fragments of everyday life, satisfying audiences' surface-level appetites and imaginations about South Korea and Asia.

The shift from *The Hamartia Trilogy* to *Haribo Kimchi* is thus more than a matter of "participatory or not," or "critical or not". We also witness Koo's transformation: no longer simply an Asian student struggling in Europe, he has become a European artist seasoned with Asian flavors. His home is no longer perpetually "in transit." The frustrations, pressures, and homesickness of migration have gradually become less unspeakable and representable. The more

we look for traces of critique in this work, the more we realize: when watching audience members happily accept his invitation, sit on the stools, and take the cup of somaek (소맥) he hands them—that the idea of home, and the intimacy we hold dear, will eventually be swallowed up piece by piece in the very act of storytelling.

[1] Following the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism's (문화체육관광부) policy guidelines, the production translates kimchi (김치) as "Shinchi." (辛奇) For ease of reading, this review uses the more commonly recognized Taiwanese term "paocai." (泡菜)

[2] *The Hamartia Trilogy* premiered in full at the 2023 Taiwan International Festival of Arts (TIFA) and includes *Lolling and Rolling* (你捲（剪）舌了嗎), *Cuckoo* (電子鍋) (also performed in Taiwan in 2018), and *History of Korean Western Theatre* (韓國西方戲劇史).