

NA KIM BOLD EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

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METAL met Na Kim in a café in the centre of Barcelona. She has come to give a talk at Elisava – Barcelona’s School of Design and Engineering, and we sat in the sun. Na Kim admitted, “Right now I live in Berlin, I need to soak up as much sun as possible”. Seeing her so relaxed, you wouldn’t think her work has been exhibited in countless institutions around the globe, including now the walls of Elisava in Barcelona.

Her success and design process about from chance, understanding the rules and bending them to suit her. We talked to her about the role of memory in the construction of our creativity, national identity, and the artist's conscience in a context of constant change.



FFC on 6, 7, 8 for OUTSIDE IN at ICA Philadelphia, 2021.

Correct me if I'm wrong. I heard that being a designer wasn't exactly what you had in mind at first. It was something that came later in life for you. Could you expand on that?

I studied industrial design before, and that wasn't something I was against, but I thought there had to be something that was much more interesting. In industrial design, decision-making comes from the market. From the styles to what type of product is more saleable. So I started thinking about what was the purpose of a designer. Intuition, for example? I started to think about graphic design because I could see that it had an interdisciplinary approach.

When I studied industrial design it was at an engineering school. The environment was very different, and it made you have a very systematic idea of life. In many experiences, planning is not really important (laughs). Life is just smooth, happens by chance, which is how I wanted to start trusting myself.

I travelled to different countries to find which one was going to be most suitable for me —and it ended being Werkplaats Typografie in the Netherlands, by chance! It was a more free environment, teachers came once a week just to talk about the project we were doing and everywhere was our workspace. That experience helped me to build my own path. Many kinds of changes happened during that period of time.

The static feeling of industrial design wasn't made for you, you prefer something much more creative.

Yes, compared with industrial design, [graphic design] is very interesting. It's always something happening by chance.

Taking a general look at your work, one could say it's a nod to everyday stationery such as stickers or tape. Materials we find ourselves playing with as kids. What's the idea behind your work? Do your origins play a role in them?

That's true. Stationery is a very important ingredient for my work, but I don't want to limit my work just to that. What I see through the stationery is something found. Perhaps it's the same case as a painter that needs to find a space to draw with a free mind. What I like from this process is that I don't create from scratch but build another thing from found materials. Finding everyday stuff and intriguing objects in my daily life is very important. I'm very curious about how other people find or create their own materials: if they use red, what kind of red? What does that red tell them?

I've found out that the idea of primary colours is very different depending on the country. I like to, when I travel, go to stationery shops and randomly pick out stuff. That speaks to me about the power of found objects and the composition they can make. Even when they can look similar to one another, you can start seeing a pattern or a regulation. Some ready-made rules. I want to see how to make my own composition within these already established rules and create new ones.

It's like you are an anarchist in the world of design. Almost as if you want to see a new meaning that people forget about.

I'm very happy to hear you say that because, usually, I'm asked about my visuals or why do I use certain colours. For me, the important fact is that I'm just intrigued by something and trying to understand the rules behind it. I think it happens in many ways in my day to day life, as well. Some happen by chance, but whatever that's already been decided is intriguing for me.

Well, at the end of the day, many things we use nowadays are made by chance. I think that's very important to keep in mind, and to see if you are able to think outside the box or just follow the rules.

Not everything can be made by chance, though. You also have to know the previous rules. Without knowing them, making your own choices doesn't make sense. You have to know about yourself first and then make your own decisions. Otherwise, it is very complicated to create anything.

At the moment, I'm doing this workshop with the students [at Elisava, in Barcelona], and it's called Monumental Souvenir. It's about four different murals for four different floors, so many things have already been decided. I always like to talk with the students about their own personal objects, because I think it says a lot about their personalities. I asked them to bring their own stuff and asked them to share their stories. Objects aren't just physical things, but a container for previous stories and memories. I want them to tell their own stories through these found objects. As if they were writing an autobiography.

If you imagine that you need to write about yourself, you start writing and try to think about meaningful moments about you. Later on, you realise you don't exactly remember what those memories were. And, by chance, you end up making these stories where you don't know if it's completely true or not. I'm very interested in these kind of moments, too. Design is, essentially, creating fiction by chance and sharing it with other people.



Elisava installation.

I don't know if you know about this photographer called Joan Fontcuberta, but he basically, in a similar way, creates photographs from already made photographs and plays a lot with what's reality and what's not. I wonder if perhaps the same thing happens to him, not knowing where to draw the line between real or fake. I also think it's very common in your work.

Exactly, yes. Fiction wasn't an important issue regardless, but I realised that it just happened at some point. In the end, reality and fiction get mixed, and you don't know when it's real or not. That's the magic of it.

About your origins, you were born Gwangju, a peripheral city in South Korea, you soon moved to Seoul to study for your degree in graphic design and later moved to the Netherlands to complete your Master's. What have these places taught you? How different is graphic design worldwide?

If I go back even earlier in my life, I always liked to do something related to culture. I never wanted to be a banker or a lawyer (laughs). I happened to go to a science High School and thought that, perhaps, I could be an architect because it's somehow related to design. In the meantime, I always wanted to be a painter when I was young, which is something I always remember. At the end I went to an Engineering School because it was the closest one to what I liked [coming from a science High School], that's how it happened!

From that moment, I realised that I needed to experience many cultures because it's very important for a designer. When I was thinking about studying abroad, especially coming from an Asian country, many students wanted to go to the United States or England. But then I decided to study more in South Korea, which is when I studied Graphic design. There's something about Korean design, the typography and Hangul, that made me realise that seeing design in my language was something I needed. As I said, going to the Netherlands happened by chance, but there's something about their design that's very focused on pragmatism, you know?

Yeah, prioritising functionality.

The Netherlands is a very small country, and they almost need to build everything by themselves. Design-wise, if something is decided by the Government, they can change everything immediately. That's why I have to say their design is very sexy (laughs). Not because it's chic, but because they have a bolder approach. And that attitude is very different from Germany and Switzerland. They do what they have to do, and I love that kind of mentality.

They are also emotionally minimal, which is why many people would say I looked Dutch! I was very shy at first, being an Asian girl and not really knowing how to navigate that new atmosphere. After six years I became more expressive and bold, less afraid. Nevertheless, the reason why I went back to South Korea was because many European countries are very supportive of their Governments.

In what sense?

Well, fond of their founding system. They know how to respect culture and art because they see it as their heritage, which is great. But in 2011, with the economic crisis happening and the Governments cutting the cultural budget first, I was quite shocked by people's reactions. The demonstrations were very peaceful, they didn't look angry. We have the same difficulties in South Korea, but we mobilise ourselves a lot. We even impeached a president [Park Geun-Hye].

If I'm not mistaken, it was the President previous to the one you have right now, Moon Jae-In.

Exactly. Compared to that situation, we [Koreans], are angry people. Very expressive and emotionally strong. I saw a lot of outrageous things going on in Europe at the time, and I needed to feel an energy I wasn't seeing. I went back to South Korea and, somehow, started my career there. I started to make a lot of projects related to my country and Korean clients, as well. That helped me to have a starting point and to have a smooth comeback. Once I experienced this energy again, I realised there were too many things going on, it was a very busy life and I was feeling burnout, so I decided to go back to Europe and get established in Berlin.



SET v.21: 118+142, for 019 Ghent, 2021.

I think it's a nice medium place, to be honest.

Yes! That's where I'm working now. I really enjoy living in Europe because, for me, it's very connected, and I can move easily everywhere. I also can have much more experiences like this where I can be invited to go to other Schools and give talks. It's nice to have a very strong stance being at home, but it's also nice to have a place to take care of your health and your relationship with other people.

About Korean design, and I know you are tired of people asking you about shapes (laughs), I believe it has a very personal touch to it. The design seems, as you said, more care-free and less scared to have a different approach to design than Europe.

I think that has changed a lot. It's a need for speed and constant changes. Especially coming from last year, where you can hear K-Pop everywhere. Recently I'm working for SeMA [Seoul Museum of Art], that is preparing a big exhibition about Hallyu, so I already knew that K-Culture is very big internationally. But preparing for this exhibition I could learn more about my culture and I could see how it's very connected to technology and the younger generations.

There's a pessimistic point, which is that we have the political issue coming from the 1950s, and we had to develop in a very short period of time, with different other issues along the way. It's easy to fall into depression if progress doesn't work, and people often go with a "let's do what we have to do" mindset. Now, there has been some sort of dynamic energy going on for a while and it seems to be paying off. Still, if you copy or reference constantly from outside then there's something that's getting lost.

Loosing yourself for the sake of going global?

I think it's obvious. It's the culture of younger generations, and it can represent a new point of view about Korea, but there's something about South Korea's culture that's somehow evolving.

Going back to design, we've already talked about how you work with different mediums. How does your design change while working with a cross-medium approach?

Maybe it's a very simple answer, but the approach doesn't really change. It's about knowing what to do with the space you have. Back in the day, when I started in graphic design I was interested in the concept of space. Books, for example, are a 3D space you can transform from inside. Something I'm not afraid of is knowing how to adapt to different mediums, whether it is 3D or printed. Also, the SET project is one of those, and after having different exhibitions, I realised spaces aren't only a white cube, but also a relationship between the people who visit—which is an idea I'm very interested in right now. I'm about to open a project in my atelier, to invite one person at a time to experience said space.

Almost as a dialogue.

That's a great word, yes. The atelier of an artist also is a big part of every project. To visit it is also, I think, is part of the experience, of what shapes a piece. It's also important to experience something alone. An experience of your own. That's my biggest project this year!



LOOM project at Na Kim's studio in Berlin.

That's a very interesting approach because people can be seen as both designers and design itself.

That's something I really like. Especially when I come here [to Barcelona]. People care about their living space, about architecture and interior design. I always feel amazed about these things because it feels like the living space is a big part of one's life. It creates a feeling, a mood, about one's own life. Everything can be part of your experience and there's no limitation between an art-piece and design.

Also you were talking about SET, which was the very first think you did as a solo artist in New York. I heard you created it taking in mind the idea of archiving reminds you of death, and that's also why SET became a recurring series of yours. What brings you back to it? Is it your way of facing that fear of death of your pieces?

I think that's still, somehow, in process. When I started this project in 2015 it also happened by chance. First I did the book and then translated it into a space, so it's the other way around as how you usually do it. After the first show I realised I can make different translations of SET because if the space changes, everything else does, too. Until now I've done more than twenty different versions of it.

Wow!

Exactly! When I came to the twentieth version I asked myself: should I finish it or not? Because even if I try to change the rules for the versions, I get tired of creating doodles about the same topic. I tried to get to some conclusion, but I also realised that, maybe, after time goes by, I can find even new rules for SET. Why try to control my life before it even happens? I don't know whether to kill SET, yet. Maybe I will just let it go for a while.

I also heard that archiving reminded you of collecting, as we spoke at the very beginning of the interview. Is it a memory exercise or is it creating a narrative by itself?

I think it's not just about creating memories, because they are fiction (laughs). If we consider memory as something unchangeable, then it feels like a dead-body. Collecting, as general definition, is having a group of things you just like. Archiving is reshaping and includes an editorial part. Overall, I think it's about creating a narrative but with an already existing base.

To wrap this up, since we are outside Elisava, could you give us a hint of the tips you give to the alumni?

Right before our meeting, I was doing a workshop about Monumental Souvenir where I talked to them about all of this (laughs). This time, for the workshop, I wanted to connect it with a previous one I did there, too, called Souvenir. It really depends on the students but, sometimes, they seem afraid of trying new things. I understand it can be difficult to start something without a clear direction in mind, but I like to push them to try very different things. To see what works with them and to communicate with one another. I also like to make them be each other's teachers. Most of the time they feel lost because I never really direct them because I don't like that. I just let them talk and find how to work with it by themselves. From this experience, it helps to be brave and bold. Maybe the only thing I can say is to just try!



Drawing SET, at Bottomless Bag exhibition, SeMA Seoul, 2020.