



Sowon Kwon/MATRIX 196

average female (Perfect)

January 27 – March 24, 2002

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

Sowon Kwon/MATRIX 196

Seeing Nadia achieve “perfection” on TV was paradoxically the first time I consciously recognized, in a profound way, our (physical) limitations as human beings, our mortality. That this recognition came about because of the extreme beauty of what I was seeing is, I think, significant.

—Sowon Kwon¹

Manhattan-based artist Sowon Kwon initially encountered the “Human Figure—Average Female” ergonomic template in college while taking architecture classes and working in an architectural supply store. The template has been a standard feature in her drawings, collages, prints, sculptural reliefs, architectural motifs, and video installations since the early 1990s. She explains, “I thought the templates could invoke the body in a productive way, or address identity as a fragile construct, without the usual baggage.”²

Kwon’s **average female** series began in 1990 with the creation of twelve blueprint drawings. Kwon “incorrectly” used both the blueprint technique and the ergonomic template to form an oddly unsettling and personalized version of a pinup calendar. *October* depicts a woman with eight arms. Shown seated and leaning forward, she cannot touch her toes despite the help implied by additional appendages. This inability is due not to her physical fitness, but rather to the length of her arms. The “average female” in *March* has three heads, stacked vertically. The tentativeness of the lines Kwon has drawn adds an active and fluid dimension to the figure; it seems as if she might have three heads because something has caused the original one to fracture. Kwon explains that in these drawings she “made [her] own averages” by working with different scales of the “Human Figure—Average Female” template.³ Kwon has also made blueprint drawings that present an “average female” figure who has outgrown the old-fashioned spaces designed for her.⁴ In one she is literally trapped within a canopy bed, unable to lie down or gain any respite. Perverting the logic of ergonomics, Kwon reveals interior space as a place for the body’s regulation and confinement.⁵ Kwon’s new averages, which Russell Ferguson calls “disruptive interventions,” pose very basic questions such as what is average? What is female? And, what is average female?⁶ The semantics of utility and imperfection is a recurring notion in Kwon’s work.

In a 1993 article on Kwon titled “Means, Medians, Averages,” critic Helen Molesworth succinctly outlines the history of ergonomics. In the United States ergonomics evolved under the name Human Factors Engineering. While the initial application was a military one, after World War II ergonomics began to be used in the industrial arena.⁷ Templates became standard in architecture, industrial design, and plumbing, used in technical drawings to detail structural elements of particular spaces or designs. The current application is ubiquitous and affects everything from



kitchen counter heights to car interiors to soap dispensers.

Ergonomics gathers enormous amounts of data in the form of body measurements, and then attempts to synthesize that information into a series of averages. By taking the body to be the ordinary source of measurement for the world, ergonomics is a system of proportions that extends out into the world to pull everything into scale with human beings.⁸ The unsettling effect of this mathematical formula, as Russell Ferguson notes, is that “the bureaucratic neutrality of the title [of the ergonomic templates] masks a totalizing finality. Insofar as any woman deviates from the proportions of the template, she will find herself outside the parameters of an anonymous norm against which others will judge her.”⁹ Standardization and/or nonconformity breeds not only inconvenience but angst.

Kwon’s works intimate some of the effects of such standardization and offer the possibility of “other” averages.¹⁰ Her **average female** series has been read as a “wry indictment of Western, late capitalist society’s continual demand for new forms of bodily perfection.”¹¹

An idealized notion of beauty began with ancient Greek sculpture, was reinforced by the Renaissance, and is perpetuated today through popular media. Perfection, unattainable by the majority of the population, has been mathematically analyzed and scientifically “proven” by a vast variety of sources from art history to television news. In a 1921 essay Erwin Panofsky argues that the cultural framework of an era can be ascertained by its representation of human bodies. From this representation one can deduce accordingly the culture’s perception of beauty, spirituality, and power.¹²

Since the first television broadcasts in the 1930s people have been experiencing both culture and history mediated through broadcast images. The ability to transmit imagery to a wide segment of the public creates a media-based extension of the phenomenon of collective memory—one that with satellite capability expands to negate both time and geography. Television becomes personal history; one remembers exactly where one was or what one was doing when memorable events occur. One such event was in 1976 when, during the Montreal Olympics, Romanian Nadia Comaneci achieved the first ten in women’s gymnastics. (She received perfect tens on both the uneven parallel bars and the balance beam.) Russian gymnast Nellie Kim also scored a perfect ten in 1976; her event was the

of (First Perfect), 2000; DVD animation still; courtesy of the artist.



vault. These perfect performances elicited varied personal and press reactions—nationalistic pride, pure awe, semantic reconsideration of the word “perfect”; and for Kwon, who was twelve years old at the time, her first conscious experience of the finiteness of time, of our “mortality.”

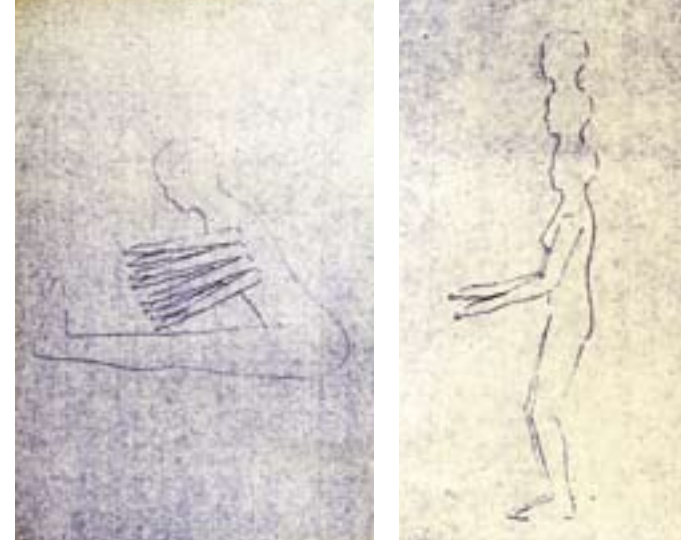
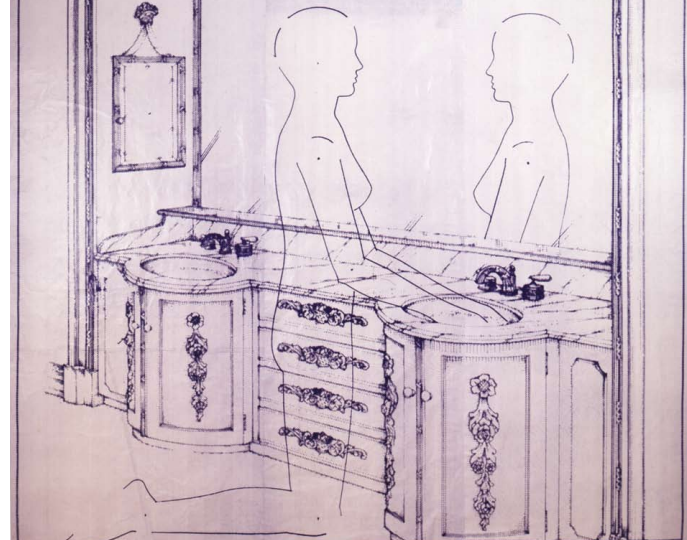
In her MATRIX exhibition, **average female (Perfect)**, Kwon explores the idea of perfection, the definition of beauty, and the gendered inscription of the female body. Here Kwon digitally lays the ergonomic template over actual footage of Comaneci and Kim during their 1976 Olympic floor and vault routines. Oddly, other than Kim’s vault, the performances Kwon chose to use are not the perfect performances. Perhaps her choice asks what was imperfect about these routines? And, how can one move so easily between perfection and imperfection? Be perfect in action but not in body? Kwon likes things that are in between, transitory, not quite, but almost. In fact, she notes, she is “very interested in the sometimes slight, sometimes pronounced mismatch when the template is overlaid on top of real bodies.”¹³

In *af (First Perfect)* (2000) and *af (Second Perfect)* (2000), the two mural-size DVD projections that comprise her **average female (Perfect)** exhibition, the drawn figures are mapped onto the filmic, highlighting or “reading” movement through repetition and mimicry. The juxtaposition of man-made “averages” with human “perfection” (or imperfection) explores the unrealistic expectations our society can impose on the female body. Simultaneously, the outline emphasizes the inherent grace of the gymnasts and the essential perfection of their movements. If there were ever a question as to where the viewer should look during these performances, Kwon has delineated the focus. The actions she presents are utterly mesmerizing.

Kwon’s recent shift from static work to animation and video installation is an explicit attempt to engage the body of the viewer in her work. *af (Inverted Skills)* (2000) is a wall-size projection consisting of video images merged with computer-animated line drawings. The “average female” enacts a series of short acrobatic performances, activating an otherwise mundane domestic space, and makes some suggestions for creative living in tight quarters.

Two or Three Corridors (2000), commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art for presentation at their midtown Manhattan branch located in Philip Morris headquarters, shows the animated “average female” roaming the Philip

of (Perfect), 2000; installation view—Artsonje Center, Seoul, Korea; courtesy of the artist and Artsonje Center, Seoul, Korea.



Morris offices. She is first seen emerging from her own “blueprint” architectural reality, rendered in a series of spare blue lines against an all-white backdrop. She moves freely through the spaces, looking at passersby and the artwork on the walls. Sometimes she mimics the poses of the figures in the art; at other times she superimposes herself onto the bodies of passing office workers. Through the inscription of the “average female” template onto other bodies, Kwon draws our attention to the nuances of the office workers’ ordinary movements and asks viewers to reflect on their own patterns.¹⁴

Another theme addressed in Kwon’s sculptural and video installations is the inextricable link between a work of art and the environment in which it is displayed—specifically, how different contexts, such as the gallery, the home, or the office, affect interpretation.¹⁵ The essence of an art object is known as its *aura* as defined by Walter Benjamin in his pivotal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” One wonders about the “Human Figure—Average Female” and how her aura is affected by Kwon’s appropriation and the transformation through different venues, media, and sizes. The template was created as a tool to guide design and production. In Kwon’s hands it serves to point out the assumptions that are almost universally made about beauty, the body, and the built environment. She posits the rethinking of these “givens” and the resulting “averages.”

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ The artist in an email conversation with the author on December 19, 2001. ² Ibid. ³ Sowon Kwon, “Average Female,” *Documents*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Summer 1993), p. 94. ⁴ Frazer Ward, “Sowon Kwon,” *Art & Text*, no. 54 (May 1996), p. 76. ⁵ Alice Yang, “Sowon Kwon’s Interior Schemes,” in *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 55. ⁶ Russell Ferguson, “Reproducing the Average Female,” *Documents*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 101, 102. ⁷ Helen Molesworth, “Means, Medians, and Averages,” *Documents*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 106-107. ⁸ Ibid. ⁹ Ferguson, p. 101. ¹⁰ Sowon Kwon, artist statement, unpublished text, n/p. ¹¹ Molesworth, p. 103. ¹² Ibid., p. 104. ¹³ Excerpts from an interview between Sowon Kwon and Debra Singer, unpublished, n/p. ¹⁴ Debra Singer, *Sowon Kwon: Two or Three Corridors* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 2000), n/p. ¹⁵ Ibid.

Two or Three Corridors, 2000; DVD animation still; courtesy of the artist.

Sowon Kwon was born in Seoul, Korea, in 1963. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1985. She then attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, and received a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1989. Kwon participated in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 1990 and 1991. She lives and works in New York City.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2000
“Two or Three Corridors,” Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York, NY
1997
“Borrowing,” Art in General, New York, NY
1996
“Interior Schemes,” Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions

2001
“Mega-Wave: Towards a New Synthesis,” International Triennale of Contemporary Art, Yokohama 2001, Yokohama, Japan
“BodySpace,” The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
2000
“Invisible Boundary: Metamorphosed Asian Art,” Niigata Prefectural Civic Center Gallery, Niigata, Japan, and Utsonomiya Museum, Utsonomiya, Japan
“KOREAMERIKAKOREA,” Artsonje Center, Seoul, Korea
“Man + Space,” The 3rd Kwangju Biennale, Kwangju, Korea
1999
“Shelf Life,” Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
1997
“Home Life,” State University of New York, Old Westbury, NY
1996
“The Power of Suggestion: Narrative and Notation in Contemporary Drawing,” The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
“Landscape Reclaimed: New Approaches to an Artistic Tradition,” Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT

of [Inverted Skills], 2000; animation still; courtesy of the artist.

1995
“Altering History/alternating stories,” Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela
“Live/Work,” Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY
“Familiar Places,” Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
1993
“Trade Routes,” The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY

Selected Catalogues and Books

Amor, Monica. *Alterando Historia/alternando historias* [Caracas, Venezuela: Museo de Bellas Artes, 1995].
Butler, Cornelia. “Dissent at Home,” *Warp and Woof: Comfort and Dissent* (New York: Artist Space, 1991).
—. *The Power of Suggestion: Narrative and Notation in Contemporary Drawing* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996).
Kim, Sun Jung, ed. *KOREAMERIKAKOREA* [Seoul, Korea: Artsonje Center, 2000].
Man + Space, The 3rd Kwangju Biennale [Kwangju, Korea: The Kwangju Biennale Foundation, 2000].
Marcoci, Roxanna, Diana Murphy, and Eve Sinaiko, eds. *New Art* (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1997).
Molesworth, Helen. “Domestic Rearrangements: The Art of Choice,” *Interior Schemes* (New York: Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, 1996).
Trippi, Laura, *Trade Routes* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993).
Yang, Alice. “Sowon Kwon’s interior schemes,” *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

Selected Periodicals

Baker, George. “Review,” *Artforum*, March 2001, p. 147.
Ferguson, Russell. “Reproducing the Average Female,” *Documents*, Summer 1993, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 101-2.
Karmel, Pepe. “Depicting the Multiculturalism of Queens,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 1995, p. C23.
Kwon, Sowon. “Questions of Feminism: 25 Responses,” *October*, Winter 1995, no. 71, p. 28.
Molesworth, Helen. “Means, Medians, and Averages,” *Documents*, Summer 1993, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 103-9.
Pasucci, Ernest. “Landscape Reclaimed,” *Artforum*, February 1997, vol. 35, no. 6, p. 92.
Ward, Frazer. “Review,” *Art & Text*, May 1996, no. 54, p. 79.

of [4], 1994; blueprint on linen; 96 x 96 in.; courtesy of the artist.

Work in MATRIX
of [First Perfect], 2000
DVD installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

of [Second Perfect], 2000
DVD installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Please Note:
Selections from *average female [Perfect]* can be viewed online at www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/matrix/196 during the course of the exhibition.

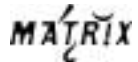
MATRIX Curator Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will lead a walkthrough of Sowon Kwon/MATRIX 196 *average female [Perfect]* on Thursday, February 14, at 12:15 pm.

On Sunday, March 3, at 3 p.m., Sowon Kwon will engage in a dialogue with renowned art historians Anne Wagner of the University of California, Berkeley, and Miwon Kwon of UCLA, followed by a reception from 4 to 6 p.m. This exhibition and talk are presented in conjunction with the Bay Area-wide F-Word Project, a series of exhibitions, performances, readings, and panels examining the role of women in contemporary cultural production.

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by the generous endowment gift of Phyllis Wattis.

Additional donors to the MATRIX Program include the UAM Council MATRIX Endowment, Ann M. Hatch, Eric McDougall, and Glenn and April Bucksbaum.

The museum also wishes to thank Joan Roebuck for her support of Sowon Kwon/MATRIX 196 *average female [Perfect]*.



© 2002 The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.

COVER: *of [Second Perfect]*, 2000; DVD animation still; courtesy of the artist.

ABOVE: *of [October]*, 1990; *of [March]*, 1990; blueprints; each 6 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.; courtesy of the artist.