

Boyfriend

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Spending time alone in public space is typically understood to be a result of loneliness - lacking companionship and therefore having no option other than to go solo while eating at a restaurant, going to the cinema, attending a live performance, or visiting a museum. The stigma of social isolation has often served as a powerful unspoken symbol of various degrees of depraved loneliness – the meme-ification of Rodin's *The Thinker* comes to mind. In the era of COVID-19, however, negative views of isolation have shifted in the public imagination. It is now seen as a form of protection, a way to practice care by reducing risks to oneself and those around them. Being in public alone now means reducing risk, acting responsibly, thinking of the collective without being in close physical proximity. Newly re-opened museums and galleries serve as public spaces for solo visitors, and Ga Ram Kim's new work *#FANTASY* (2020) channels the ways we may evade loneliness in our solitary public experiences, by simulating a date with the exhibition's tour guide – a handsome and charming online boyfriend.

To participate in *#FANTASY*, a visitor completes a magazine style quiz by answering questions about their exhibition viewing personality: do they learn about the art beforehand, or go without any preparation? Do they follow exhibition maps, or explore on their own? All with the goal of matching them with a boyfriend who will guide them through the space. On view in the gallery is a new iteration of Kim's well-known project *#SELSTAR* (2016), and the boyfriend's intention is to accompany the visitor and provide context as they experience the work. The installation displays cosmetics on a platform of letters (spelling out the word *#FANTASY*) outlined with bright lights. The goal of *#SELSTAR* is to encourage visitors to take a selfie in the space, makeup is provided as an extra nudge for those who may have left their lipstick at home.

Kim's *#SELSTAR* project came about after recent discussions within art institutions about the popularity of taking selfies inside art installations or next to works of art. The museum, some argued, had become just a superficial site for augmenting a selfie background, and not a place for viewing art. This attitude assumed that there is a singular, correct way to experience art and behave in a museum. In addition, self-documentation was not perceived as a valid form of close looking, or of interacting with the visual qualities of artworks. In response, Kim created a work that was about, and dedicated to, nothing other than

taking a selfie inside an exhibition space. *#SELSTAR* is simultaneously a subtle taunt of the rather elitist rejections of selfie-takers, as well as a celebration of those who go to museums in search of artsy lighting and flashy backgrounds for their profile pics.

Since *#SELSTAR* was developed, museums have more or less wholeheartedly embraced the Instagram-ability of their spaces, most likely because they noticed benefits in increased visitorship and online visibility. Just as the attitude towards a solitary body in public – including an exhibition space – has presently shifted, so has the understanding within art museums of what constitutes meaningful participation. Since Kim initially developed works around selfies, the impulse to self-document and self-broadcast has been legitimized as a valid form of engagement. The swarm of selfie sticks crowded in front of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre is no longer a sordid reflection of our obsession with digital frivolity, and more an indication of the global popularity of the painting itself. Experiencing the museum via a phone screen is a way of seeing, but is there criticality in this form of visitor engagement? Part of what *#FANTASY* signals is the ways that visitors might be drawn to work based on their interactions with the screen instead of the physical art encounter – and the opportunities for deriving comfort or discomfort from the experience of being a solo occupier of a public art space.

In *#FANTASY*, exhibited in Fall 2020 at the Bangkok Art Biennale, the gallery is set up with the lighting and make-up installation, but the main experience centers on the visitor's interaction with the digital boyfriend as tour guide. After completing the quiz, the visitor is assigned their boyfriend for their visit. The options range from one of four types, all performed by actor Jung Hosung: the Artist, a youthful and flirty cutie who keeps the conversation lighthearted; the Ghost, a bad boy with a cool attitude and a penchant for negging; the Curator, a polite but playful guide who shares thoughtful observations and insider info about the artist; and the Collector, a more privileged and polite companion who has a lot of institutional knowledge. The boyfriend guides the visitor from one location to the next in the exhibition, describing the work, sharing the artist's impetus to create it, and encouraging the visitor to put on the makeup and take a selfie. Depending on the visitor's choice to put on the makeup (during COVID-19, makeup use is limited based on public health protocols),

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the boyfriend compliments them or reassures them if they choose not to participate. Afterwards, the boyfriend shares brief statements on his "favorite" works by Kim, with in-video pop-ups linking to documentation of the projects mentioned. The experience ends with the boyfriend suggesting going together to a nearby café, complete with a recommendation of what to try. The whole process is one of feeling taken care of, paid attention to, and guided. Instead of feeling potentially insecure while listening to a docent's tour or not fully grasping academic wall text, the visitor can spend time in the space at their own pace, feel desired by their companion, and have fun.

This entire engagement is not unlike the typical relationships that boyfriend/girlfriend vloggers have with their followers. They upload videos that simulate dates or situations – eating dinner together, taking a walk in the park, or providing words of consolation when you've had a stressful day. While in-person dating often requires a constant awkward negotiation of both physical and social boundaries, dating an online avatar allows for more. The intimacy between these virtual companions and their followers is manifested in the imagination of the viewer, and followers are able to engage with whatever understanding of their virtual partner they choose. If they want to focus on their cheerful attitude instead of their cute outfits, that's fine. The pressure is off to accept the totality of the person while providing comfort in getting exactly what you need from a romantic avatar. For these reasons, the popularity of boyfriend/girlfriend vloggers has grown substantially, especially during COVID-19 when in-person dating poses real health risks. *#FANTASY*'s boyfriend tour guide plays into a certain type of desire – an unspoken need to be comforted in an uncomfortable space. The boyfriend is a cute co-viewer who might prompt you to learn more about the art, but he is delightfully void of the impersonal authority of the institution.

Beyond the flirty and fun boyfriend experience, there are elements that unintentionally address social codes of gender and sexuality in public space. In *#FANTASY*, there is no girlfriend option, so the visitor, no matter their sexual orientation, must spend time going on a date with a boyfriend. Furthermore, this date is on display – it's part of the art, it's on view in the gallery, and all visitors are essentially sharing in the same experience. Even though it is within the specific context of an exhibition, for male heteronormative visitors who may feel discomfort at being

labeled or regarded as gay, *#FANTASY* poses a seemingly innocent yet slightly subversive role-play of the boyfriend experience. Though it is not a direct commentary on sexuality and how it is rendered visible or invisible in public space, the project leaves open this possibility for encounters with heteronormative unease.

In many of her past projects, Kim has considered how to celebrate popular forms of dialogue and expression while also addressing the subtleties of social discomfort. In *the AGENDA Hair Salon* (2014-2016), the artist trained as a professional hairstylist in order to provide a space for political conversations to be embodied through one-on-one interactions. In exchange for a free haircut, participants discussed political topics with the artist, choosing the length of their trim to scale in relation to their level of agreement or disagreement with various current events. *UNBALANCE* (2019) created a 1980s/1990s roller-skating rink (a symbol of nostalgia for young adults in Korea) which only provided one shoe with actual roller skates. Participants could skate and listen to classic tunes, but their movements were always off-balance, reflecting the real-life uncertainties facing today's young generations.

Expanding on *#SELSTAR*, Kim staged a performance at the Nam June Paik Art Center in 2018, titled *Selfie-Upload*. The artist performed as an elevator attendant, outfitted in a mod retro uniform, and encouraged visitors to take selfies as they traveled between the museum's floors. An out-of-place interaction, the project prompted visitors to think about their impulses to photograph themselves, while also creating an environment to support photo snapping. As *#FANTASY*'s Curator boyfriend asks his companion: "People want to take selfies more and more. Should museums allow this? Should they not?" After a few pauses and sweet gazes into the camera, he advocates: "Let's make taking selfies a final part of the artwork itself!" Through this flirtatious conversation, visitors have a chance to consider, what else is part of the artwork? Is it themselves? *#FANTASY* prompts active engagements with one's own imagination, asking the visitor to think of their digital guide as a true boyfriend, and to relish in his charm and companionship. The imaginary space occupied by this one-on-one interaction harnesses the power of virtual intimacy for art-viewing, laying a playful digital stage for experiences of desire and closeness in an otherwise anti-social physical reality.

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