

Discovery of the [Queer] Minjung Tradition: The Sinchon Station IDAHOBIT Billboard Vandalism and Queer Korean Politics of Visibility

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Introduction

On the morning of August 2, 2020, a twenty-something man slashed through the faces of 517 South Korean LGBTQ+ individuals and allies with a utility knife. Granted that the said faces were printed portraits on canvas, the brutality of the act still resonated with all those involved. The slasher was unnamed by the few media outlets that followed up and reported on the incident. Despite this happening in the middle of Sinchon Station, one of the busiest metro stops in the city of Seoul and a mecca for youth culture and nightlife, not a single witness came forward.

In celebration of International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexism and Transphobia (“IDAHOBIT”) on May 17, a subway billboard proclaiming the ubiquity of sexual minorities in the everyday was commissioned at Sinchon Station. The seemingly simple and unthreatening message of the billboard “söngsosujanün tangshinüi ilsang sogé itsümnida” (“sexual minorities are among you in your daily

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lives”) was written out in a mosaic consisting of the 517 volunteer models’ portraits to numerically represent the date 5/17 (May 17). Only two days had passed since July 31, the day the billboard was first installed by Seoul Metro, when the canvas of the advertisement was shredded to tatters. According to publicly released portions of the police interview transcript, the arrested culprit responsible for the defacing was a self-alleged man of piety who admitted that his homophobic vandalism was motivated by religious beliefs. “I did it because I hate sexual minorities (for religious reasons).”¹



Figure 1. Vandalism of the IDAHOBIT billboard at Sinchon Station on August 2nd, 2020.²

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- 1 “성소수자 광고 훼손 용의자 ‘포스트잇은 나 아냐’” [“Suspect of the ‘Sexual Minority Advertisement’ Vandalism Says, ‘I Didn’t Touch the Post-its’”], *Donga*, August 3rd, 2020, <https://www.donga.com/news/Society/article/all/20200803/102276897/1>.
 - 2 김겨 (@isye0202). 2020. Twitter, August 2nd, 2020, 6:22 p.m. <https://twitter.com/isye0202/status/1289733171492188160>.]

The installation of the billboard itself was considered a feat in the South Korean LGBTQ+ community. Of course, the original plan was for the subway billboard to be installed in May, as discrepancy between the actual date of IDAHOBIIIT and that of the vandalism shows. Clearance from Seoul Metro was indefinitely delayed, however, on the grounds that the billboard's message was an "advertisement of opinions" with the possibilities of inciting social controversy and civil complaints.³ No additional comments were provided by Seoul Metro as to why the billboard was rejected in a majority ruling after a month-long committee review. Given the committee's charge in screening for the proposed billboards were, among other things, "uses of terms of discrimination, prejudice, or hate" as well as "expressions that encourage sexism or disparagement and hate"⁴ as grounds for disqualification, the irony said more than anything about the marginalized status of sexual minorities in South Korea. In other words, the very existence of queer subjects in contemporary Korea and its proclamation are controversial, politically charged, and disruptive. Furthermore, discrimination, prejudice, or hate against sexual minorities in South Korea is not institutionally legible. Eventually, the billboard was approved after arduous months of activist groups pushing back.

Immediately after the vandalism, concerned citizens mobilized by Rainbow Action, a South Korean LGBTQ+ organization coalition, came together to recreate the billboard's original message on-site, and

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- 3 Hee-jin Kim and Kyung-min Oh, "사회적으로 민감한 광고라서 불승인'...성소수자인권단체, 인권위에 진정" ["Disapproved Due to 'Socially Sensitive Subject'... Sexual Minorities' Human Rights Organization Presents the Case to National Human Rights Commission of the Republic Of Korea"], *Kyungghyang*, July 7th, 2020, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=202007071447001.
 - 4 Hee-jin Kim and Kyung-min Oh, "사회적으로 민감한 광고라서 불승인'...성소수자인권단체, 인권위에 진정" ["Disapproved Due to 'Socially Sensitive Subject'... Sexual Minorities' Human Rights Organization Presents the Case to National Human Rights Commission of the Republic Of Korea"], *Kyungghyang*, July 7th, 2020, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=202007071447001.

their medium of choice was sticky notes. While a replacement billboard was being printed, sticky notes were arranged over the temporary blank tarp pulled over the frame to shape out the Korean word for “sexual minorities” (“sōngsosuja”). Alongside the A4 prints of Rainbow Action’s issued statement and narrated accounts of the vandalism, solemn messages of solidarity and resistance were scribbled on each of the post-it memos. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, this humble assemblage of handwritten notes was torn off the following day on August 3, even before the new billboard could be installed. As interviewees of this project have attested, however, these series of events were catalytic to the emergence of what this paper will refer to as a ‘co-authored sacred queer space.’ In reaction to the series of vandalisms, a collective movement was spurred to make the IDAHOBIT billboard site at Sinchon Station a destination of pilgrimage for queer subjects and allies, and the pilgrims’ contributions to the wall resulted in the vibrantly queer space marked out by post-it notes, stickers, and all sorts of celebratory paraphernalia.

While the exact number of vandalistic incidents against the IDAHOBIT billboard varies according to journalistic sources, an estimated total is seven or eight times over the course of the month it was displayed. It was reported that the same culprit who had slashed the billboard on August 2 had ripped down the colorful wall of post-it notes multiple times in August. He admitted to defacing the newly replaced billboard with permanent markers and blue paint as well, saying that all his vandalisms were motivated by his enmity against sexual minorities.⁵ While the unidentified man was indicted for six out of seven vandalisms that occurred, an additional group of four men and women in their 20s and 30s were also investigated for ripping down

5 Jung-jin Kim, “훼손 또 훼손...인권위 지원 '성소수자 차별반대' 광고판의 수난” [“Vandalism After Vandalism...Disaster at the Anti-Discrimination Billboard Supported by the National Human Rights Commission of the Republic Of Korea”], *Yonhap*, August 14th, 2020, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20200814112300004>.

the first batch of sticky notes on August 3. The quartet of vandals explained that they “took down the notes while passing by Sinchon Station because it made the area look unclean.”⁶ All five culprits were investigated for charges of property damage and not hate crimes.



Figure 2. Vandalism of the IDAHOBIT billboard on August 3rd, 2020.⁷

At the time of the IDAHOBIT billboard’s vandalism, ten interviewees who had participated in posting sticky notes to the billboard site at Sinchon Station had been identified through voluntary response sampling and requested to participate in semi-structured interviews. All wished and agreed to be cited anonymously. Because of severe travel restrictions imposed due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, interviews of respondents and observations of the billboard site were conducted over Zoom and/or other forms of video-audio communication methods. Considering that the movement that emerged from the onset of vandalisms against the IDAHOBIT billboard did not cen-

6 Jung-jin, “훼손.”

7 무지개행동_rainbowaction (@rainbowactionkr). 2020. Twitter, August 3rd, 2020, 8:46 p.m. [https://twitter.com/rainbowactionkr/status/1290131801613058049.](https://twitter.com/rainbowactionkr/status/1290131801613058049)]

ter around a particular gender or sexual identity but called to action any individual who fit the umbrella term ‘sexual minority’ and their allies, the sample collected reflected this diversity in representation. The list of terms used by interviewees, when prompted to identify themselves in their own terms during introductions, includes but is not limited to: gay cisgender man, bisexual woman, male-to-female trans woman, fluid, non-identifying, demiboy, androsexual, and pansexual. My analysis of their answers to questions about their choice of medium and performative protest culture is informed and enriched by theories of social movements, performance, queer studies, fan studies, culture, and aesthetics. Emphasis was placed on identifying the historical model that this protest culture emulated as well as drew its authority and aesthetics from.

“Discovery” of the [Queer] Minjung Tradition

Without doubt, the installation of the IDAHBOIT billboard was an important landmark for queer visibility politics in South Korea. Readers and queer studies academics outside of Korea might find it perplexing that a simple sentence on a billboard caused commotion as such, with the abundance of queer-coded contents and queer representations in Korean popular culture. However, the course of events that transpired at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard demonstrates the often-overlooked friction between modes of representations in two domains: the “plastic representation”⁸ of specific demographics that serves as artificial visual signifier in popular media versus representation of minority demographics within legal, political spheres. The reaction of the Seoul Metro committee to an unadorned proclamation such as

8 Kristen J. Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation,” *Film Quarterly* Winter, Volume 71, Number 2 (2017), <https://filmquarterly.org/2017/12/04/in-the-time-of-plastic-representation/>.

“sexual minorities are among you in your daily lives” demonstrates how the South Korean public domain refuses legibility and the very existence of non-normative sexual minorities’ citizenship and civil rights. As the famously strategic rhetoric of self-proclaimed feminist and former human rights lawyer President Moon revealed, homosexuality had been exoticized and temporally framed as an issue that must be addressed indefinitely “later” as it is much too progressive an issue for modern Korea to confront, a controversial lifestyle that any proper politician should “not agree with.”⁹ Even as recently as 2022, the Seoul government had announced the unconstitutionality of the Seoul Queer Culture Festival Organizing Committee and their rejection to recognize the group as non-profit corporation. Due to the South Korean constitution’s definition of the right to marriage and family life on the basis of “the equality between the two sexes,” the Seoul government had refused the legal recognition of an organization that puts forward the equal treatment and rights of sexual minorities as its agenda.¹⁰ Queer visibility politics in South Korea strives to counter such structural and semantic suspension of the queer Korean subject within the political domain, and the collective action at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard is one of many creative strategies that were employed to this end.

The present essay is an attempt to theoretically engage with the significance of the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard’s short but impactful presence in terms of its aesthetics and historicity. Referring to

9 “성소수자 인권은 ‘나중에’? 문재인 페미니스트 선언 현장서 무슨 일이” [“Human Rights of Sexual Minorities Should Come ‘Later’? What Happened When Moon Proclaimed Himself a Feminist”], *Korea Times*, February 27th, 2017, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/201702171882636050>.

10 Hyung-chul Shin, “[단독] 퀴어축제조직위 법인 불허한 서울시...헌법에 어긋나” [Exclusive, Seoul Metropolitan Government Does Not Approve of Seoul Queer Culture Festival Organizing Committee as Non-Profit Corporation...‘Unconstitutional’], *Seoul Shinmun*, April 14th, 2022, <https://www.seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20220414500064>.

Raymond Williams' articulation of the "structure of feeling,"¹¹ I argue that the vandalism of the IDAHOBIT billboard was an event in contemporary South Korean history that brought to attention different vying aspects and components of local queer visibility politics: residual structures of the heteronormative public that have endured since the times of Cold War geopolitics; dominant theories of liberal queer visibility politics originating in the West; the emergent and more localized queer activist cultures that can, at the same time, articulate the on-going residual elements of the structure of feeling.¹² At first glance, the celebratory function of the billboard that commemorates internationalist visibility politics points readers to read the collective efforts made at Sinchon in vocabularies borrowed from Western-derived liberal politics. This paper offers an alternative reading that goes against the grain of Western-centric queer studies. The latter part of this piece will break down the complex intentions of collective authorship projected on to the billboard site and the locally centered sources of inspiration for the site's aesthetics. This section begins with conceptually engaging with the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard to place it within a more nation-specific heritage of the Korean people's leftist democratic movement.

Much has changed since Dong-jin Seo's articulation of the daunting challenge of writing about the indefinite object that is his own identity as a gay man, likening homosexuality as a "wispy phantom" and "a term without its own referent."¹³ And even before Seo's time, the struggle for survival and articulation of the non-normative queer subjectivity had been – to borrow Williams' terms – emergent.¹⁴ At the

11 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 123-25.

12 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 19.

13 Dong-jin Seo, "Mapping the Vicissitudes of Homosexual Identities in South Korea," trans. Mark Mueller, in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2001), 66.

14 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 123-25.

same time, even with the South Korean sexual minorities' "under-the-radar presence" based on self-oriented practices of intimacy that do not endanger them and their public personas bound by family, society, and nation,¹⁵ as Todd Henry described, the unruly subjects' desire for public visibility and legibility did simultaneously exist and surface, as evidenced by the incident at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard.

This article considers the possibility of placing this queer desire for public visibility within a broader history of Korea's radical left, the counterhegemonic masses otherwise known as *minjung*, or "those who are oppressed in the sociopolitical system but who are capable of rising up against it."¹⁶ Borrowing Robin Kelley's re-articulation of Cedric Robinson's political theory on the generations of Black intellectuals who delineated not *the* singular and definitive Black Radical Tradition, but rather, "discovered" the Black Radical Tradition through praxis,¹⁷ I similarly argue that the *minjung* tradition and its radical force come from its accretion over generations of collective actions and intelligence, able to be accessed by those who can discover its historical vein. As Sunyoung Park put it, "Rediscovering the leftist heritage of the *minjung* movement helps us now to balance the historical record, allowing a reevaluation of the movement that is not entirely held hostage to its nationalist excess."¹⁸ Taking Robinson's and Park's theoretical approaches seriously, I put into conversation the collective action

15 Todd A. Henry, "Queer Korea: Toward a Field of Engagement," in *Queer Korea*, ed. Todd A. Henry (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2020), 4.

16 Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), 5.

17 Robin Kelley, Foreword to *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, by Cedric J. Robinson, Revised and Updated Third Edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), xviii.

18 Sunyoung Park, *The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 374 (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Published by The Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10027900>, 274.

taken at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard with Sohl Lee's work on protest art – specifically, the *kōlgae kūrim* – and the narrow scopes of the narratives of *minjung* art established in the field.¹⁹ As Park suggests, if the *minjung* culture can be re-envisioned as a constellation of political, cultural, and social forces that goes beyond the often-invoked “alleged ethnonationalist and Marxist excesses” and masculinist ethos,²⁰ can queer visibility politics – often exoticized, effeminized, and relegated beyond consideration as vital component of nation-building efforts – be located within the traditions of Korean democratic counter-culture? If we consider Todd Henry's premise of Cold War geopolitics directly informing the vernacular languages and the local politics of non-normativity on the Korean peninsula,²¹ and the Cold War conditions and the self-disciplinary habits they produced subordinating queer individuals and communities to heteropatriarchal and gender-normative dictates,²² how can today's emergent countercultures that protest against the residual structures of Cold War geopolitics not be entangled in some way or form with the *minjung* culture that was historically ascendant in that era?

Not only does the incident at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard offer a more locally grounded perspective on queer Korean visibility politics while not completely disavowing South Korea's more-than-marginal position within the network of global queer activist cultures, sit-

19 Sohl Lee, “Exhibiting Minjung Art Abroad: Tokyo, New York, and Pyongyang in the Twilight of the Cold War,” in *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea*, ed. Sunyoung Park (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10027900>, 104.

20 Sunyoung Park, “Introduction,” in *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea*, ed. Sunyoung Park (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10027900>, 9.

21 Todd, *Queer Korea*, 7.

22 Todd, *Queer Korea*, 17.

uating it within the tapestry of *minjung* traditions initiates an intervention into the narrow scope of the *minjung* movement and *minjung* art that had been allocated to national history. Undoubtedly, the South Korean queer rights activists' attention to and attendance in the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia set the stage for the succession of events that led to the month-long collective actions at Sinchon Station. But as one participant present at the billboard site put it, the urgency of the queerphobic violence that occurred on-site is what triggered the co-authoring of the restored billboard as part of history. "Ironically, because the IDAHOBIT billboard was vandalized, it was able to be reborn as a space recreated by everyone and archived as a scene in the history of sexual minorities' human rights movement."²³ Even a statement by the Rainbow Action collective issued on August 3, 2020 refers to the "unintentional hot spot" that Sinchon Station had become, a space that "re-opened queer time" in continuation of the activist history the neighborhood is steeped in. Furthermore, the statement specifies that the activist collective's objectives include legal restructuring to include recognition of sexual minorities' rights as a protected clause via the institution of anti-discrimination laws.²⁴

23 Han-hee Ban, "3박 4일 동안 신촌역 광고판을 지킨 이유" ["Why They Guarded the Sinchon Station Billboard for 4 Days and 3 Nights"], *OhmyNews*, September 2nd, 2020, http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002672418.

24 "아이디aho 지하철역 광고 재게침에 부처 - 평등의 외침은 증오와 폭력을 이긴다" ["In Addendum to the Re-Installation of the IDAHOBIT Subway Billboard - Voice for Equality Defeats Hate and Violence"], Rainbow Action Against Sexual-Minority Discrimination of Korea, August 3, 2020, <https://lgbtqact.org/%EB%85%BC%ED%8F%89-%EC%95%84%EC%9D%B4%EB%8B%A4%ED%98%B8-%EC%A7%80%ED%95%98%EC%B2%A0%EC%97%AD-%EA%B4%91%EA%B3%A0-%EC%9E%AC%EA%B2%8C%EC%B2%A8%EC%97%90-%EB%B6%80%EC%B3%90-%ED%8F%89%EB%93%B1%EC%9D%98-%EC%99%B8%EC%B9%A8%EC%9D%80-%EC%A6%9D%EC%98%A4%EC%99%80-%ED%8F%AD%EB%A0%A5%EC%9D%84-%EC%9D%B4%E>

History reverberates here, the collective action at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard site resembling the production of visual images displayed in the public space that “responded to the urgency to accumulate, build, and express collective power” not in the logic of equal representation (i.e., the logic of horizontal distribution) but a culmination of counterhegemonic power (i.e., the logic of vertical energy) seen at the sites of *minjung* art.²⁵ And as Lee makes the distinction between Japanese and Korean models of protest banners, “the emphasis on history among Korean minjung artists envisioned the present conditions (hyönsil) as an entry point for resistance and the rewriting of history.”²⁶ The *minjung* tradition of site-specific protest art or hyönjang misul (art at the site), which included flags, posters, banners with slogans, and wearable objects like scarfs, in addition to the actual “poster” or the kölgae kŭrim continued on as well. Furthermore, kölgae kŭrim’s performative aspects of collective production that put to question any singular authorship for the art production were as important as its radical public viewing practice.²⁷ While the connotations of co-authoring practices and aesthetic inspirations will be further explored in the latter part of this essay, all interviewees confirmed the collective energy built from the accumulation of sticky notes as well as the assortment of paraphernalia left by visitors at the billboard site.

The *minjung* precedent of the public demonstration practice grounds our analysis to South Korean historicity and locality. The more general phenomenon of sticky notes emerging as newly popular medium of embodied protest²⁸ inside and outside of Korea can be understood, to

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25 Sohl, *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea*, 109.

26 Sohl, *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea*, 109.

27 Sohl, *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea*, 116.

28 Jeffrey S. Juris, “Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public

start, as a sort of appropriative practice with de Certeau's theories of the "procedures of everyday creativity" where people as active "users" reuse, utilize, and appropriate the urban space through a multitude of fragmentary "tactics."²⁹ I want to emphasize that although I previously identified aesthetics of the social movement as a crucial axis of analysis, the complexities of intentions that are projected onto the walls of sticky notes cannot be reduced to Western notions of 'art,' 'protest art,' or even 'artistic protest.' My methodology of not approaching a singular authorial figure and instead identifying and interviewing individual participants at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard had been partly inspired by scholars like Minna Valjakka who has, building on de Certeau as well as Edensor's discourses on "vernacular creativity" which foregrounds non-economic values and practices in urban spaces to question the dominating discourses of the creative city frameworks,³⁰ moved away from Western-derived concepts of alternative art and art collectives to describe creative co-authorship and open-ended processes of Hong Kong's Lennon Wall as "socially engaged creativity."³¹ The notion of authorship or individual expression that is deeply embedded in Western (and dominant) understandings of art inevitably disrupts our perception of collectivity that is definitively crucial in sticky notes protests. And even categorizing the co-authored queer space under the Western category of 'protest art' is limiting. As TV Reeds argued, protest art that employed radical aesthetics to attack established bounda-

Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2: 259-279.

29 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

30 Tim Edensor, Deborah Leslie, Steve Millington, and Norma Rantisiet, eds., *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy* (London: Routledge, 2010).

31 Minna Valjakka, "Co-Authoring the Space: The Initial Lennon Wall Hong Kong in 2014 as Socially Engaged Creativity," *Cultural Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2019.1698056.

ries and hierarchies of art involved moving the individual artist down from their pedestals, “denying the art object what Benjamin called its ‘aura,’ through such resolutely demystifying creations as Duchamp’s ready-mades.”³²

Later portions of this paper will demonstrate the exact opposite process occurring at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard site: the mundane place is transformed into a sacred space when identified by protesters as a site of struggle and mecca-like destination. Aura is, inversely, imbued into the co-authored space. The here-and-now-ism and the site-specific authenticity of the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard site is sourced locally. Turning to the historical *minjung* art movement, a distinctly Korean political and aesthetic avant-gardism, liberates us from the yokes of Benjaminian aesthetic theories. While all interviewees confirmed they first saw the vandalized IDAHOBIT billboard on social media posts, their answers indicated that the mechanically reproduced images served more as real-time flow of information that connected the participants in a community, while the “presence” of the actual protest site (“hyŏnjang”) and the ritualized performance of accumulating sticky notes distinguished the physical space from the online one. This aural presence of the protest site (“hyŏnjang”) is further elaborated by interviewees as a complex amalgamation of locally found aesthetic fan practices as well as the neighborhood Sinchon’s history as a venue for events that ushered modern Korea into a civil democracy. Thus, while theories on performative collective authorship such as Valjakka’s or Western-derived concepts of protest art may partially account for what occurred at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard, there is a much richer and fulfilling analysis to be made from locating the activities surrounding the billboard within the local traditions of *minjung* protest art.

32 TV Reed, “Protest as Artistic Expression,” in *Protest Cultures: A Companion*, eds. Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Martin Klimke, and Joachim Scharloth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 80.

The Making of a Sacred Queer Space: K-Pop Fan Behavior and Other Competing Models

When I first sat down to talk with the interviewees who had graciously volunteered their time for this research, I asked a question with a specific answer in mind: “What inspired you to use sticky notes? Can you name other specific cases where this practice draws inspiration from?” Sticky notes have been a vital medium of communication in South Korea in the past decade, particularly in times of national tragedies. Citizens’ appropriative use of public space to amplify emotions of condolences or demands for social justice has been a common practice, even if sticky notes had not yet entered the creative vernacular. As early as 2003, citizens were inscribing messages of solace on the black charred walls left behind the Daegu subway fire of February 18, an incident where an arsonist set fire to a train, killing 192 and injuring 151.³³ Sticky notes emerged as “ephemeral items in particular, created with spontaneity and emotion”³⁴ that represented and evoked the affective memory of citizens in moments of crises: the sinking of Sewol ferry in 2014, the Gangnam Station femicide in 2016, the death of a teenage subway worker at Guui Station in 2016. Similar overseas cases such as the Hong Kong Lennon Wall or the post-election ‘Subway Therapy’ sticky notes at New York’s Union Square subway station³⁵ likewise demonstrate the power of post-it notes as a medium of communication for social protest. The Lennon Wall had emerged again re-

33 Tae-woo Lim, “작은 종이 한 장의 힘...!포스트잇 추모! 물결의 이유” [“The Power of One Small Piece of Paper...Reason for the Waves of ‘Post-It Memorials’”], SBS News, June 2nd, 2016, https://news.sbs.co.kr/news/endPage.do?news_id=N1003605421.

34 Samantha Schmidt, “Post-Election ‘Subway Therapy’ Sticky Notes Taken Down – but Not Thrown Out,” *Washington Post*, December 19th, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/12/19/post-election-subway-therapy-sticky-notes-taken-down-but-not-thrown-out/>.

35 Samantha, “Post-Election.”

cently in the 2020 Thai protests as well, the students and youths involved in the movement writing their demands such as “welfare for the people should come from the government” on tiny squares of colorful paper to post in public spaces. Not limited by national borders, the medium of sticky notes as tools for site-specific co-authorship has become the symbol of political freedom, justice, and solidarity of the marginalized.³⁶

So, you can imagine my surprise when none of the interviewees cited these cases as their primary source of inspiration. Instead, the respondents indicated a practice even closer to popular culture and the vernacular everyday than the aforementioned examples: the hive-like mass of sticky notes left by adoring fans on subway walls, saturating the metro billboard advertisements commissioned for K-pop idols and celebrities for celebratory occasions such as their birthdays or album releases.

This popular fan practice has a powerful presence in the Korean public space, representative of the influence of the idol fandom that drastically transformed Seoul’s subterranean transportation scene. According to Seoul Metro’s statistics collected over three years from 2016 to 2019, the number of K-pop idol/celebrity-related subway billboards in South Korea increased from 76 to 2,166, demonstrating a 2,800% growth and currently taking up one-fifth of the entire subway billboard pie.³⁷ Seoul Metro explains that the presence of the billboard is understood as an index for the associated idol or celebrity’s popularity, so the competition among fans to be allocated a more accessible or popular billboard space is fierce.³⁸ The similar process of competition for

36 Young Yoo, “‘포스트잇’, 뉴욕과 서울에서 자유의 상징이 되다” [“Post-It Notes’ Become Symbol of Freedom in New York and Seoul”], November 26th, 2016, <http://www.newsm.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=6743>.

37 Ki-won Ok, “‘아이돌 팬덤’이 바꾼 서울지하철 풍경...제일 잘 나가는 그룹은?” [“Idol Fandoms’ Transform Seoul Metro Scene...Which Idol Group is the Best?”], April 7th, 2020, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/area/capital/935996.html>.

38 Ki-won, “‘아이돌 팬덤’이 바꾼 서울지하철 풍경.”

space as well as the swarm aesthetics of sticky notes and paraphernalia were cited by the interviewees as reasons for seeing this specific fan practice as their model.

Approaching the subject with this newfound perspective allowed clearer distinctions between the co-authored queer space of the IDAHOBIT billboard at Sinchon Station and earlier-cited cases of public spaces appropriated through sticky notes. When asked specifically about the differences between the IDAHOBIT billboard and some of the domestic cases of sticky notes activism, interviewees distinguished the function of the IDAHOBIT billboard space as a celebratory one. They did not see the billboard site as a place to mourn or to pay respect to the dead, and only a few interviewees commented on the metaphoric capacity of the queerphobic vandalism committed on the original billboard to stand in for literal death. In line with most of the interviewees, one respondent elucidated the reason for their movement's festivity by referring to its temporal specificity: "The most significant feature of the movement [in reaction to the vandalism of the IDAHOBIT billboard advertisement] back in August was the physical 'presence' of it. When the annual Seoul Queer Culture Festival moved online this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, solidarity in the offline space had to manifest elsewhere."

Indeed, the activities happening around the billboard space had begun to resemble aspects of the annual pride festival that took place around June. Interviewees recalled refreshments were brought and shared among activist volunteers who were on patrol duty for lurking vandals. Visitors who had taken the time out of their day to travel to the site as well as unknowing passerbys alike made themselves comfortable around the co-authored space, sharing pleasantries and their personal experiences of living as a queer person in Korea. Not limited to post-it notes, those making pilgrimages to the site attached all sorts of objects to the billboard, ranging from holographic stickers in every hue of the rainbow to even a floral bouquet. A respondent notes that they even saw a dance performance by a vaguely-identified "queer

dance team” at one point. Showing a drastic tonal transformation from the first batch of post-it notes that were put up on August 3, humorous and not-so-solemn messages punctuated the colorful inundation of paper squares. Next to handwritten memos that affirmed solidarity amongst the LGBTQ+ community and resistance against queer erasure such as “wherever we are, that is the agora [of democracy],” messages like “if you take this [sticky note] off, you will become a graduate student” (presumably left there by a then-suffering academic) playfully presented adversity to vandals.



Figure 3. Display of sticky notes and paraphernalia at the co-authored queer space in Sinchon.³⁹

39 무지개행동_rainbowaction (@rainbowactionkr). 2020. Twitter, August 31st, 2020, 9:10 p.m. <https://twitter.com/rainbowactionkr/status/1300284688771084288>.

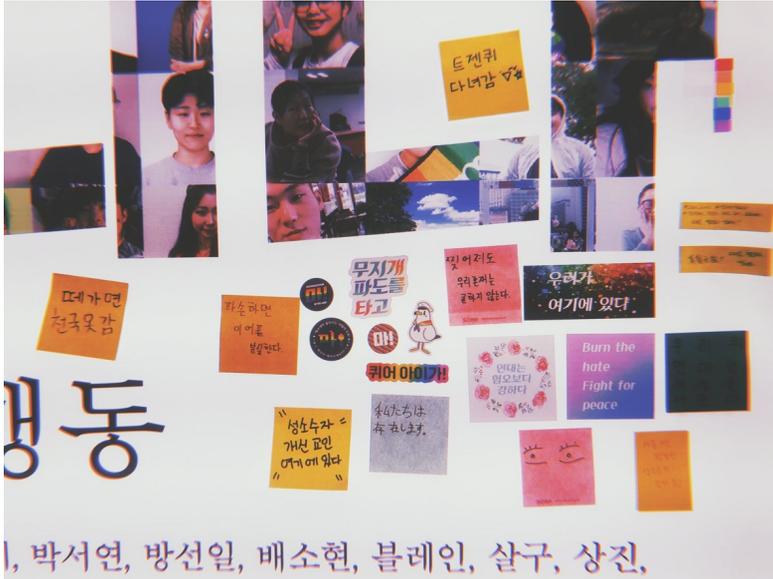


Figure 4. Close-up of sticky notes and stickers attached to the IDAHOBIT billboard.⁴⁰

As the transient queer space which emerged at Sinchon Station closely resembled that of a pride parade, I want to emphasize the more complex politics of place and space-making involved in its production. Early traditions of pride demonstrations in 1970 in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago captured a sense of misplacement through the act of locating itself in a public space that is distinctly ‘not gay.’ The function of pride demonstrations began during a phase when lesbians and gays were – quite literally – coming out in the streets to publicly celebrate LGBT life and culture and raise the demand for LGBT liberation, including the abolition of discriminatory laws.⁴¹ Location is

40 @young_light. 2020. Twitter, August 4th, 2020, 3:08 a.m. https://twitter.com/young_light/status/1290228071648223232.

41 Abby Peterson, “Introduction: Coming Out All Over,” in *Pride Parades and*

political, as Johnston and Waitt point out: “the politics of gay pride festivals and parades is always located; place matters.”⁴²

However, theorization based solely on the logic of Western-derived practices of pride demonstrations still provides only a partial account for the full panoramic range of affects and intentions projected on to the site of Sinchon Station, and more specifically, the neighborhood of Sinchon. Indeed, when asked about the significance of the choice of venue for the IDAHOBIT billboard, almost all interviewees responded that Sinchon’s locality afforded an unprecedented flow of non-queer-identifying populations into their co-authored space. But going further, interviewees identified Sinchon as a neighborhood steeped in the history of Korea’s leftist student activism, as well as one of the vital sites for local LGBTQ+ activism. More than just a central transit hub that could maximize exposure of LGBTQ+ presence, interviewees saw Sinchon as a space marked by the constantly crystalizing, emergent force of radical transformation in South Korea. That transformative energy is not a monolithic one. One interviewee elaborated on this point further to discuss not only the historical role of Yonsei University in Sinchon as a hub for collaborative inter-university student activism, but also the school’s role as host for one of Korea’s first queer culture festivals in the year 2000, following only a month after the first-ever “gay parade” in Daehak-ro.⁴³ Interviewees also discussed a more vernacular history of queer space making in Sinchon, citing examples

LGBT Movements: Political Participation in an International Comparative Perspective, eds. Abby Peterson, Mattias Wahlström, and Magnus Wennerhag (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.

42 Lynda Johnston and Gordon Waitt, “The Spatial Politics of Gay Pride Parades and Festivals: Emotional Activism,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Lesbian and Gay Activism*, eds. David Paternotte and Manon Tremblay (London: Routledge, 2015), 116-117.

43 “집단적으로 감행한 커밍아웃” [“Taking on Coming Out as a Collective”], September 20th, 2000, <http://legacy.www.hani.co.kr/section-021065000/2000/021065000200009200326030.html>.

such as the park in front of Sinchon Station where gays and lesbians met for cruising as well as socializing purposes, or anecdotal incidents that occurred during the pride parade of 2014 hosted in Sinchon.

Temporality and presence were cited by interviewees as crucial determinants to the development and expansion of the co-authored queer space. Temporality, aside from the timely factors of the pandemic and the digitalization of the Seoul Queer Culture Festival, was also referred to in terms of ‘expiration.’ Ephemerality of the billboard advertisement and the sticky notes was imperative in elevating the site of violence to its status as a destination for pilgrimage. When prompted to narrate their experiences of engaging with the billboard, interviewees responded that their visit to the physical IDAHBOIT billboard site was mostly spurred by online discourses of urgency. Threats of additional vandalism as well as the strict month-long duration contracted for the billboard encouraged the interviewees to make offline excursions to the co-authored queer space.

Contemporary Koreans’ performative ritual of attaching post-it notes or stickers in meaningful spaces has often been likened to and compared in degree of convenience to leaving ‘likes’ and comments in the digital space.⁴⁴ While interviewees were familiar with the analogy and were able to apply it to aforementioned cases of sticky notes’ usage in national tragedies and political causes, they also confirmed that they attributed more affective and symbolic significance to their being present at the physical location of the IDAHOBIT billboard. One respondent, while not wholly confirming the ‘artness’ of the sticky notes, even went on to quote Walter Benjamin and his concept of art’s un-reproducible “aura” to illustrate the essence⁴⁵ of his pilgrimage. The temporal and spatial presence of the co-authored queer space and its

44 Tae-woo Lim, “작은 종이 한 장의 힘.”

45 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 4.

unique existence was confirmed through contrast against its reproduced images online.

It is important to emphasize here what I call the ‘slipperiness’ of affects involved in space-making at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard. Jinsook Kim coined the term “sticky notes activism” to specifically refer to the use of sticky notes “as a means to express personal opinions, messages, and sentiments as well as solidarity with broader social and political movements”⁴⁶ in the aftermath of the Gangnam Station femicide case. Kim cites Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green to hone in on the “stickiness” of affect that distinguishes sticky notes activism, referring to the capacity of media to attract and hold individuals’ attention and engagement, often in contrast to the concept of “spreadability.”⁴⁷ While Kim’s conceptualization of “sticky notes activism” and “stickiness” describes “(1) material protest artifacts such as sticky notes, (2) an audience’s attention to and participation in a media text, and (3) the circulation and accumulation of affect,”⁴⁸ there is an additional affective dimension to what was happening at the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard that “stickiness” cannot quite grasp, the sort of urgency invoked in response to ephemeral material conditions that I want to describe as ‘slippery.’ Precisely because they could not be certain how long the sticky notes could stay intact or when the next vandalism would occur, interview respondents were determined to make offline voyages to the mecca-like destination that was the co-authored queer space at Sinchon. The aural presence of the site, as much as it was bound by the sticky affects that Kim elaborates, was predicated on its slippery status that reflects the material conditions in which queer Korean subjectivity was formed.

46 Jinsook Kim, "Sticky Activism: The Gangnam Station Murder Case and New Feminist Practices against Misogyny and Femicide," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 4 (2021): 41.

47 Jinsook, “Sticky”, 42.

48 Jinsook, “Sticky”, 42.

The co-authored queer space created at the IDAHOBIT billboard site makes a clear departure from the “temporary memorials”⁴⁹ Yeonho Lee conceptualizes, such as that found at the site of the 2016 Gangnam Station femicide. While the re-appropriated space of queer festivity at Sinchon Station is similarly reactionary in nature, the temporary memorial sites claimed by citizens which emerge in times of national crises are spaces dedicated to demands for social justice and mass mourning. In contrast, the IDAHOBIT billboard site was an exemplar of the manifestation of “socially engaged creativity” where multiple and more complex layers of affective responses and queer identities could be projected by the participating subjects.⁵⁰ While grief and frustration were expressed, as one interviewee pointed out, there was also relief in that no fatalities occurred. This was also accompanied by joy, humor, and festivity. In addition to the mosaic-like convergence of diverse identities under the umbrella term ‘sexual minority,’ diversified expressions of emotions and experiences were able to be projected on to the co-authored queer space at the IDABOHOBIT billboard site.

Returning to the specificity of the sticky note as medium, we can observe another dimension of poaching that allowed the site of the vandalized IDAHOBIT to be appropriated as a ‘sacred space.’ The celebratory subway billboards commissioned for K-pop idols and celebrities (which interviewees identified as their primary source of inspiration for using sticky notes and stickers as co-authoring tools) are conceptualized as “fan-made sacred places” and destinations for “fan pilgrimages”⁵¹ by Kyungjae Jang. Jang’s redefining of fans’ practices that

49 Yeonho Lee, “Temporary Memorials in Korea and Folk Religion: Focusing on the Cases of Gangnam and Guui Stations,” *The Journal of the Korean Association for the History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (2018): 9-36, DOI: http://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE07591081&language=ko_KR.

50 Minna Valjakka, “Co-Authoring the Space: The Initial Lennon Wall Hong Kong in 2014 as Socially Engaged Creativity,” *Cultural Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2019.1698056, 8.

51 Kyungjae Jang, “Creating the Sacred Places of Pop Culture in the Age of

create, authenticate, and maintain their sacred places via semi-religious activities echoes Lee's invocation of folk religion as a framework to understand engagement behavior of individuals in co-authored mass mourning sites. Lee argues that seeing through the lens of folk religion is crucial to understanding the participants' commitment and patterns of behaviors, as "the individuals who participate in and create such phenomenon [temporary memorials] cannot be expressed precisely simply with adjectives such as 'social,' 'political' or 'economical.'"⁵² While distinctions were made earlier between the celebratory function of the IDAHOBIT billboard site and that of mass mourning sites, this framework derived from studies of folk religion can be applied to understand participant behavior and motivation at the co-authored queer space at Sinchon Station. Sacred places of pilgrimage "may originate from religious beliefs, but the place visitors think has special meaning becomes a sacred place."⁵³ The aural presence of the billboard site that interviewees confirmed is relevant to this analysis of the site as taking on a shrine-like quality.

Aligning their behaviors to K-pop fans, activists have creatively poached the billboard site as a sort of a "fannish place," a space which is "identified through alterations to the site made by fan visitors like mementos, notes, graffiti and even permanently installed objects" and is defined by a "multiplicity of spatial significances."⁵⁴ The physical site of the "fannish place" is visible and accessible to non-fans as well, but the transcendental reality of this space can only be accessed by those who find the space significant. Transcendental realities are, according to Toy's understanding of pilgrims' sacred places, manifestations of

Mobility: Fan Pilgrimages and Authenticity Through Performance," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 18, no. 1 (2020): 42-57, DOI: 10.1080/14766825.2020.1707463.

52 Yeonho Lee, "Temporary."

53 Kyungjae Jang, "Creating."

54 J. Caroline Toy, "Constructing the Fannish Place: Ritual and Sacred Space in a Sherlock Fan Pilgrimage," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 254.

“intersections of reality and imagined worlds” and are “co-constructed and ritualized sites of interpretation that emphasize the agency and emotional attachments of fans.”⁵⁵ In these terms, the sacred space of the IDAHOBIT billboard sits at the intersection of Korean sexual minorities’ slippery material reality and their imagined world of publicly recognized queerness. “Sexual minorities are among you in your daily lives” – this simple yet powerful narrative, emboldened by a tradition of radical transformation discovered from time and space, gave life and aural presence to the sacred queer space at Sinchon Station, albeit for only one month.

Conclusion: The Carnavalesque and Ritualesque Culture of Queer Korean Visibility Politics

The month-long incident at the Sinchon Station IDAHOBIT billboard urges us to look beyond generic essentialisms or binaries that limit our understanding of its “carnavalesque”⁵⁶ nature. Public performances can signify many things at once, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, and the multiplicity of perspectives and affects projected onto the Sinchon IDAHOBIT billboard disrupts many of the assumptions that we impose on area-specific queer studies. Not only that, this perspective suggests that scholars can traverse and expand narrowly-defined, dominant narratives of national counterculture. If the concept of *minjung* in Korean public discourse, disparate fields of cultural productions, and the arts is associated with the counterhegemonic masses and “those who are oppressed in the sociopolitical system but who are capable of rising up against it” since the 1980s,⁵⁷ why has the history

55 Toy, “Constructing the Fannish Place.”

56 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, original work published 1965, 1984).

57 Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of*

of queer counterculture that renounced the very same sociopolitical system been excluded from this tradition? Have emergent queer activist cultures always been able to “discover” and access that residual vein of radical energy throughout history? In tandem with and not in mutually-exclusive relation to the carnivalesque, the “ritualesque” function of the performance at the Sinchon Station IDAHOBIT billboard demanded extra-ceremonial transformations.⁵⁸ As one participant on site put it, “Ironically, because the IDAHOBIT billboard was vandalized, it was able to be reborn as a space recreated by everyone and archived as a scene in the history of sexual minorities’ human rights movement.”⁵⁹ The shrine-like presence and function of the ‘sacred queer space’ went beyond making it a destination for “fan pilgrimages”⁶⁰ – the ritual-esque performance by the repressed collective communicated the need for social change. As one interviewee commented, “While traditional news outlets refused to report on this issue due to its association with sexual minorities, our collective action brought the billboard more attention than we could have ever imagined.”

The aim of this theoretical piece was to present readers with speculative questions than to draw a definitive conclusion, precisely because of the nature of the subject it describes. How is contemporary queer visibility politics in South Korea defined? How do activist prac-

Representation in South Korea (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), 5.

58 Jack Santino, “From Carnavalesque to Ritualesque: Public Ritual and the Theater of the Street,” in *Public Performances: Studies in the Carnavalesque and Ritualesque, Ritual, Festival, and Celebration*, Volume 4, ed. Jack Santino (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2017), 6.

59 Han-hee Ban, “3박 4일 동안 신촌역 광고판을 지킨 이유” [“Why They Guarded the Sinchon Station Billboard for 4 Days and 3 Nights”], *OhmyNews*, September 2nd, 2020, http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002672418.

60 Kyungjae Jang, “Creating the Sacred Places of Pop Culture in the Age of Mobility: Fan Pilgrimages and Authenticity Through Performance,” *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 18, no. 1 (2020): 42-57, DOI: 10.1080/14766825.2020.1707463.

tices that demand public recognition of queer Korean subjectivities co-exist with the “under-the-radar presence” based on self-oriented practices of intimacy⁶¹ without relying on Western-derived liberal political theories? At the same time, can the influences of internationalist LGBTQ+ visibility politics be entirely refuted? And does admitting to the significance of international and transnational cultures in shaping local queer visibility politics void any possibilities of situating the activist culture within the rich lineage of leftist democratic movements in Korea? The incident at the Sinchon Station IDAHOBIT billboard challenges researchers to broaden approaches and perspectives for research as well as to pay more careful attention to the complexity of political, social, and cultural forces from which South Korean queer civil society draws its energy from. Opening our eyes to the eclectic channels of inspirations across time and space will help us discover powerfully transformative traditions in history.

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〈Abstract〉

Discovery of the [Queer] Minjung Tradition: The Sinchon Station IDAHOBIT Billboard Vandalism and Queer Korean Politics of Visibility

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This theoretical piece discusses the Sinchon Station IDAHOBIT billboard vandalism case and the collective action that occurred in reaction to it in August 2020 to open more avenues and perspectives for studying queer visibility politics in South Korea. A Bakhtinian “carnival,” the culture of queer Korean visibility politics draws inspirations from many different sources, signifying multiple perspectives and affects that are often considered incompatible with one another. Through semi-structured interviews of individuals who participated in constructing the co-authored space of the IDAHOBIT billboard, this project parses out the eclecticism involved in the creative poaching of Sinchon Station that sources aesthetics and historicity from internationalist queer visibility politics, local traditions of Korean leftist democratic movements, K-pop fan practices, etc. A reconsideration of the Sinchon Station IDAHOBIT billboard as a site of complex intentions pushes us to (borrowing Cedric Robinson and Sunyoung Park’s words) “discover” the historical vein of radically transformative power through queer praxis.

Keywords: Korea, queer, minjung, minjung art, avant-garde, Cold War, protest culture, visibility politics, K-pop, carnival-
esque, affect, Sinchon Station IDAHOBIT billboard

〈국문초록〉

퀴어 민중 역사의 발견: 신촌역 국제성소수자혐오반대의날 (IDAHOBIT) 광고 훼손 사건 그리고 한국 성소수자의 정치적 가시화

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본 논문은 대한민국 성소수자의 정치적 가시화 연구를 위한 접근 방법과 관점의 다양화를 제안하며, 2020년 8월에 일어난 국제성소수자혐오반대의날 (IDAHOBIT) 광고 훼손 사건과 이에 대응한 공동행동에 대해 이론적 논의를 한다. 박진적 카니발로써, 한국 성소수자의 정치적 가시화를 도모하는 목적의 시위문화는 다양한 원천들로부터 영감을 얻을 뿐만 아니라, 흔히 공존할 수 없다고 단정되는 관점들과 정동을 동시다발적으로 표현한다. 본 연구는 신촌역 국제성소수자혐오반대의날 광고를 복원하는 과정에 참여한 시민들을 대상으로 반구조화 면접을 진행하였다. 이를 통해, 국제 성소수자 정치적 가시화 시위 운동, 한국 좌익 민중항쟁의 전통, 케이팝 팬덤 관행 등 신촌역에서 일어난 공공장소의 창의적 밀렵 행동이 미적 정서와 역사적 권위를 끌어낸 영감의 원천들을 식별한다. 국제성소수자혐오반대의날 광고 현장을 이룬 복잡한 정동의 결정체로 재고함으로써, 학계로부터 기존 혁명의 역사를 퀴어적 프락시스에서 (세드릭 로빈슨과 박선영 저자의 말을 빌리자면) “발견”하기를 촉구한다.

주제어: 한국, 퀴어, 민중, 민중미술, 아방가르드, 냉전, 시위문화, 정치적 가시화, 케이팝, 카니발레스크, 정동, 신촌역 아이다호 광고