



Copy-Makers, Craftsmen, and the Art Tech Group: A Critical Historiography of Collective Technical Artistry

Gyung Jin SHIN

Abstract

This study reexamines the relationship among art, technics, and collective practice in Korean art history, proposing a new historiographical framework grounded in the concept of giye 技藝, or “technics-art.” By tracing a longue durée genealogy from premodern copy-makers and craftsmen to late 20th-century experimental groups such as the Art Tech Group, this study reveals how collective technical artistry has persistently shaped Korean aesthetic and cultural production. It argues that practices traditionally dismissed as technical or mechanical embody an alternative epistemology in which art and technics are mutually constitutive, reflecting the relational worldview of Korean cosmotechnics. Premodern practices such as copy-making and apprenticeship sustained networks of embodied and collective knowledge, which later rearticulated through 1990s media experiments that reconceived collaboration and technics within digital contexts. Through the lens of cosmotechnics, the trajectories explored in this study reveal collective technical artistry not as stages in a linear modernization but as recurring reconfigurations of collective making in which human, material, and technical processes intertwine. This study thus challenges Eurocentric and individualist art histories and situates Korean art within a broader philosophical discourse that understands technics as a living, collective practice in the postdigital horizon.

Keywords: giye, technics-art, art and technology, cosmotechnics, collective technical activity, copy-makers, craftsmen, Art Tech Group

This article is a substantially revised and developed version of a portion of the author's PhD dissertation, completed in June 2022.

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Introduction

In recent years, Korean contemporary art has increasingly embraced collaboration and participation, evident in community-based projects, pedagogical initiatives, and large-scale media installations. These initiatives challenge the long-standing emphasis on individual authorship that has shaped the dominant paradigms of modern art. The expansion of digital networks and the popularization of digital devices have further accelerated this shift, producing new forms of collective authorship that involve large, often anonymous groups and blur online-offline boundaries. Yet despite these developments, the historiography of Korean art has yet to provide a robust analysis of technologically mediated or collectively produced practices. Existing accounts tend to marginalize creation facilitated by technology and to focus, particularly in the case of media art, on image-based works such as video art, while overlooking other technical or process-oriented activities (G. Shin 2024, 453). Consequently, many practices that do not fit within conventional aesthetic or disciplinary categories remain unexamined, limiting our understanding of the diverse modes of collective creativity emerging in Korea's postdigital landscape.

To address these gaps, this study rethinks the relationship among art, technology, and collective practice to propose a new historiographical framework for understanding Korean art. Employing a *longue durée*¹ perspective inspired by the French Annales school of history, it traces the history of collective technical artistry—from premodern copy-makers and craftsmen to modern experimental groups such as the Art Tech Group—thereby revealing how art, technics, and collectivity have continually

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1. The *longue durée* approach of the French Annales school emphasizes that, to understand historical developments, it is necessary to analyze their temporal and geographic scales as well as the changes at their centers and peripheries. Since relevant scales are not always self-evident, historians must continually compare temporal and spatial frameworks. For foundational discussions on this approach, see Fernand Braudel ([1958] 1980) and Kenneth Ames (1991). Adhering to this principle, this study examines over three millennia of Korean art history to achieve a longitudinal perspective that transcends the limitations of a more narrowly focused temporal analysis.

intersected in different contexts. It situates collective technical artistry within broader philosophical debates on *technicity* and *cosmotechnics*. Rather than constructing a linear genealogy, it explores how collective making in Korea has repeatedly reconfigured the relation between art and technics across changing historical conditions.

Re-envisioning the Relationship among Art, Technology, and Collectivity

In the history of Korean art, collective technical activities have been doubly marginalized. On the one hand, collaborative production has received less scholarly attention than individual creation, largely due to the enduring Romantic paradigm that locates aesthetic value in the singular expression of an artist's interiority. On the other hand, the technical underpinnings of artistic form have been obscured by a dual conceptual pressure: traditional East Asian ideologies that prioritized metaphysical intent over material execution and a Western philosophical lineage that has long failed to regard technics as a legitimate object of inquiry, treating it instead as a mere instrument secondary to the conceptual realm. Addressing collective technical activity in Korean art, therefore, necessitates a critical re-evaluation of the historical nexus between collective making and technics. The following discussion seeks to reframe Korean art historiography by exploring alternative epistemologies of collectivity and technicity.

Defining Collectivity in Korean Art

The notion of group creation cannot be reduced to collaboration, for perceptions of collaboration depend on how collectivity itself is defined. In the modern era, the dominant approach to Korean historiography has been to associate collective identity with the concept of *nation*. This approach is based on the premise that Koreans belong to a single ethnic group, called *Han-minjok*, which has maintained its kinship identity for over 5,000 years on the Korean Peninsula. This historical perspective, frequently termed

nationalist historiography,² emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and has developed as part of an effort to transcend Confucian and Japanese colonial historiography, especially following the liberation of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 (Han 1992; S. Shin 2018). This pattern is often observed in Asian countries that experienced decolonization in the 1940s and 1950s, where nationalist agendas served to erase the vestiges of foreign rule in the process of modernization (Kwok 2006). Following the formal division of Korea after the armistice in 1953, Korean nationalism rooted in a single ethnicity has played a pivotal role in the political rhetoric of both the North and South, particularly as an essential basis for reunification and domestic legitimacy (Seo-Hyun Park 2019).

The historiography of Korean art largely paralleled this perspective, particularly through discourses on *Koreanness*. The theoretical roots of this discourse can be traced back to Japanese critics such as Yanagi Muneyoshi during the colonial period, who identified the essence of Korean art through concepts like the “beauty of sadness,” “local color,” and the “beauty of whiteness” (Seok-Tae Park 2004). Korean theorists and art historians continued to adopt and reproduce these perspectives uncritically for decades following independence (Seok-Tae Park 2004, 259). In the 1960s and 1970s, the military regime further institutionalized this ethnic-centered nationalist discourse through cultural policies that emphasized a singular national identity (G. Shin 2020).

Concurrently, a trend toward a class-centered understanding of collectivity in Korean art also emerged. From this perspective, the central issue is the dichotomy between those who serve the dominant class and those who align with the marginalized. Court and literati painters represented the art of the elite, functioning as the primary artistic groups from the premodern era. Court painters were professionals commissioned by royal offices to produce portraits and documentary paintings, while literati painters were scholar-officials who practiced painting alongside calligraphy and poetry as a form of self-cultivation. In contrast, the art of the

2. Nationalism, which can be defined in various ways, means, in short, granting the privilege of collectivity to a specific ethnic group equated with a political unit. See Kwok (2006).

working classes encompasses the 19th-century folk paintings known as *minhwa*, the proletarian art of the 1920s (e.g., the Korea Artista Proleta Federacio, or KAPF), and the People's Art, or Minjung art, of the 1980s.

While these established frameworks have been foundational to the study of Korean art, their preoccupation with macro-level national and social identities has often obscured more nuanced forms of collective practice. This study seeks to recover creative activities sidelined by these dominant narratives, proposing an alternative historiography that attends to the multifaceted dimensions of collective making. I investigate this notion of collectiveness through the lens of *technics*—a concept I define in detail below. In premodern Korea, *technics* was inextricably linked to art and rooted in communal modes of production. This expanded conceptualization of *technics* allows for a re-evaluation of artistic practices that emerged alongside the influx of modern technology from the 1960s to the 1980s. To ground the subsequent analysis of collective technical artistry, I first examine the conceptual trajectory of *technics* and *technology* within Korean artistic and philosophical traditions.

Giye 技藝: *Rethinking the Relationship between Art and Technics*

The term “technology” is the product of a radical turn in European modernization, closely tied to the concept of automation (Hui 2016). The word for technology in Northeast Asian countries—*gisul* in Korean, *jishu* 技術 in Chinese, and *gijutsu* in Japanese—is a neologism created to translate the Western concept. I instead use the broader term *technics* to denote “all forms of making and practice” (Hui 2016, 4), encompassing technologies, techniques, and technical activities across times and regions. Of course, most translations between Korean or non-European languages and English are only approximate owing to the subtle connotations of language. Hui points out that this imprecision indicates that *technics* is not a universal concept; he argues that the widespread misconception of technology and science as a universal “remains a huge obstacle to understanding the global technological condition in general, and in particular the challenge it poses to non-European cultures” (Hui 2016, 12). For Hui, *technics* involves both

necessity and contingency and unfolds in distinct ways within specific cultures. Consequently, technics should be understood as a philosophical subject emerging from a given region, which is why Hui proposes the term “cosmotechnics.”

The present task, therefore, is to discern the cosmotechnics specific to Korea, particularly regarding the ways of thinking about, using, and managing collective artistic creation. In East Asia, prior to the influence of Western modernization, technics was understood through a perspective rooted in Eastern philosophy (Hui 2016, 35). Ancient Korean terms related to technics include *gi* 技 (technique or skill), *gi* 器 (tool or piece of technology), *gi* 機 (machine or mechanism), *gye* 械 (tool or instrument), and *gong* 工 (craft, skill, or labor). Each of these terms encompasses a distinct semantic range and served specific purposes. Hui traces Chinese cosmotechnics to the dynamic relationship between *qi* 器 (*gi* in Korean) and *dao* 道 (*do* in Korean). The former signifies a “tool” or “container” or, in a more metaphysical sense, a vessel that can contain *dao*—the “Way” or “principle.”

I begin by introducing the concept of *gi* (again, 技, ‘skill’ or ‘technique’). While Yuk Hui’s cosmotechnics largely builds on the notion of *qi* 器, this study focuses on *gi* 技 as the embodied and collective dimension of *technē* that precedes technological instrumentality.³ In this sense, technics is understood not as material fabrication but as an immaterial and performative knowledge underlying collective artistic practice. Building on the genealogy of philosophical reflections on technics—from Heidegger’s disclosure of *technē* to Simondon’s theory of technical individuation and Stiegler’s notion of technics as the exteriorization of collective memory—this study asserts that technics as *gi* 技 offers a cultural and philosophical ground for understanding collective making in Korean art, moving beyond the machine-oriented ontology of modern technology.

Gi has frequently been discussed in the context of Korean art. An account of its derivation provides a useful framework for interpreting the concepts of art and technics from ancient times through the Middle Ages.

3. The concept of *technē*, often translated as either *art* or *craft*, refers to the human ability to make and perform. It serves as a useful cross-cultural parallel to *gi* in this discussion.

The frequent association of *gi* with art—prior to the introduction of the Western concept of “modern art” mediated by Japanese colonialism—suggests that premodern Korean cosmotechnics recognized the inherent intersection of art and technics. Thus, *gi* has been understood as an indispensable element of art that determines its quality. When combined with *ye* 藝 (signifying art, skill, and knowledge), *gi* forms the word *giye* 技藝, signifying mastery, high artistry, and, more broadly, technical achievement in any field. In this paper, *giye* is referred to as “technics-art” to underscore the inseparable relationship between these concepts in Korean thought.

The deep-rooted influence of Confucian values fostered the view that *gi* 技 is inferior to *do*, leading to the marginalization of technical artistry throughout much of premodern Korean history. In East Asian philosophies, including Confucianism and Daoism, *do/dao* refers to the guiding “way” or “principle”—the cosmic order discerned intuitively as the ultimate source of wisdom (Zai 2015). Within this framework, *gi* is rendered subordinate to the independent, autonomous, and sacred *do* (Jo 2014, 293).⁴ Furthermore, in the arts, activities associated with *gi*, such as ceramics and handicrafts, were deemed inferior to literati painting or calligraphy, which were perceived as being closer to *do* (Jo 2014). This hierarchy, solidified by Confucian orthodoxy, reinforced the long-standing marginalization of technics in Korean artistic traditions.

Such marginalization persisted into modern and contemporary art, where the manual and collective dimensions of making were often regarded as secondary to conceptual or aesthetic concerns. In the case of media art introduced in the 1960s, activities involving *gi* (器 and 技)—encompassing both technical apparatus and embodied skill—were frequently dismissed as merely mechanical or industrial.⁵ Nevertheless, the experimental approaches

4. “Confucianism fundamentally regards *gi* and *giye* as belonging to a lower dimension compared with *do*, the way, or *deok*, virtue. However, depending on the context, if *gi* or *giye* can embody or express *do* and *deok*, it is acknowledged that *gi* or *giye* can potentially become *do* themselves” (Jo 2014, 293).

5. Artistic activities requiring technical expertise, such as programming and physical computing, have been regarded as industrial production methods and marginalized, even within the context of media art. This tendency has been observable in large exhibitions

of Korean artists reveal a continuity of the *giye* tradition of collective making. Examining these practices will illuminate how technics serves as a shared ground between premodern craftsmanship and contemporary technological art in Korea. This study examines three key cases: (1) premodern copy-makers and (2) craftsmen, who embodied collective *gi* in their practice, and (3) the Art Tech Group of the 1990s, whose collaborative use of modern technology reactivated *gi*-based collectivity within new social and technological contexts.

Historical Cases of Collective Technical Activities

Copy-Makers: Technics as Shared Embodiment

“Copy-making” (*mosa* 摹寫 in Korean) refers to a method of reproducing paintings or calligraphy and was a fundamental requirement in the Northeast Asian artistic tradition. The traditional pedagogical system was categorized into imitative copying, tracing, and stylistic emulation; among these, *mosa* (tracing/reproduction) demanded the precision required to replicate not only the visual image but also the inner spirit of the original artist (C. Park 2003). These traditions are widely observed across Northeast Asian countries, including Korea, China, and Japan. This methodology served to train students in diverse techniques, evaluate artistic proficiency, facilitate the circulation of images over distances, and enable large-scale production (Kho 2019). Although a significant portion of premodern Korean calligraphy and painting was produced and transmitted through copies, these works have largely been marginalized in Korean art historiography. They have even been dismissed as forgeries when judged by modern standards that prioritize originality and individual authorship. Given that paradigms of artistic creation shift over time, it is imperative to

dealing with Korean media art, including *The Future is Now!* at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in 2013 and the MMCA's 2019 exhibition about Korean media art history (G. Shin 2024).

analyze the activities of copy-makers based on contemporaneous records and perspectives that recognize the collective and processual nature of their technical practices.

1) A Distinct Paradigm for Art: The Embodiment of Technics

The artistic paradigm represented by copy-making differs markedly from modern conceptions of art. Records from the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) demonstrate that both copied works and their creators received formal institutional recognition. Consequently, copy-making was a primary responsibility of court painters and was regarded as a standard, legitimate practice—analogue to the ubiquity of photocopying or digital photography today. No legal or moral sanctions impeded the production or possession of official copies. On the contrary, the preservation and transmission of royal portraits and images of eminent literati-scholars were ensured through official state ceremonies specifically organized for the creation of copies. Furthermore, when high-demand original works could not be physically transported, the production of copies served as a vital mechanism for the spatial dissemination of the image (Kho 2019, 45–53).

The mastery of technique (or *gi*), achieved through embodying the details of earlier works rather than creating entirely new ones, lay at the core of copy-making. Such a conception of art emerged within a milieu where individual creativity was not the sole criterion of value (Kho 2019, 65). While these ideals were deeply rooted in literati tradition of emulating masters, this perspective also resonates with key tenets of Daoist thought. In Confucianism, *gi* was generally seen as subordinate to *do*, whereas Zhuangzi 莊子⁶ envisioned an organic continuity between the two (Jo 2014, 298).⁷ In the “Fable of Cook Ding Butchering a Cow” (庖丁解牛寓言), Zhuangzi argued that *gi* can reach the level of *do* when, through long-term training, it transcends mere technical skill. In other words, the accumulation of

6. Zhuangzi, or “Master Zhuang,” was active in the late 4th century BCE.

7. “Among the various discussions concerning *do* and *gi*, the most positive view of *gi* can be found in the writings of Zhuangzi” (Jo 2014, 298).

craftsmanship can elevate *gi* to the realm of *do* (Jo 2014, 300). Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), who inherited this Daoist lineage, further argued that mastery in any field could become equivalent to *do* (Jo 2014, 304). Although Confucianism remained the dominant ideological foundation of artistic production throughout the Joseon period, Daoist ideas provided a crucial framework for valuing the continuous relationship between *do* and *gi*.

Of course, some argue that *do* in Daoism should not be associated with art, based on the belief that the pursuit of the ethical virtues associated with nature is inconsistent with human creativity. In Eastern art, however, the pursuit of *do* had long been both the primary purpose of art and the criterion for its evaluation; thus, outstanding achievements in literati painting and calligraphy were often praised with the statement that they “reached *do*” (Jo 2014, 291).⁸ The concept of technics-art represents the achievement of such a state, where the mastery of *gi*, internalized through repetitive training, reaches the level of high art—a state in which technique is fully embodied and becomes inseparable from the artist’s body.

Certain examples suggest that copy-makers shared not only images but also specific aspects of technics-art across time and space; in doing so, they disseminated and transformed technical and aesthetic elements associated with original works. For instance, the hawk painting (Fig. 1) attributed to Emperor Huizong (r. 1100–1126), the 8th ruler of China’s Northern Song dynasty, was repeatedly reinterpreted by East Asian painters—including those from Korea, China, and Japan—particularly during the 16th and 17th centuries (Kho 2013). Given that the existence of an original hawk painting by Huizong remains uncertain and written records only emerged after the 16th century (Kho 2013, 134), most extant versions are likely copies. These variants proliferated across East Asia over the centuries: some were stamped with apocryphal seals identifying Huizong as the artist, while others, produced by later or anonymous hands, retained his motifs while

8. Indeed, in literati painting or calligraphy, acquiring detailed techniques and vocabulary with the artist’s own body and internalizing them were considered an important process of reaching *do*, that is, completing a great work.



Figure 1. Huizong, *Hwajo* (Flowers and a Bird), 1120, 115.5 × 67.8 cm, traditionally attributed to Huizong

Source: Taiwan National Palace Museum.

gradually evolving in technique and composition.⁹ These iterations suggest that the act of copying functioned as a shared artistic practice through which technical knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities were transmitted across borders and subtly reshaped over time.

Viewed from the standpoint of collective agency, these works reveal how images and techniques were shared and reinterpreted across vast spans of time and space, transcending conventional concerns with authenticity. Copying, in this sense, operated as a collective technical practice responding to diverse social and artistic demands. Historical sources from China and

9. Detailed accounts of the patterns of replication and derivation that occurred in Asia can be found in Kho (2013).

Joseon record that the enduring popularity of paintings attributed to Huizong was partly due to their recognized shamanistic and ritual functions (Kho 2013, 142–148).¹⁰ Much like oral traditions transmitted from one performer to another with little regard for individual authorship, these images circulated across centuries, sustaining and transforming their meanings through repetitive iteration. Consequently, the premodern Korean artistic milieu functioned as a space for collective participation in technics-art, allowing inherited traditions to be vibrantly reinterpreted and experienced by the broader community.

2) Painting Manuals and the Democratization of Technics-Art

The technics-art of copy-making was further systematized and reinforced with the emergence of painting manuals, known as *hwabo* in Korean. Specifically, these were mass-produced compendiums of Southern School literati landscape paintings that gained immense popularity during the late Joseon period (1637–1897). These manuals treated individual images as semiotic modules, organizing them in a systematic, encyclopedic manner (Fig. 2). Painters could select and arrange these modules to convey specific meanings; the repetition and circulation of these motifs across various works endowed each image with specific semantic values contingent upon its compositional and thematic context. Such a mechanism represents not a spontaneous emotional expression, but an intentional and systematized form of knowledge-based creativity. In this framework, painting operates as a cognitive and technical practice deeply embedded within a shared cultural system (H. Oh 2016, 78).

The prevalence of painting manuals in the 18th and 19th centuries is closely linked to the erosion of the ruling class's monopoly over the technics-art of painting. While copy-making had previously been centered on the

10. "According to Chinese and Joseon literary records, the reason for the circulation of Emperor Huizong's hawk paintings was the recognition of their shamanistic function. Based on this context, it can be understood that charms featuring hawks were produced" (Kho 2013, 131).



Figure 2. *Inmulokubo* 人物屋宇譜 (Manual of Figures and Houses), *Gaejajon hwajeon* 芥子園畫傳 (Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden)

Source: Waseda University Database of Japanese and Chinese Classics.

restoration or reproduction of royal portraits and elite imagery for state distribution, these manuals catered to the cultural aspirations of the common people by democratizing artistic techniques.¹¹ This phenomenon reflected broader shifts in the social hierarchy and the development of a commodity-money economy in late Joseon society. Through its modular system, copy-making addressed both the burgeoning mass demand for visual culture and the desire for the stylistic refinement traditionally reserved for high art, thereby integrating the technics-art of painting into the cultural life of the broader public.

11. Similarly, during this period, folk paintings (*minhwa*) by anonymous artists were widely produced for utilitarian and decorative purposes.

The collective subjectivity embodied by copy-makers offers a profound insight into the interplay between art, technics, and the social fabric. Their works addressed social needs and common cultural aspirations rather than reinforcing elite monopolies over artistic scarcity—standing in stark contrast to the modern valorization of individuality, authenticity, and artistic singularity.

Craftsmen: Apprenticeship and the Knowledge Chain

The term “craftsman”—*jangin* 匠人 or *gongjang* 工匠 in Korean—describes those who have mastered a specific handicraft technique. Most of the artworks produced in ancient and medieval Korea can be classified as handicrafts. However, they have been underappreciated in Korean art history, mainly because handicrafts were viewed as practical objects for public use rather than as expressions of individual creativity (Young-hee Lee 2004). In addition, the scarcity of records reflects their association with low social status and collective production (Ock 2009). It was not until the 2000s that large numbers of relevant documents were discovered, making full-scale research possible (Jang 2015).

The marginalization of craftsmen in Korean art history also stems from the premodern ideology that regarded *gi* as lowly. By the Unified Silla period (676–935), the state had already begun taking measures to ensure that appropriately skilled craftsmen were available, and the work of such craftsmen remained valued through the subsequent Goryeo dynasty (918–1392). The situation changed with the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). Occupations associated with *gi*, including craftsmen, were often relegated to the lowest social levels, frequently equated with the *nobi* class. These workers did not sign their works, and no written records were kept of them (Ock 2009, 71).

1) Family-like Apprenticeship and the Knowledge of Craftsmen

In 1434, the state recognized that granting craftsmen greater freedom was essential to improving the quality of handicrafts, which had declined due to

rigid bureaucratic control and forced labor. During the mid-Joseon period (1506–1637), craftsmen began to gain some autonomy from state control, allowing for greater artistic expression and improved social standing. Work efficiency, devotion, and the overall quality of production gradually improved as artisans were increasingly drawn from the *yangin* 良人 (commoner) class, who enjoyed higher legal status.¹² Accordingly, the number of private artisans, or *sajang* 私匠, began to grow; by the 18th century, most handicrafts were produced by private artisans in workshops throughout Seoul (B. Kwon 1995).

Thereafter, Korean craftsmen began to develop a distinct culture and community, including a formalized system of apprenticeship. Private artisans established procedures for transferring and teaching their technical skills and artistry, a system comparable to the trade guilds of medieval Europe. However, while European guilds imposed strict legal restrictions on the number of apprentices, the length of training, and succession, apprenticeship in premodern Korea was deeply integrated with family-like relationships (W. Lee 1974). Under this arrangement, an apprentice mastered a specific technics-art by sharing every aspect of their master's life over many years. Until the mid-Joseon period, skills were primarily transmitted privately through family lines without standardized training or accreditation (W. Lee 1974). It was only during the late Joseon (1637–1897) that rising social demand for handicrafts fostered a more structured apprenticeship culture, where unrelated apprentices would join a master's household at an early age for years of intensive training.¹³

This family-oriented apprenticeship reflected the unique nature of craftsmen's knowledge: embodied, technical, and cognitive layers were inseparably interwoven within an organic continuum. Although few detailed records of apprenticeships involving private artisans survive from the Joseon

12. *Yangin* 良人 was a term in the Joseon dynasty that collectively referred to all classes except for *cheonmin* 賤民, who were slaves 奴婢. It encompassed *yangban* 兩班, *jungin* 中人, and *sangmin* 常民, the common people.

13. The records of the metal manufacturing industry in the late Joseon period, for example, show that artisans learned from artisans to whom they were not related over a long time. See Lee Won-ho (1974).

period, recent ethnographic studies provide insight into the education received through these traditional practices (Ahn 2009; Chang and Chang 2013; Jae-Ho Kim 2015; M. Kwon and Sohn 2018; Seo 2017). According to a study of Korean *onggi* pottery by Jae-Ho Kim (2015), the knowledge of craftsmen—acquired through long-term, informal apprenticeship—was not easily externalized or systematized:

From the preparation of raw material to the complete products, the techniques and traditional knowledge involved in the process of manufacturing pottery are closely connected, employing numerous categories and levels. Such an aspect can be referred to as a “techniques chain.” Here the *techniques* mean not only the scientific *techniques* but also, in addition to the *skills*, the knowledge of various *techniques* and levels including habitual, unconscious behaviors of potters. (Jae-Ho Kim 2015, 157; emphasis in original)

In other words, the knowledge of a craftsman consists of bodily techniques, empirical methods, skills, and ethno-scientific understanding, all of which operate inseparably and sequentially in what Kim terms a “techniques chain.”

In another study of apprenticeship, Seo (2017) argues that knowledge is effectively transmitted through apprenticeship because it constitutes a “total experience” indistinguishable from the life and body of the master. From this perspective, craftsmen’s knowledge embodies both technical skill and spirit, transcending mere manual dexterity (77). In turn, masters transmitted their comprehensive experiential knowledge by cultivating in apprentices the capacity for autonomous reasoning and situational problem-solving (67).

In sum, the *technics-art* of these craftsmen was internalized through repeated practice, embodying their life experience and rendering art and life inseparable. Their know-how—interlinking epistemic understanding, material instruments, embodied practice, and modes of living in a continuous cycle of making—was rooted in an Eastern organic mode of thought. According to Hui (2016, 169), East Asian conceptions of technics,

grounded in an organic epistemology that privileges process and relationality over mechanism, diverge fundamentally from the mechanistic paradigm of European modernity. The organic dimension of craftsmen's knowledge and pedagogical practice must therefore be interpreted within this broader East Asian epistemological framework, which conceives technics as an extension of lived experience. This organic linkage of technics-art, however, began to transform in the late Joseon period as new modes of production and dissemination emerged.

2) From Technics to Technology

European modernization profoundly reconfigured the traditional epistemic order by severing the symbiosis of technics and art, categorizing art, craft, and science into separate disciplines. Consequently, technics—once a comprehensive know-how grounded in a way of life—was replaced by the Western notion of technology as an instrument of economic development. *Giyeron* 技藝論 (Theory of Technics, 1802), written at the dawn of the 19th century by the philosopher and scientist Jeong Yak-yong 丁若鏞 (1762–1836), clearly illustrates this conceptual transition: from *giye* as an organic unity of making and living to *gi* as an instrumental technology oriented toward efficiency and productivity. Concerned by stagnant skill transmission, Jeong argued that national prosperity depended on productivity driven by technological progress. He reconceived *giye* not merely as artisanal skill but as a practical means of improving public welfare, reflecting his conviction that technical refinement was integral to social reform. This reorientation was shaped, in part, by his awareness of Western scientific ideas that had circulated in East Asia since the 17th century.

Jeong's concept of *giye*, however, suggests a distinctive understanding of technics that diverged from Western mechanistic conceptions. While drawing selectively on new scientific knowledge, Jeong's vision remained rooted in the practical and ethical orientation of Neo-Confucian thought, which harmonized technical proficiency with moral cultivation and valued the improvement of everyday life over mere mechanical efficiency. In this light, *Giyeron* offers a glimpse into a uniquely Korean trajectory of

technics—a potential precursor to what can be understood as Korean cosmotechnics.

Meanwhile, the modern concept of art in Korea eventually embraced the Western notion of *fine art for art's sake*, mediated through Japanese imperialism at the beginning of the 20th century. This shift emphasized the individual artist's sensitivity and the use of materials and methods specific to the art world. The rapid spread of Western modernization transformed the underlying cosmology of artistic expression (Hui 2016, 297), detaching technics from both art and the embodied practices of making. Consequently, the technics-art of traditional craftsmen was devalued by both capitalist logic and modern aesthetic standards.

In the West, there have been significant ideological attempts to reclaim the value of craftsmanship lost during industrialization. In *The German Ideology* (1846), Karl Marx highlighted “real community” as a way to overcome the alienation produced by the division of labor (Marx and Engels [1846] 2016, 75), arguing that human senses and consciousness are fully realized only through emancipated, material work. His view suggests that making is not merely an economic activity but a vital mode of experiencing the world (23). Similarly, Richard Sennett (2008) argues that the ethics of craftsmanship embody “material consciousness”—a form of thought rooted in direct engagement with matter. Both thinkers recognize the urgent need to restore the organic relation between labor, art, and technics that modernity had severed.

This Western philosophical call for restoration finds a resonant and concrete manifestation in the tradition of Korean craftsmanship. By applying the framework of Korean cosmotechnics, we can see that the practice of traditional artisans is not a relic of the past but a living model for reintegrating moral, aesthetic, and technical values into everyday life. The processes of making and transmission observed in these craftsmen thus offer a path toward healing the modern rift between subject and object, embodying a continuous and vital link between the body, the material, and the world.

The Art Tech Group

Following the rapid modernization of the late Joseon period, the traditional concept of technics-art in Korea entered a transformative phase. During the ensuing decades of industrialization and upheaval—spanning Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), liberation, war, and dictatorship—the relationship between art and technology was radically redefined. Under the Japanese colonial administration, art and technical education were reorganized to serve imperial and military objectives (G. Shin 2024). After liberation, successive military governments in the South continued to control cultural expression while promoting technology as a primary engine for national development.¹⁴ Recognizing its economic and political potential, the dictatorship established the Ministry of Science and Technology in 1967 to spearhead modernization policies. It was within this climate that contemporary practices, now conceptualized as “art and technology” or media art, began to emerge. Despite the structural constraints that hindered spontaneous growth, several experimental artists and collectives—among them the Art Tech Group—sought to articulate an independent perspective on the nation’s technological condition. The Art Tech Group exemplifies how these pioneers strategically utilized the synthesis of art, technicity, and collectivity as a subtle form of resistance to the era’s rigid social and political constraints.

1) Collective Characteristics of Experimental Artist Groups

Korea’s first experimental artists emerged in the late 1960s, forming collectives and organizing group exhibitions such as Zero Group, The Fourth Group, Young Artists Union, Space and Time (ST), and Avant-Garde Association (AG). Their experiments embodied an anti-art ethos that challenged conservative institutions and sought to dissolve the boundaries between genres and materials (M. Kim 2000a). In particular, these artists

14. With the imposition of martial law in 1964, the situation became so dire that experimental artists minimized their social engagement and even formal experimentation.

rejected the academicism of Informel painting—then dominant in the Korean mainstream—embracing instead objects, happenings, street marches, ready-mades, and participatory events. Notably, media played a critical role in their anti-art expressions, as their practices extended to the incorporation of technological materials such as electronic circuits, lights, film, and video. These groups explored technology not merely as a functional tool or visual effect but as a conceptual framework for artistic inquiry. For instance, the work of Kim Ku-lim, a leading experimental artist, is often regarded as the progenitor of Korean media art, as he was among the first to treat the viewer, space, and technology as interrelated aesthetic elements (T. Min 2016, 101).

As personal computers became accessible to the public in the mid-1980s, small artist groups continued to experiment with media and technology, frequently making use of video projection, electric circuits, and computer programming (T. Min 2016, 103). Many members of these groups had been active in the experimental art movements of the 1960s and 1970s, ensuring a continuity of practice. The early experimental artists and the small groups of the 1980s shared a significant commonality in their emphasis on collectivity. Rather than simply mounting group exhibitions, they collaborated through performances, video works, and installations, maintaining small-scale organizations to avoid institutional rigidity (S. Lee 2018, 48–54). To be sure, numerous artist groups across diverse genres emerged after liberation, as collective activity was often seen as more effective than individual efforts in impacting the art world (49–50). These specific small groups, however, served as a shield and a form of strategic solidarity, enabling young experimental artists to defend their convictions against oppressive social norms (S. Lee 2018, 50; M. Kim 2000b). This collective nature was not merely a backdrop but the very foundation of the Art Tech Group's formation in the 1990s. This emphasis on collectivity—understood as a mode of shared production, knowledge exchange, and resistance to institutional authority—became central to how the group envisioned the relationship between art and technology.

2) The Art Tech Group and the KC Computer Art Lab

In the 1990s, following democratization, the South Korean government began actively promoting the convergence of art and technology through state-led exhibitions and seminars. Amidst this shifting landscape, media artists Jin Sik Shin and Jae Kwon Kim founded the Art Tech Group in 1991. The group became a pivotal hub, bringing together nearly half of Korea's active media artists, many of whom were rooted in earlier experimental circles. Inheriting the collective and experimental ethos of previous movements, the Art Tech Group redefined technicity not merely as a set of skills but as a critical medium for engaging with the social and institutional constraints of the era (E. Lee 2022, 58–61).

The group's formation was catalyzed by the 1991 exhibition *The Technological Transformation of Art*, which featured German media artists associated with Nam June Paik. The accompanying symposium introduced theoretical and philosophical discourses on art-tech convergence that deeply resonated with Korean artists and critics. In response, the Art Tech Group emerged as an informal research community and a platform for collaborative exchange (T. Min 2016, 107; E. Lee 2022, 63–64). Rather than acquiring technical skills through formal education, members engaged in collective learning, sharing knowledge about computers, video systems, and electronic devices through hands-on production.

This emphasis on cooperative experimentation was theoretically anchored by Jae Kwon Kim, the group's central figure. Drawing on his studies under Frank Popper, Kim distinguished between "personal creativity" and "collective movement," viewing technology as a mediator that amplifies artistic messages and activates viewer participation rather than as a neutral tool. He critiqued the stagnant academism and modernism of the domestic art scene for its lack of social engagement, advocating instead for a technologically engaged art that fosters openness, diversity, and critical reflection (T. Min 2015, 51–52).

Guided by his theoretical framework, the group positioned technology art as a critical alternative to formalist modernism and as a vehicle for integrating scientific experimentation with artistic imagination within

Korea's rapidly modernizing milieu (T. Min 2016, 107–108). Such ideas were realized in exhibitions like *The Founding Exhibition of the Art Tech Group* (1992) and *Techno Art Exhibition* (1993), where the group's projects combined advanced technologies—video, lasers, holograms, and computer systems. The resulting works examined how technology mediates social relations and aesthetic perception, revealing the group's collective effort to transform technical media into an arena for both creative inquiry and subtle socio-cultural critique (E. Lee 2022, 66–70).

The practical engine for these ideas was the KC Computer Art Lab, founded by Kim Yoon and Choi Eun-Kyoung in 1990, which functioned as the primary base for the Art Tech Group's projects (T. Min 2016, 107). Although archival evidence of its specific day-to-day operations is limited,¹⁵ the lab likely offered one of the few environments where artists could access computers and share technical knowledge at a time when such resources were scarce in Korea. In this context, limited access to technology rendered collaboration a necessity rather than a choice. This condition mirrors the cooperative ethos of international artist-engineer networks of the 1960s—such as Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) and PULSA in the United States, ZERO in Germany, and the Computer Arts Society in the United Kingdom—which sought to bridge the gap between art and technology. While there is no evidence of direct influence from these Western precedents, the parallel circumstances highlight how technical constraints can catalyze new models of collective creativity. Thus, the KC Computer Art Lab represents the essential, albeit informal, infrastructure that made the early development of technology art in Korea possible.

The Art Tech Group transformed machines into media for reflection, reframing technology art as a field where making, thinking, and collaboration intersect, transcending its role as a mere showcase of innovation. This approach reflected a distinctly Korean understanding of *giye*, or technics-art, which transcends the utilitarian and industrial notion of technology (*gisul*).

15. Further archival and oral research—particularly with Jae Kwon Kim and Eun-Kyoung Choi—will be necessary to document the Lab's technical exchanges in more detail in a future dedicated study.



Figure 3. The Art Tech Group, Video Mur, CRT monitors, 1993. Created by Jae Kwon Kim and Tai-Byung Cho as part of a collaborative installation for the exhibition titled *Techno Art Exhibition*, Gallery Expo, Daejeon

Source: Image courtesy of the artist. © Jae Kwon Kim.

While the dominant discourse of the 1990s often equated “art and technology” with modernization and efficiency, the Art Tech Group treated technicity as a site for rethinking artistic processes and social engagement (T. Min 2016, 108). This philosophical stance was manifest in the *Techno Art Exhibition* (1993), where most works were co-produced by members who combined technological artifacts with natural materials like rocks and soil¹⁶ (Fig. 3) to explore the ethical and ecological dimensions of modernity (Cho 2002, 176).¹⁷ By incorporating devices such as TV sets into reinterpretations

16. “As the title of the exhibition suggests, the showcased works integrate advanced media such as video, computers, touch screens, lasers, holograms, neon, and optical fibers with natural elements from Korea, including soil, stone, wood, and water, to create a total environment” (Jae Kwon Kim 1993).

17. “An installation featuring stacked televisions and stones, alongside works that blend living natural elements like fallen leaves, soil, bamboo, and rice seedlings with artificial materials

of traditional earthen walls and stone pagodas, the artists reimagined technology as part of a living continuum between humanity and nature (G. Shin 2024, 457; Jae Kwon Kim 1993). In doing so, the group both participated in and critically reinterpreted the state-driven vision of technological progress, grounding high-tech media in local materiality and collective practice.

Conclusion

This study has examined the intertwined histories of art, technics, and collectivity in Korea, tracing their evolution from premodern practices of copy-making and craftsmanship to the digital experiments of the late 20th century. The investigation reveals that the collective and technical dimensions of artistic creation, long marginalized in mainstream Korean art historiography, constitute a continuous undercurrent connecting these diverse historical periods. By recovering these practices through the concept of *giye* 技藝, or technics-art, this study has sought to uncover the diverse forms of collective creative subjectivity that emerged across different historical periods in Korea.

Premodern practices, such as copy-making and apprenticeship, demonstrate how art in Korea historically embodied a communal mode of technics. Copy-making emphasized the shared embodiment of skill and spiritual attainment through iterative practice, transmitting not only images but embodied knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities across time and space. Likewise, craftsmen's apprenticeship systems maintained intricate chains of tacit knowledge wherein technics was inseparable from life praxis. These forms of collective artistic labor were informed by an organic worldview rooted in Daoist and Confucian cosmologies, which understood technical practice as a moral, spiritual, and relational activity rather than a purely instrumental one. In this sense, *giye* did not merely denote manual skill but encompassed an ethical and ontological mode of being—an embodied form

such as neon lights and televisions" (Cho 2002, 173–178).

of wisdom that unified the maker, the material, and the life-world.

This indigenous epistemology underwent a profound transformation in the late Joseon period with the influx of Western science and the imperatives of modernization. Thinkers such as Jeong Yak-yong began to reconceive *giye* as an agent of social reform and economic development, bridging traditional craft knowledge with emerging ideas of technological progress. Yet, even within this transition, there persisted a distinctive understanding of technics as a relational and cosmological force rather than a mechanistic one. The subsequent upheavals of colonialism and the postwar drive for rapid industrialization in the 20th century fractured this unity. During this era, the holistic concept of *giye* was increasingly supplanted by the narrow term *gisul* (technology), replacing collaborative, embodied making with individualistic, utilitarian, and state-centric ideals.

The late 20th-century experiments of the Art Tech Group marked a significant reactivation of this collective technical spirit within a new technological milieu. Emerging in the 1990s, a decade defined by the burgeoning of civil society and democratic transition, this group redefined technology not as a tool of state-led progress or commercial spectacle but as a medium for critical thought, collaboration, and social reflection. Through cooperative production in spaces such as the KC Computer Art Lab, the group resonated with the premodern ethos of shared technics as embodied knowledge, reformulating it for the age of electronic and digital media. Their integrated approach challenged both the elitism of modernist aesthetics and the instrumental rationality of industrialization, offering instead a vision of “cosmotechanical” art in which machines, materials, and human participants shared an interdependent ecology.

By situating Korean collective artistic practices within the philosophical framework of cosmotechneics, this study reinterprets technics as a form of embodied knowledge and collective sensibility that traverses disparate historical moments. Synthesizing the practices of copy-making, craft, and early media art reveals that Korean technics-art has always been more than the externalization of mechanical proficiency; it is a dynamic mode of relational knowledge production linking embodied practice, material process, and communal life. Recognizing these historical resonances allows

us to decenter Eurocentric narratives that equate technological art solely with Western industrial modernity, articulating instead a plural, region-specific history of the technological imagination. This recontextualized historiography thus paves the way for a broader understanding of postdigital creativity in Korea—one that integrates technics, art, and community into a shared horizon of making, embodying a living cosmotechnics that continues to unfold in the contemporary digital age.

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