

TRANSCRIPTS



Archives in Transition

Throw Like YSP: On the Wild*Feminist Photography of Youngsook Park

KYOO LEE

Abstract: This essay introduces the work of the “first generation” Korean feminist photographer Youngsook Park (b. 1941). Highlighting the spirited and critical “wildness” of her feminist aesthetic agenda, with a topical focus on her iconic *Michinnyeon Project* (1996–2005, “The Mad Women Project,” retranslated here as “The Crazy B*tch Project”), this dossier also contextualizes her more current projects such as *Michinnyeon · Balhwa-hada* (Blooming/Uttering) (2016) and *Could Not Have Left Them Behind* (2017) along with her broader lifetime achievements thus far.

Keywords: Youngsook Park, madwoman, feminist aesthetics, Korean feminism, The Michinnyeon Project, The Mad Women Project, photography, Wild*Feminism

There she is, washing dishes, and he is watching TV in the living room after dinner.

Suddenly throwing an ashtray at her, the husband yells, “Water, Didnyou Hear, You, *Michinnyeon*, Bring Me Water, NOW” . . . yeah, that sense: this is how Youngsook Park (박영숙, b. 1941, hereafter YSP), one of the most prominent “first generation” feminist photographers in Korea, best known and widely celebrated for her *Michinnyeon Project* (1999–2005), explained to me the “*michinnyeon*.” Why would an ashtray be thrown at her, and what could she throw in turn?

Michin, an adjective, means a cocktail of mad, crazy, deranged, unhinged, insane, psychotic (or also fanatically passionate as in mad “about or for” something or someone), and *nyeon*, a subject marker (e.g., a professor) misogynistically reserved for a (nasty) woman (cf. a professors*nyeon* would be a female professor suddenly and simply undeserving the professional title for her natural *nyeon*-ness), is a sort of wench close to b*tch but human, not canine, but in any case female/feminine-gendered even or especially when used ironically as in when two self-identified men call each other this-*nyeon* and or that-*nyeon*, out(b*tch)ing themselves. So *Michinnyeon*—one word, like Englishman, but a slur, unlike Englishman—is a derogatory term for a woman deemed irredeemably bad or off at any given social moments. Somewhere between a “crazy b*tch” and a “crazy cow,” the level of insult more elastic than either, this “madwoman” in Korean culture used to be at times and still potentially is as crazy as female drivers out on the street; imagine that fellow diner, now a driver also out on the street, throwing a fit again, yelling at some random female driver driving next to, in front, or around him, for causing *the* traffic by not “staying home cooking and doing laundry”—*Michinnyeon*! So: a stock phrase.

Whozcrazy? Patriarchal misogyny remains one of the most deeply rooted and pressing sociopolitical problems, from intimate partner violence to institutional sexism, an issue that, surely, is not unique to Korea, but which can materialize in some specifically colorfully Korean ways. Such must have been on YSP’s mind, too, when she, a former photojournalist, threw herself into what has become her signature work, the *Michinnyeon Project* (1999–2005).¹ Here, emerging from a kitchen (figure 1) and a bathroom (figure 2), sometimes enjoying a picnic (figure 3), too, the YSP gallery of crazy b*tches, including a few friends in Japan (figures 4 and 5), a total of eighty-seven, rearticulates and diversifies their *michinnyeon*hood with revitalized performative subjectivity and intersubjectivity. In a kind of yes-why-not talk back *at* and through that ashtray throwing *nom* (a slightly derogatory and often vaguely endearing word for a man or person with some unique or odd characteristics), each *michinnyeon*, each becoming a character in a story one can readily relate to, picks up that ashtray and plays it like a baseball, like they *mean* it. Through this series of theatrically staged, deconstructively constructed photographic speech acts or counteracts, these actors, in turn, tell their own stories, their quietly quotidian moments of psychic shift, “de-rangement” (*ver-rückt-sein*) (Kim 2009, 12) in the Freudian sense. As feminist scholar Yong-ok Kim spells out with a brilliant punceptual play on *kwang* (lightness or madness), YSP’s photographic compositionality and performativity allows such critical turns to “manifest themselves” (Kim 2009, 10); *bal-kwang* means self-illumination (*bal* voluntary/self and *kwang* illumination/light), a concept homophonous with another word for *madness*, *balkwang*, that is, showing or manifesting *madness*. So, typically, a Korean *michinnyeon* portrayed by YSP does not (have to) say, “haven’t you heard, I’m



Figure 1. The Mad Women Project, “Imprisoned Body, Wandering Spirit #1,” c-print, 120 cm. × 120 cm., 2002. ©Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

the crazy b*tch around here?,” as does Blair Waldorf, the young, insecure overachiever of the Upper East Side New York from the hit TV show *Gossip Girl*. No need; it/she/elle shows.

Instead, “haven’t you seen, we’re the crazy b*tches around here”: that’s what they, the YSP gallery of *michinnyeondl* (*dl* being the plural marker, it means a host of *michinnyeons*) would say and say only with a collective nod or wink. We could then try to modify, while literally pluralizing, the tonality of Mss. Blair’s young b*tchy New Yorky self-presentation, and we would get closer to the world of Korean *michinnyeon*hood, their village. Again, words in the YSP version are photographically captured in the quiet intensity of the images of alleged or self-identified madwomen, and their vocal diversity comes from their compositional intersubjectivity and situational interlocutions. It is about some of “us,” the “we” of narrative solidarity and sequentiality, including, yes, the b*tchy or b*tchified “I” in a hetero-love triangle.

For instance, as Sander Gilman points out astutely in *Seeing the Insane* (1982), the hands of “Crazy Kate,” “a standard image of love melancholy” (Gilman



Figure 2. The Mad Women Project, “Mad Women’s #1,” c-print, 150 cm. × 120 cm., 1999. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

1982, 127) in paintings since the late eighteenth century in the Anglo-European West, are “hidden” (Gilman 1982, 127) when she is shown seated like a wilting flower in front of, for instance, a relatively wilder, bifurcated tree—a symbol of madness. Now, then, turn to the Korean housewife cooking in the kitchen (figure 1 again): as she suddenly enters into her zone of momentary madness, she is seen holding a big kitchen knife, rather precariously, a little too close to herself, and we know it is not her mobile phone. Such a bodily interaction—contact—with “the other,” including a baby (figure 2) and a mirror (figure 6), photo-telegraphs the deep and extensive textuality of everyday craziness and crazy b*tchiness of the world there in particular. Featuring female characters from all walks of life, this lucid project on gendered insanity discloses the intersecting sexist and homophobic world shared as such. To borrow the art critic

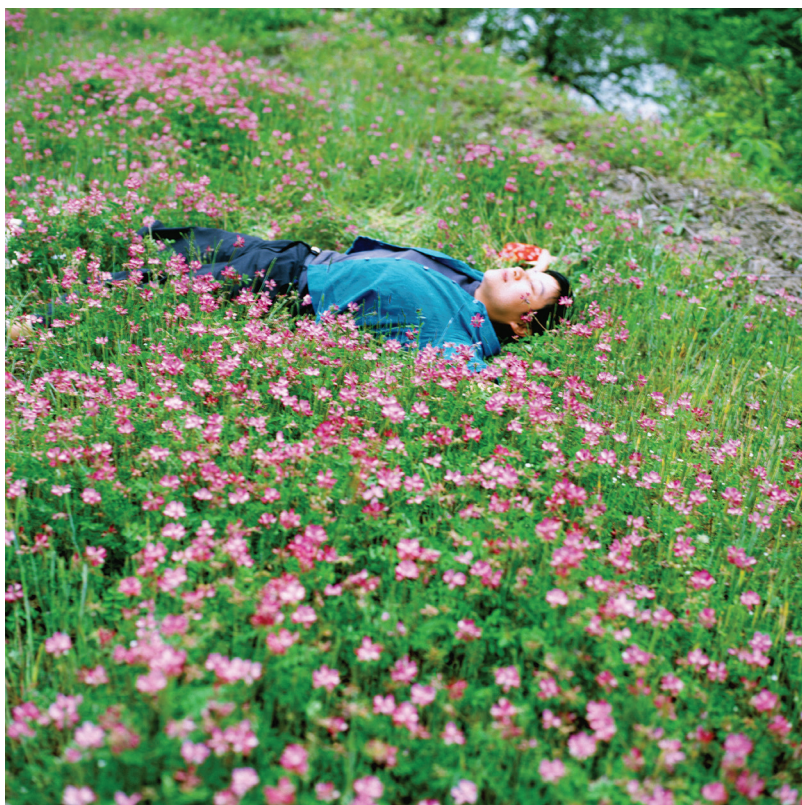


Figure 3. The Mad Women Project, “A Flower Shakes Her #13,” c-print, 120 cm. × 120 cm., 2005. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

Hyejin Mun’s succinct formulation, this “unique photographer-subject-viewer solidarity derives from the telos of YSP’s photographic work, demonstrating, in turn, why her photographs themselves cannot but be feminist performances” (Mun 2016, 6).

Such empathy is at the heart of YSP’s photographic attention. Relational ethics is the grammar of her approach, and empathetic energy the aesthetic syntax of her lens, where expressive bodies will find their instant home when she “clicks,” clicking with and at them at the same time. YSP’s feminist ethical sociality is inseparable from her politico-aesthetic practices. Again, look at the woman who is cradling a baby in her arms (figure 2). Is she clutching the baby a little too tightly, “crazily,” or not? This subtly cryptic image restages a momentary encounter YSP had at a psychiatric hospital she was visiting then as part of research on Michel Foucault she was doing with other feminist scholars and cultural activists in the 1990s. It was her “gazing at me” from afar in the dark corridor that “made me start this,” YSP said (to me, at least three times since I met her in 2015 in Seoul, as I recall). She, the photographer, *saw* a life story in



Figure 4. The Mad Women Project, “Feminists in Osaka #6,” c-print, 120 cm. × 120 cm., 2004. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

a flash. That intense, complex look of hostility, timidity, curiosity, reciprocity had to be unpacked, honored, vocalized, archived. She, YSP, remains haunted by those eyes. Foucault, too, would probably nod here, or not.

Interestingly, various dramaturgical situations and idioms in YSP’s images, so affectively charged, are also somewhat referentially and contextually layered since many of the actors who pose for her magnetic camera are prominent artists, actors, writers, cultural activists, poets, politicians, professionals in the culture industry, scholars, theorists—with both junior and senior status—all from her legendarily wide social and artistic circles (cf. figures 7 and 8). And sometimes, these temporary actors impersonated historical figures in front of YSP’s camera. Hyesoon Kim, for instance, one of the most important, edgy feminist writers in Korea writing in Korean today, became Nanseolheon Heo, a vastly underappreciated sixteenth-century poet (figure 9), a sister of Gyun Heo, an iconic (male) writer of the Shakespearean magnitude; a female poet portraying a female poet doubles the poetic economy of the allegory. The semiotic and sociohistorical resonances between those two overlapping bodies and the bodies that altogether form otherwise present, subtextually resilient



Figure 5. The Mad Women Project, “Feminists in Tokyo #6,” c-print, 120 cm. × 120 cm., 2004. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

communities, especially for those who can also “see” the references at once, are quite immediate and effective. Unlike Cindy Sherman, for instance, who plays such dramatically situated, fictional characters herself, YSP, also known for her (Gertrude) Steinesque social generosity and curatorial perspicuity as the owner of the much celebrated and loved Trunk Gallery (defunct as of 2019), brought all those “real”-life dramatic characters together as part of a broader, countercritical, social life “project.”

When asked how I would translate the *Michinnyeon Project*, after some months of studying and pondering, I proposed “BeWitched” as an option, also thinking back “B(ew)itched,” which resonates more immediately with the subtheme with which the project as a whole concluded, “the Inner Witch (*Maa-nyeo*)” (figures 4 and 10). YSP’s bewitching/ed wildflowers in wilderness, her plainly irrepressible “witches” under patriarchal watch, and the threats of social stigmas are like jackies-in-the-box. As YPS’s 2005 artist statement specifies:

Those women had to cover up “the witch in them.”
all that crazy all-out brightness that cannot be covered even when covered
with the witch who would constantly look up even when covered up
covered up.

Now let us just get out and usher in “the inner *maa-nyeo*”

The lost intuition

The lost warmth

The lost embrace

The lost *eros*

The lost sweetness

That belongs to her the “*michinnyeon*”

hers yes and yet to be shared

That will have to become richer

Through you and me, all together

That will eventually be massively surprising to the whole universe.

(Park 2009, 90)



Figure 6. The Mad Women Project, “Imprisoned Body, Wandering Spirit #2,” c-print, 120 cm. × 120 cm., 2002. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 7. Yoonja Park, "Portraiture of 36 Friends," gelatin silver print, 16 in. × 20 in., 1981. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 8. Dancer Gyuhyun CHO, "Portraiture of 36 Friends," gelatin silver print, 16 in. × 20 in., 1981. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 9. The Mad Women Project, “Project for Money Reformation #2 (Heo Nan Seol Heon),” c-print, 120 cm. × 83 cm., 2003. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

YSP’s turn during this period to LGBTQ subjects also reflects not only her sustained feminist artistic, and somewhat maternally caring, attention to gendered minorities and gender-policed sexual minorities, but also their increasing and contested visibility in Korean culture and society. Almost two



Figure 10. The Mad Women Project, “Witch Within Me #5,” c-print, 170 cm. × 127 cm., 2005. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

decades in, her path-breaking photographic staging and chronicling of those *michinnyeondl* of Korea has become an invaluable archival index to stories, histories, and theories of queer and increasingly trans-inclusive Korean feminism since about the mid-1990s. Objectively abjected, rejected, or eventually ejected by the androcentric, patriarchal, quasi-military, postcolonial masculinist regime of life, YSP’s women, rather than becoming dejected, spring back, throwing back those potent images of displaced women and womanhood *at* and *into* the origin of oppression *as if* away.

Throw Like YSP 🌸 99



Figure 11. The Mad Women Project, “Project for Money Reformation #1 (The Guardian Grandmother),” c-print, 120 cm. × 83 cm., 2003. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 12. The Mad Women Project, “Monsieur Butterfly #1,” c-print, 120 cm. × 120 cm., 2003. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 13. The Mad Women Project, “Lesbian Wedding #1,” c-print, 60 cm. × 60 cm., 2003. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 14. The Mad Women Project, “WOMAD—Goddess of Love and Passion,” c-print, 170 cm. × 120 cm., 2004. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 15. Youngsook PARK. From the artist's personal archive. 1999.
©Jaeyon Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 16. “Grandma who went far away,” gelatin silver print, 25 cm. × 67 cm., 1988. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 17. “Now, great mother sleep and awake,” two-channel slide projection and sound, variable size, 1994. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Fig. 18. "Body and Sexuality," c-print, 175 cm. × 110 cm. (each), 1998.
© Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Fig. 18. (Continued)



Fig. 18. (Continued)



Fig. 18. (Continued)

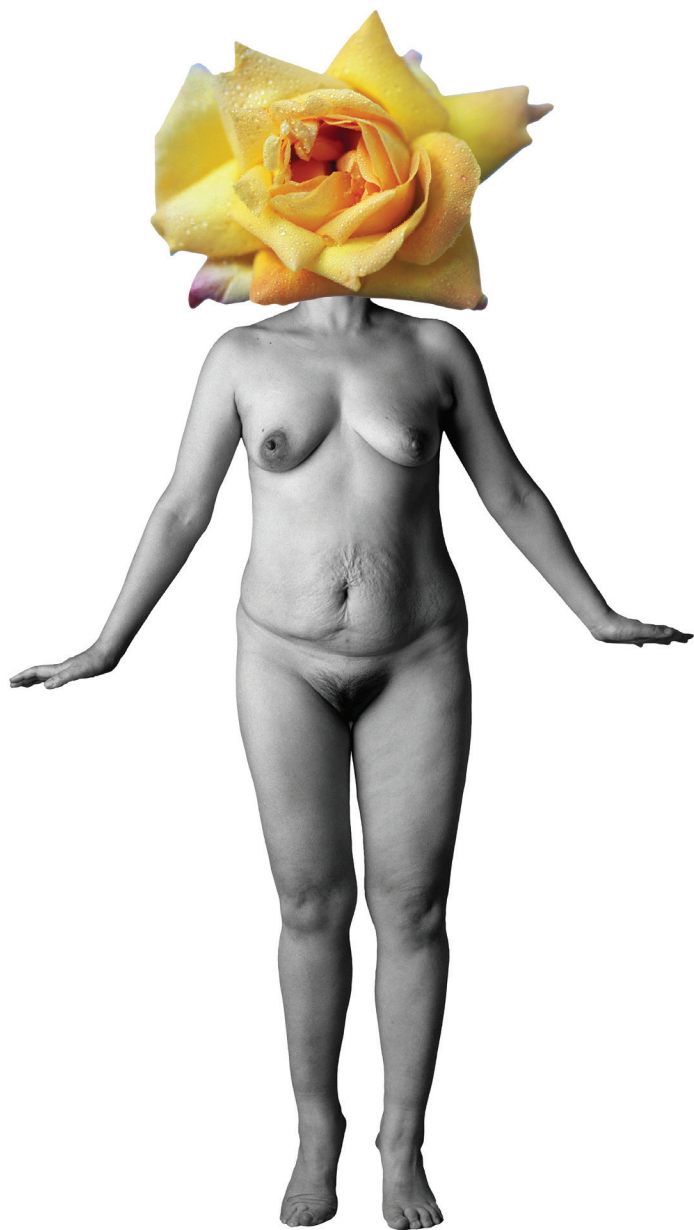


Fig. 18. (Continued)



Fig. 18. (Continued)

Throw Like YSP  III



Fig. 18. (Continued)



Figure 19. "The Rose," gelatin silver print, 133 cm. × 25.5 cm., 1988. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

This theatrico-photographic, narrative *écriture féminine* (womanly writing) carries self-emancipatory gestures which, for some readers today, especially from younger generations, could come across as a little too “angry” or “reactively trapped” (Lee 2005) as a reviewer of YSP’s 2016 retrospective “*Michinnyeon · Balhwa-hada*” (*balhwa* means glow/bloom or utterance, and *hada* turns a noun into a verb) gingerly noted while amply acknowledging her legacy, a source of inspirations for many and especially feminist artists in Korea. This is all readily doubly understandable and quite fair. When all YSP *michinnyeondl*, along with many of other friends and goddesses from her photographic and real life, were invited in for that grand celebration at Arario Gallery, one of the most prominent venues in Korea, this extended show that performs its “madly” differential repetitions in the form of a singular woman artist who “returns” to the scene, also showcased the superwomanly vitality of a seventy-five-year-old artist *unni* (sister, usually but not always big sister or old sister). The 2016 retrospective became an occasion celebrating YSP’s extraordinary work as a visual artist *and* reaffirming the critical import of her feminist interventions today in the age of toxic masculinist politics and the increasing renormalization of the culture of misogyny. As said reviewer concluded, a search for such “images of truly free women,” such a wildcard, “could perhaps be the assignment YSP wants to leave behind” (Lee 2005) and this homework is also being done by YSP herself, who again starts from the domestic space.

A case in point is the last show, *Could Not Have Left Them Behind* (2017), a project on “old women” as temporal interplayers, where YSP, in her seventies, turns her archival gaze to her *unnidl* in their eighties and nineties at their homes, who “have outlived” those years, surviving themselves (figures 20, 21, and 22). In the aptly titled catalog essay, “An Homage to the Outliving, Living *Unnidl*” (Yang 2017), Hyosil Yang, the scholar of aesthetics and art critic, perceptively picks out a certain “agelessness of the ‘being’” of these figures: each has a social status on account of her lifetime achievements (a poet’s archivist wife, a singer, an artist, a business woman, etc.) and, more importantly, each *unni*, older and wiser, is grounded in herself, her humble yet confident self.

Those great *unnidl*’s ordinarily luminous lives, framed with YSP’s curatorial skills at creating and capturing an instant synergy between such resilient subjects and almost self-effacing whispering little objects around them, do not exactly represent some types or figures. More simply, and subtly, they themselves become present again. Interestingly, nowadays YSP, a great *unni* herself, also a beloved mother, splits her time between her Seoul studio and Jeju, the island of deep spirituality and deeply tragic his/herstories. YSP is now creating another darkroom for her *michinnyeon*



Figure 20. Byoungbok LEE, head of the theater company Freedom, “Could Not Have Left Them Behind,” gelatin silver print, 126 cm. × 126 cm., 2017. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.



Figure 21. Byoungbok LEE, head of the theater company Freedom, “Could Not Have Left Them Behind,” gelatin silver print, 106 cm. × 106 cm., 2017. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

friends and *unnidl*, this time in a deeper recess of gendered spaces such as Jeju. Her current project involves flying there regularly to photo-stage some imaginary cave witches, retired free spirits, who communicate with and through oil bottles, jam jars, and marble balls they inhabit, in the nests



Figure 22. Seunghee Choi, renowned *pansori* singer, “Could Not Have Left Them Behind,” gelatin silver print, 60 cm. × 60 cm., 2017. © Youngsook Park. Used with permission by the artist.

they have built, where visitors will also occasionally drop by for a chat over tea. That project is for her next show soon, when her fella *michinnyeondl* will return in more poetic and restful ways. Here, I am also reminded of one of her longtime feminist buddies, an art critic and curator Hong-hee Kim’s prescient remark, in 2016, on the “fantasmagic (fantastic and phantasmagoric [my coinage in translation]) and shamanic” (Kim 2016) surreal or supra-real dimension of YSP’s otherwise grassroot, seemingly documentary, realist aesthetics.

So we will see that *michinnyeon* coming again . . . with those wild* feminists out of the caves.

Kyoo Lee, a transdisciplinary philosopher, writer, critic, and author of *Reading Descartes Otherwise* and *Writing Entanglish*, teaches philosophy, gender studies, and justice studies at the City University of New York. A recipient of faculty fellowships from Cambridge University, KIAS, the Mellon Foundation, and the NEH, among others, she publishes widely in the interwoven fields within the arts and humanities. Throughout her site-specific philopoetic practices, “Q” Professor Lee explores co-generative links between critical theory and creative prose. A scholar also active in editorial fieldwork, she is part of the new book series initiative *Bloomsbury Studies in Critical Poetics*. She can be reached at klee@gc.cuny.edu.

NOTES

I would like to express my special thanks to Jaeyeon Park, the archivist from the Youngsook Park Archive Project, for her assistance throughout the process of writing this piece.

1. The title is usually translated as “The Mad Women Project” or “The Mad Woman Project,” as in a madwoman. While this rendering is quite literally faithful to the original Korean, I think calling it “The Crazy B*tch Project” instead might actually better capture the “wild” spirit and incisive colloquialism of the project, part of all of YSP lifelong “projects,” as she herself prefers to call them (instead of “works,” that is).

WORKS CITED

- Gilman, Sander. 1982. *Seeing The Insane: A Visual and Cultural History of Our Attitudes Toward the Mentally Ill*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Kim, Honghee. 2016. *Michinnyeon · Balhwa-hada: Youngsook Park's Mad Women Project, 1999–2005*. Exhibition Leaflet. Gwacheon : Arario Gallery.
- Kim, Youngok. 2009. “A Montage of Memories on Record.” *Mad Women Project*. Gyeonggi: Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation.
- Lee, Youjin, 2005. “Feminist Photographer, Youngsook Park, ‘Mad Women Project,’” *Hani* [Daily Newspaper] June 14, 2005. www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/women/42088.html
- Mun, Hyejin, 2016. “Youngsook Park’s Style of Photographing: She Photographs Her,” *Monthly Art* 375 (April). Seoul: Wolgan Misul.
- Park, Youngsook, 2009. “A Witch within Me.” *Mad Women Project*. Gyeonggi: Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation.
- Park, Youngsook, 2017. *Could Not Have Left Them Behind*. Seoul : The Hanmi Museum of Photography.
- Yang, Hyosil, 2017. “An Homage to the Outliving, Living *Unnidl*.” In *Could Not Have Left Behind*, 1–7. Exhibition Catalogue. Seoul: Gahyeon Cultural Foundation.