

CUCHIFRITOS

GALLERY + PROJECT SPACE

— a program of ARTISTS ALLIANCE INC

artistsallianceinc.org

88 Essex Street
New York NY 10002

Weds through Sat
Noon - 6p or by appt.

Sue Jeong Ka

Explicit!!!

On view through June 21 2025

Cuchifritos Gallery is very pleased to present ***Explicit!!!***, featuring new work by NYC-based artist **Sue Jeong Ka** on view from April 25 through June 21, 2025.

Explicit!!! builds on Ka's ongoing investigation of the censorship practices within the U.S. carceral system, focusing on publication bans across 26 states. Through her research, Ka reveals how book censorship operates as a tool of racial, sexual, and cultural control. She illuminates biases that specifically target works by marginalized authors, especially those presenting sexually liberal narratives or culturally non-Western perspectives.

For this exhibition, AAI LES Studio Program alum (2023), Ka presents a series of site-responsive works, including kinetic sculptures, large-scale wall installations, and a public program series that fosters vibrant dialogue among artists, researchers, and community members in the Lower East Side and Chinatown. These works invite visitors to reflect not only on prison censorship but also on the broader patterns of content suppression in public education and cultural institutions—systems intricately intertwined with the policing of racial and sexual knowledge.

The core of *Explicit!!!* is Ka's data analysis of manga—a genre of comics and graphic novels predominantly created by East Asian artists. Across various state prison systems, manga is frequently classified as "sexually explicit," leading to its prohibition in prison libraries and preventing its distribution to incarcerated readers. In parallel, New York City public schools have removed manga titles like "Assassination Classroom," citing moral concerns regarding their content. These acts of censorship—whether in prisons or schools—are not isolated incidents; they embody a broader infrastructure that dictates which stories are acceptable and whose cultural expressions are silenced.

This exhibition aims to inspire visitors to contemplate the following questions:

- What criteria define a text as "sexually explicit" within these institutional frameworks?
- Is manga inherently more explicit than other literary or visual works, or is its vulnerability to misunderstanding driven by its cultural origins rooted in East Asian aesthetics and philosophies?
- How does the Eastern philosophical sensibility in manga clash with the Christian moral framework underpinning much of American censorship from its birth?
- Who holds the authority to determine what knowledge is "appropriate" and for whom it is deemed suitable?

By centering censored manga, *Explicit!!!* confronts the intersection of racialized censorship, moral gatekeeping, and xenophobia, raising essential questions about whose bodies, desires, and cultural expressions are considered dangerous—and why.

In reflecting on these concerns, Ka seeks to bridge the private realm of banned reading materials with the public space of the gallery, creating an encounter in which the issue of censorship becomes visible, tangible, and open to discussion.

Kinetic Sculpture: The Retinal Archive is an interactive sculpture that captures and visualizes the artist's eye movements as she reads censored manga pages. Utilizing eye-tracking technology, Ka records her gaze as she navigates these forbidden materials. The collected data is transformed into a heatmap—a living archive of gaze, desire, and curiosity—which projects back onto the manga pages themselves. This results in a kinetic dialogue between the bodily act of reading and the institutional act of censorship, mapping what the eye is drawn to and what the system attempts to erase. Alongside the censored pages, two distinct lights represent different modes

of seeing: a red light symbolizes surveillance, while another signifies the artist's personal reading of the censored materials. These contrasting illuminations are deliberately juxtaposed, highlighting the tension between imposed oversight and individual perception.

Ex parte Erasure (The Dream of the Forbidden Code) combines historical imagery, contemporary censorship, and speculative visual storytelling, connecting the school-to-prison pipeline with the racialized and sexualized perceptions of Asian and Asian American in media.

Presented as a large wall vinyl, the work merges characters from banned manga with symbolic representations of data flows and the school-to-prison pipeline. Motoko Kusanagi from the "Ghost in the Shell"—a work banned in multiple U.S. prisons—is depicted with her signature cybernetic cords, showing her cyborg body that is replaced with her original. These cords extend across the wall, intertwining with the tentacles of the teacher Koro (octopus-looking figure) from "Assassination Classroom," a manga removed from NYC public schools. This visual connection illustrates how prison and school censorship work together to create a pipeline of control, starting with the policing of knowledge in childhood and continuing with the regulation of intellectual and sexual freedom in incarceration.

This visual interplay also addresses the concept of techno-orientalism, where Asian bodies and cultures are both fetishized and feared, characterized as hypersexual, hyper-technological, and inherently alien. By linking Motoko's cybernetic cords—symbols of technological enhancement and surveillance—with Koro's exaggerated tentacles, which draw from both manga aesthetics and the erotic legacy of ukiyo-e, particularly "The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife," the work reveals how Asian cultural products are framed in the U.S. as not only morally dangerous but also as symbols of exotic, uncontrollable otherness.

The piece is not only a critique; it serves as a visual statement on freedom of expression. By allowing these cords and tentacles to spill across the gallery wall, the installation claims public space as a site for uncensored cultural expression. It invites visitors—whether from Lower Manhattan or beyond—to reflect on what it means to silence certain narratives while celebrating others and to recognize that freedom of expression is not merely a legal principle but also a cultural and racial battleground.

This installation transforms the gallery wall into a speculative site of resistance, where censored knowledge, racialized surveillance, and the rich history of Asian visual culture converge into a chaotic yet vibrant network—a declaration of refusal to remain silent within systems designed to erase diverse narratives.

Graphing Erasure is an installation of drawings that visualizes banned manga datasets created with the San Francisco Public Library's Jail and Reentry Services program and graduate students from the Master of Information and Library Science program at the University of California, Los Angeles. Quietly situated in the gallery's back room, the work charts layered information on manga censorship across the U.S., drawing from state-level data to surface patterns, often obscured from public discourse.

Each drawing contains multi-layered insights: the percentage of manga banned in a given state, the proportion authored by Asian creators, and, within those, how often Asian women's bodies appear. Through this meditative visual process, *Graphing Erasure* invites viewers to consider how institutional logics of protection usually operate as mechanisms of erasure and reinforce the marginalization of specific narratives, identities, and forms of representation.

Rendered in a minimalist aesthetic, the drawings incorporate what the artist refers to as *warm data*—a term coined by Nora Bateson to describe relational information about the interdependencies and contexts within a complex system. Here, warm data is used to materialize emotion as a form of feminist resistance. Rather than manipulating affect, the work highlights how emotional and social dimensions of censorship, especially those tied to race and gender, can be made visible through a slow, relational approach to data.

About the Artist

Sue Jeong Ka is a visual artist whose work challenges carceral censorship, systemic erasure, and gendered surveillance. Her projects span commemorating 19th-century Asian immigrant women, producing trilingual community newspapers in Chinese, English, and Spanish, and developing a database of banned publications in U.S. prisons, particularly those by ethnically and sexually marginalized authors. She leverages traditional art spaces to provide community services and critique public structures.

She is an alumna of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program (NY, US) and the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm (SE). Also, Ka was a finalist of the Open Society Foundation's Soros Justice Fellowship (NY, US) and a recipient of numerous grants including the NYSCA Individual Artist Grant (NY, US), NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship (NY, US), Lower Manhattan Culture Council's Creative Engagement Grant (NY, US), The Laundromat Project's Create Change Fellowship (NY, US), and has been in residence at Artist Alliance Inc. (NY, US), the Banff Center for Arts and Creativity (Alberta, CA), The Drawing Center (NY, US), Studio in the Park, Queens Museum/ArtBuilt (NY, NY), Soma Summer (Mexico D.F., MX) among many others.

Inspired by Asian American women artist-led social movements in downtown Manhattan, Ka has produced works on carceral information exchange between incarcerated and free communities, with support from NYC Books Through Bars, the New York Public Library, and the San Francisco Public Library.

Accessibility

If desired, a folding chair can be provided, should standing for short or long periods interfere with your viewing experience during your visit. Additionally, sound-dampening headphones and tinted glasses are available and will be provided upon request for visitors for whom the sound or lighting of the gallery space is disruptive. A quiet, off-site/off-view space can be arranged for those with a need during viewing hours. Baby strollers are welcome in Essex Market and Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space. Both facilities are wheelchair accessible, and service animals on a leash are permitted.

If you have questions about accessing Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space or attending programs, please email gallery@artistsallianceinc.org.

Artists Alliance Inc. (AAI) is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization located on the Lower East Side of New York City. Programming support is provided by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts with support from the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature. We thank the New York City Economic Development Corporation, The Clemente Soto Vélaz Cultural & Educational Center, and individual supporters of Artists Alliance Inc for their continued support. Special thanks go to our team of dedicated volunteers and interns, without whom this program would not be possible.