

Limitation of Fast Break Park Chan-kyong Artist

In the last few decades, mapping Korean contemporary art following a fixed topographical method has become either too difficult or it has lost its incentive. This condition can be assumed to stem from epistemological topography that is no longer as vivid as it used to be, and this is not only in the Korean society but it also exists at the level of international practice. Currently, the Korean and 'international' horizon of political ideology meets, yet it is still differentiated because of the astonishing history and reality of Korea's divided constitution. Not 'division' as a sub-theme in politics, but 'division' as a literary metaphor that represents one of the essential strengths that alludes to the psychopathology of the Korean peninsula.

From a foreigner's point of view at an international level, 'division' might be simply arranged as a regional by-product of the east-west cold war, but the situation may appear very different considering that the closed-off characteristics of a divided society actually comes from the isolation of a local resident from outer gaze or recognition. For example, even now, I still read the pink and blue colours in Yoon Jeong-mee's photographs as the emblematic colours of the North and South Korea. The term division here is what can be called 'military modernity'; from the songs that children sing to familial relationships, the east-west conflict, and religious prejudices are all extended and pushed together inside the space of a powerful loci. The circumstances are the same in Korean contemporary art. In other words, there is the removal of history in western contemporary art, or the obstinacy of connecting the revenues of abstract expressionism with the wounds of Korean War. Furthermore, through the forceful university authority, heretical thoughts are barred. Above all, the safe synthesis of formalism and Orientalism is something I cannot reflect on independent of the 'distortion' in the whole society caused by a divided constitution. The artists introduced here probably have one foot in the group of first generation and one foot half way out of this era.

Many people would probably regard this kind of description as a habit of speech by a man in his early forties still stuck in the 80s. In actuality, while meeting and dining with a foreign curator in an area massed with galleries such as Insa-dong or Sagan-dong in Seoul, the environmental scenery of Seoul gradually robs away my words of persuasion. I cannot even begin to talk about cafes in Seoul's Gangnam, an area densely populated with financial centres and up-scale boutiques. Unfortunately, a guided tour of the DMZ wouldn't change this situation greatly either, as DMZ has now become a tensionless tourist site. Now, about the only place where division can be perceived is in theatres where the trauma of Korean War and division is used occasionally to make blockbuster movies. Nevertheless, this sensation of division hardly exists anymore. At the same time, regardless of the complicated definitions of freedom, it is fair to say that the freedom enjoyed by personal and interest groups in Korea for the last twenty years has been unleashed like an explosion as though they were venting in spite. This is not simply a result of radical changes but a form of dramatic reversion.

Even if the actual and serious perception of reality or intervention has been scattered to the point that it can no longer be held together in daily life due to the phenomenon of nomadic spirit that dispossesses reality or a suspended meaning, it is important to point out that this new actuality is another shock for the artist. That is to say, DMZ becoming a tourist site and thereby no longer having a particular shock value itself is uncanny. This is an odd two-sided situation. As Area Park's photos reveal, the bisection of the whole society in the 'past' due to military tension has not changed even today.

During the last twenty years, the traces of the past have been cleared away daily, creating the disconnection from the past, and this caused the process of recurrence to the past to be even more abrupt, thus provoking a sense of bewilderment. For instance, the two candidates of the political parties not currently in power but in favour for the

next presidential election are inextricably linked to the 70s' developmental policy either through human relations or images. Along with politics, religious circles and the press seems to only reinforce the black and white logic of the cold war era. With every publication of a news article related to North Korea, people seem to repeatedly exclaim 'Ah, yes, North Korea exists!' This is a similar circumstance to Area Park turning his eyes away and focusing rather on the sky and the stars while in the vicinity of the border.

From the standpoint that there is an excessive sense of alienation from the past, it can be observed that the present in 2007 is very different from that of the 80s, yet there are also conditions today that are reminiscent of the early 80s. To re-focus on the iconographic interests of early 80s in the collision of the traditional and the contemporary in Kim Bo-min's works, or the application of 'politics of memory' used by artists such as Jo Hae-jun, Bae Young-whan, Song Sang-hee, Rho Jae-oon and myself, expresses the sense of alienation equally experienced by the two distant generations. However, the sense of alienation about the years leading to the 80s - in the 80s, or the oblivion of the past is mostly due to repression. On the reverse, the present stupor is based on what is generally labeled 'freedom'. TV documentaries such as *ljeneun malhal su itda* (We can say it now) or *Jinsilpongno* (Truth Exposure) that have become popular under the civilian government readily denotes the freedom from suppression and censorship through its titles, but now, this freedom is easily buried amongst several hundred cable channels and the heap of information on the Internet. If artists such as Shin Hak-chul and Park Bul-dong have used montage to create resistance against direct suppression of memory in early 80s *Minjoong Art*, a great number of artists exhibited in *FAST BREAK* had to burrow its way through an even narrower and a more discursive memory path which would not be sufficiently illustrated via the limited methodology of a Dadaist montage.

Certainly, the working processes vary among artists. Jo Hae-jun collaborates with his father to uncover personal memories in a classical manner, while Rho Jae-oon combines disbanded fragments of information from the digital world to re-present them in a deferred and uncertain state. Jo Hae-jun resists collective amnesia by vividly describing the details of the past affairs he tries to recollect through his father. On the other hand, Rho Jae-oon portrays collective amnesia and exposes 'remote existence' of the past emerging from the other side of the screen. Jo Hae-jun uses manual drawings but in pursuit of photographic details whereas Rho Jae-oon uses many photographic images reminiscent of painterly abstraction. In any case, it is remarkable that this hefty memory recovery process is only to redeem a short period of approximately fifty to sixty years.

Faster a society accelerates; stronger the nostalgia sentimentalizes. The mirror image of the North Korean *sokdojeon* (speed war; method of working for maximum quantity or highest quality in a given limited time) is the Korean compressed growth. As stated, compressed growth is the process of expanding by maximizing the intensity of labour in a short time. Therefore, the psychological time lapsed in during this period is actually much longer. As such, even if it is a current affair in a physical sense, it can be just as easily forgotten and thus it causes the paradox of a stronger nostalgia. It seems desires, subjects and narratives that were unable to be compressed and could not crisscross with each other in the background of the inhuman period finally bounced out like a spring at certain unexpected moments. In light of this context, Bae Young-whan's work utilizes nostalgic codes, but at the same time, positively recognizes and exaggerates the cliché of popular culture thereby turning it upside down. Likewise, I connected elite contemporary music composed by Yun Isang to the incredibly crude sensibility of *sinpa* drama¹ of the North Korean democracy. Also, the use of a sentimental title such as 'Evening Primrose' for poems written by sex workers in Song Sang-hee's work is instilled in a similar narrative. Unlike Tarkovsky's long-take shots, it is a muddy, sexy and more or less a perverse form of 'compressed nostalgia.'

This kind of narrative turn over and the use of irony indicates the close proximity of current Korean art to 'historical Pop Art' (it would be possible to use such terminology if Pop Art can cover an expanded scope including Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Dan Graham, and other various figures who have emerged during the period, all over the world). Koh Seung-wook made *gim-bab* (Korean roll made with fillings such as eggs, pickled radish, meat and vegetables and wrapped in dried seaweed) and adopted the term '*Bab Art* (rice art)' in a populist sense. However, the real irony of *Bab Art* is created upon understanding the adversity of history entwined with the history of *bab*². In the same vein, Hwang Se-joon recently analyzed Kong Sung-hun's paintings as such: "The artist emphasizes the raw in the artificial to create an aversion, and then became fascinated and captivated by the artificiality of the accentuated rawness. That is the method of reviving 'history' in Kong Sung-hun's work. He does not denounce nor explain the appearance of South Korea that has started to become particularly spoilt since late 20th century. Rather, his work shows disgust through fascination to that reality, and proves the appearance is in fact the internal through the assembly of hollow pain."

This painful process, however, is not necessarily entirely painful. The experience of Seoul's high speed includes: everyday amusement from incessant change, an instantaneous radiation of energy, wish for the unification of the division, and to some extent a healthy hope that Korea will soon be a rich country. The tingling delight brought on by this kind of change is something unique to Korea, not obtainable in Western Europe, Japan, or North America. This circumstance is featured in the rather dramatic critique of plastic-utopia highlighted by Yoon Jeong-mee and Ham Jin and portrayed in the manner of 'cheerful *Chuang Tsu*' in Koh Seung-wook's anti-productive play. *flyingCity* combines this sort of affirmative strength with architectural imagination.

Even now, upon entering the city from the outskirts of Seoul to the north in a subway, one passes by a colossal mound of rubbish. This is the site of village demolition to build new apartments. At these sites, *flyingCity* gets their 'artistic inspiration'. *flyingCity* uses the memory of Seoul's haphazard urban development as a playground, transforming it into a source for liberating imagination. Depicted as hygienic spaces in Kim Sanggil's photos and as melancholic inverse images in Kim Beom's blue-print drawings, the dependence on modernism that dominate the Korean society still cannot free itself from the grand scheme of the western democracy and functionalism of urban planning. In the likeness of the conceptions by Hélio Oiticica or Situationists, *flyingCity* discovers the positive possibilities for the third world from the first-hand experience of reckless urban planning and development. Although it can be more violent than the microscopic power relationship that permeates into the everyday or the mental state as Michael Foucault describes, these artists rediscover the unique openness and leisure in daily life that a yet-an-imperfect society allows. In particular, the invention of the 'creative labourer' of *Cheonggyecheon* (Stream) who claims to be capable of even crafting a spaceship, the mental-geographical imagination of children that weaves its way through the intricate alleyways in Seoul dialectically re-elucidates the source of energy of the Korean high-speed growth. This is the strength represented in the Korean expression such as 'to head at the bare ground', or 'to use one's body as a tool'. In light of this perspective, Kim Beom's drawings do not end at a reflection of the depressed self, but advances into a skillful and intelligent humour on this slovelny society - a society that quibbles for an efficient formation in its still inefficient and wasteful reality. Also, the seemingly very functional buildings in Kim Sanggil's photographs try too hard not to appear faulty, thus ends up looking awkward and deficient.

'Fast Break,' a term originally referring to a strategic swift attack with the aim of scoring a point before the opponent is able to get in a defensive position in sports such as basketball or volleyball; is applied here to represent a moment to generate a fresh tone, an opportunity for recharge, and to create 'artistic' teamwork. I used to reminisce of all

aspects of Korean modernization while watching Korean women's volleyball or handball team compete against tall, western athletes and command an astonishing teamwork. This includes the amazing combative spirit and ruthless training. However, as the original term 'fast break' is about opportunity, it lowers the courteousness towards the enemy's position and the games' elegance. When Korean professional *gisa* (skilled *baduk* player) defeats the most competent players from China or Japan in competitive match of *baduk* (Korean checkers, known as 'go' for Japanese) in a belligerent manner, I am overcome with the thought that this obstinate and astonishing measured movements steal away from the artistry of *baduk*. Honestly, I believe that through aggressive marketing and the praise of the new, Korean society has contributed to lowered etiquette in the world as a whole.

Korean serial dramas that take on the central role of *Hanryu* (the Korean Wave), have enjoyed its success due to its ability to stimulate nostalgia in Japan and act as a foreshadower in China and South East Asia of their own close future. This is another form of fast break - a form of delayed spiking. Not only through dramas, but the Korean economy based on trade and the fast acceptance of Western culture, by large, seems to have placed an advantage on Korea based on time difference. If so, let me throw out a rather old-fashioned and rustic question. Just because it is told in an instinctive and straight-forward manner at happy hour, it doesn't mean that it should be avoided in formal writing. In what ways do Korean contemporary art have advantage in East Asia? I believe it is from the delicate and powerful introspection in Korean art that is difficult to find in Chinese or Japanese art. Although I am not thoroughly knowledgeable in Japanese and Chinese art, as far as contemporary art is concerned, I believe that Korean art appears to be less sensational and it seems to have some sort of courtesy. Whether it is the practice of Marxism or Confucianism, and even if only halves of each remain, the diverse and complex traces of radical thoughts, moral training culture and incomplete modernization still live through the disjointed experience of time from the divided nation, compressed growth, colonization, and urbanization. Namely, it is not delayed spiking but the spatio-temporal universality in East Asia that becomes problematic again.

Terry Eagleton, a literary critic, said that the postmodernist political argument rose to its power not because the past political problems have disappeared or because they have been solved. Instead, he pointed out, it lies in the fact that these matters were difficult to handle immediately. At the point in time when trauma hides deeper into the individual psyche or becomes forgotten entirely, market for markets' sake mentality and the possibility for an emergence of a new formalism is considered to be greater overall. Still, on the contrary, fetishistic criticism and stifling borders of 'art made not for the sake of art' are dismantled. As this exhibition proves, it is certain that current Korean artists have been freed from standardized interpretation, and their desire is no longer trapped in a room of ethics. But at the same time, the pressure grows as they realise the emptiness that comes from the inability to handle the 'issues too difficult to be handled immediately'. Ultimately, this ends up just being a path towards a universal ubiquitous dream about the solidarity between succession of history and human relationships. Is this phrase too grandiose? Kim Beom's 'Untitled' (2002, paper), exhibited here of human forms dependently suspended together are merely pieces of paper that can be easily torn, but that is essentially why it appears even more sublime.

1. *Sinpa* is also called new school drama. It is a form of Korean drama that first appeared in the 20th century. *Sinpa* drama broke down traditions and rules of classical drama and became a popular form of play that used modern daily lifestyle as its subject. *Sinpa* drama is not practiced today but it is recorded as a historical movement. It currently plays a very minor or a historical role in performance such as drama, film, radio and comedy. Due to its foundation on democratic rights and nationalism, *Sinpa* drama never successfully evolved with the changes in society or with newer generations.

2. *Bab*, or steamed rice, is a staple food for Koreans.