

BRINKMANSHIP PARK CHAN-KYONG AND SEAN SNYDER

CURATED BY DORYUN CHONG AND CLARA KIM

February 14–April 18, 2010

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Park Chan-Kyong

Flying, 2005
video, color and sound, 13 min.
Courtesy the artist

Power Passage, 2004/2010
2-channel video
color and sound
Courtesy the artist

Sindoan, 2008
photographs, 23-5/8 x 35-5/8 in. each
Courtesy the artist

Sindoan, 2008
video, color and sound, 45 min.
Courtesy the artist

Three Cemeteries, 2009-10
3 photographs and text, audio
32 x 53-1/2 in. each
Commissioned by REDCAT, Los Angeles

Sean Snyder

A Revisionist Model of Solidarity, 2004-05
DVD (color, sound, 7 min., backlit projection on suspended screen);
2 DVDs on monitors, 3 photographs, wall text
Courtesy Galerie Neu, Berlin; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris;
Lisson Gallery, London

Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars, 2004-05
DVD, color and sound, 13:09 min.
Courtesy Galerie Neu, Berlin; Galerie Chantal Crousel,
Paris; Lisson Gallery, London

Exhibition, 2008
DVD, color and sound, 6:59 min.
Courtesy Galerie Neu, Berlin; Galerie Chantal Crousel,
Paris; Lisson Gallery, London

Smoke in Mirrors, 2009-10
DVD, color, silent
Commissioned by REDCAT, Los Angeles

BIOGRAPHIES

Park Chan-Kyong

Born 1965 in Seoul
Lives and works in Seoul

Education

MFA, Program in Photography, California Institute of the Arts,
Valencia, 1995
BFA, College of Fine Art, Seoul National University, 1988

Solo Exhibitions

2008
A Mountain, Gallery Soso, Paju, Korea
Sindoan, Atelier Hermès, Seoul

2005
Flying, SSamzie Space, Seoul

2004
Hermès Korea Missulsang, Artsonje Center, Seoul

2003
Koreans who went to Germany, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart

2002
S.ETS, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart

1997
Black Box: Memory of the Cold War Images,
Kumho Gallery, Seoul

Selected Group Exhibitions

2009
Unconquerable: Critical Visions from South Korea, Museo Tamayo
Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City
Platform in Kimusa, Platform 2009, Seoul
Made in Korea, Kaufhaus Sinn & Leffers, Hannover

2007
JNP Production, Tokyo Wonder Site, Tokyo
Activating Korea: *Tides of collective action*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery,
New Plymouth, New Zealand
53rd International Oberhausen Short Film Festival, Oberhausen, Germany
Fast Break, PKM Gallery, Beijing
Seoul: Räume, Menschen, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen,
Stuttgart and Berlin

2006
Everywhere, 5th Busan Biennale, Busan Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Busan, Korea
Fever Variations, 6th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea
2006 Move on Asia, Alternative Space LOOP, Seoul

2005
Parallel Life, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt
Critical Societies: Art, Criticism, and the Promises of Capitalism,
Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany
Incongruent: Contemporary Art from South Korea,
Richard F. Brush Gallery, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York
Seoul: Until Now!, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen

2003
PARA>SITES, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany
Demirrozized Zone, De Appel, Amsterdam

2002
Parallel World, Galerie K & S, Berlin
Korean Air France, La Vitrine & Glass Box, Paris
P_A_U_S_E, 4th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea

2001
Sunshine, Arts Council Korea, Insa Art Space, Seoul

2000
City Between 0 and 1, 1st Media City Seoul, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul

Awards & Residencies

2007
Tokyo Wonder Site Residency Program, Tokyo

2005
The Korean Culture and Arts Foundation

2004
Hermès Korea Missulsang

2002
Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart
The Korean Culture and Arts Foundation

Sean Snyder

Born 1972 in Virginia Beach, VA
Lives and works in Kyiv and Tokyo

Education

Städelschule, Hochschule für Bildende Künste,
Frankfurt am Main, 1993-99
Boston University, Boston, 1991-92
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1990-91

Solo Exhibitions

2009
Index—The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation,
Stockholm
Galerie Neu, Berlin
Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris
Index, Institute of Contemporary Art, London
Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis

2007
Sean Snyder: Optics, Compression, Propaganda, Galerie Neu, Berlin
Sean Snyder, Muzeul National de Arta Contemporana,
Bukarest (MNAC), Bucharest
Recent Projects: Sean Snyder, sala rekalde, Bilbao
Sean Snyder, Plug In #22, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven
Optics, Compression, Propaganda, Lisson Gallery, London

2006
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

2005
Portikus, Frankfurt am Main
Sean Snyder: Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars,
Galerie Neu, Berlin
Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig
Wiener Secession, Vienna

Selected Group Exhibitions

2009
Communism Never Happened, Feinkost, Berlin
*Globalizados. Perspectivas sobre la sociedad de consumo
en la Colección MUSAC*, Sala de Exposiciones de la Diputación
de Huesca, Huesca, Spain
Images Recalled—Bilder auf Abruf, 3. Fotofestival, Mannheim,
Ludwigshafen and Heidelberg, Germany
Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War,
Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo, Ireland
New Acquisitions—Rarely Seen Works,
Ludwig Müzeum, Budapest

2008
Terms and Conditions, de Ateliers, Amsterdam
Anzeige: Standort Alliance—Everyday Ideologies, Kunstmuseum Kloster
Unser Lieben Frauen, Magdeburg, Germany
8th Bienal de Arte Panamá, Panama
Luca Frei, *Marine Hugonniot & Sean Snyder*,
Grazer Kunstverein, Graz, Austria
Islands + Ghetos, phase III, Heidelberger Kunstverein, Germany
Brave New Worlds, Fundación/Collectiön Jumex, Ecatepec, Mexico
Self-Storage, California College of the Arts's Graduate
Program in Curatorial Practice, San Francisco
The Real World: Andreas Neumeister, Sean Snyder, Wolfgaang Tillmans,
Ludlow 38, New York
ITALIA, ITALIE, ITALIEN, ITALY, WŁOCHY,
Museo di Arte Contemporanea del Sannio, Benevento, Italy
Art Sheffield 2008: Yes, No & Other Options, Sheffield
Contemporary Art Forum, Sheffield, United Kingdom
Re Asia, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin
Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War, Blackwood Gallery, Missis-
sauga, Canada

2007
In Attesa di Risposta, Matthew Antezzo, Tom Burr,
Kirsten Pieroth and Sean Snyder, Supporitico Lopez, Berlin
Brave New Worlds, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Kitakyushu Biennial 2007, Kitakyushu, Japan
Transforming Memory: The politics of images, Galerija Nadezda, Cacak,
Serbia
Perspektive 07, Lenbachhaus Kunstbau, Munich
La Guerre et le Cinéma/War and Cinema, Centre Pompidou, Paris
Made in Germany, Kunstverein Hannover, Hannover
Memorial to the Iraq War, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

Landschaft (Entfernung)/Landscape (Distance),
Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart
Crisis Zones: World Cinema Now, Royal Ontario Museum,
Institute for Contemporary Culture, Toronto
Modelle für Morgen: Köln, European Kunsthalle, Cologne
This Place Is my Place: Begehrte Orte (Desired Spaces),
Kunstverein, Hamburg
Door Slamming Festival, Mehringdamm 72, Berlin

2006
Liminal Spaces/grenzräume, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst,
Leipzig, Germany
Exister! Bigger! Better!, ZKM, Center for Art and Media,
Karlsruhe, Germany
Everywhere, 5th Busan Biennale, Busan, Korea
House for sale, Beyond Utrecht, Utrecht, Netherlands
Fever Variations, 6th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea
How to Do Things?, Künstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, Berlin
On Mobility II, de Appel, Amsterdam
50 JPG, Centre de la Photographie, Geneva
Periferic 7: Focussing Iasi, Bienala Internationala de Arta
Contemporana, Iasi, Romania
52. Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Internationale Short
Film Festival, Oberhausen
Poor Man's Expression, Arsenal, Institut für Film
und Videokunst, Berlin
40Jahrevideokunst.de – Update 06, Lenbachhaus Kunstbau, Munich
Bad News, Galeria Kronika, Bytom, Poland
How to Do Things?, Center for Contemporary Art, Kyiv, Ukraine
Transit: NowHere Europe, National Museum of
Contemporary Art, Bukarest
Several ways out, Unge Kunstneres Samfund
(The Young Artists Society), Oslo
Sichtbarkeiten: Zwischen Fakten und Fiktionen,
Edith-Ruß-Haus für Medienkunst, Oldenberg, Germany
On Mobility, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius

2005
At the same time somewhere else....,The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
Paralleles Leben/Parallel Life, Frankfurter Kunstverein,
Frankfurt am Main
BMW: Black Market World, 9. Baltic Triennial of
International Art, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius
Istanbul, 9. Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul
Leçon Zéro, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris
Nolens Volens, 10 Jahre Galerie Neu, Galerie Neu, Berlin
inSITE_05, San Diego, Tijuana
Heimat Moderne, Experimentale 1 Leipzig 2005, Leipzig, Germany
Wanako 2005, Maejima Art Center, Okinawa
I Really Should..., Lisson Gallery, London
Offentliq Handling (Public Act), Lund Konsthall, Lund, Sweden
In This Colony/In Deze Kolonie, Kunstfort Bij Vijfhuizen,
Vijfhuizen, Netherlands

*Covering the Real: Arts and the Press Picture, from Warhol
to Tillmans*, Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel
POPULISM, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main; Contemporary
Art Centre, Vilnius; National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design,
Oslo; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
Land Marks, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris
Behind Closed Doors, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee,
United Kingdom
Red Riviera Revisited, Institute of Contemporary Art, Sofia, Bulgaria

2004
Terminal 5 Arrivals, John F. Kennedy Airport, New York
Utopia Station, Munich, Haus der Kunst, Munich
Information and the mythological machine, Warwick Arts Centre, Univer-
sity of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom
Common Property/Algemeingut, 6. Werkleitz Biennale, Halle, Germany
The Transformed Sternet, Nederlands Architectuur Instituut, Rotterdam
Territories: The Frontiers of Utopia and Other Facts on the Ground,
Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, Sweden; Witte de With, Rotterdam
Hotel Hollywood, Künstlerhaus Palais Thurn & Taxis, Bregenz, Austria
PUBLIC/PRIVATE: Tumatanui/Tumataiti, 2nd Auckland
Art Gallery Triennial 2004, Auckland, New Zealand
Schizorama, National Center of Contemporary Arts, Moscow

En Tránsito. Señales Presentes, Fundación Banco Patricios, Buenos Aires;
Museo Universitario del Chopo, México City

Awards & Residencies

2006
ARTE Prize, Filmtage Oberhausen, Germany
Artist Residency, Center of Contemporary Art, Kyiv

2005
Artist Residency, Institute of Contemporary Art, Sofia, Bulgaria

2002
Scholarship, DZ Bank

2001
Artist Residency, Akiyoshidai International Art Village,
Yamaguchi, Japan

2000
Artist Residency, IASPIS, Stockholm

1999
Senatsverwaltung für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur, Berlin

1998
Preisträger des Kulturkreises der deutschen Wirtschaft
im Bundesverband de Deutschen Industrie e.V., Köln



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Arts Council Korea

BRINKMANSHIP: PARK CHAN-KYONG AND SEAN SNYDER

By Doryun Chong

Brinkmanship: n. the technique of maneuvering a dangerous situation to the limits of safety in order to secure the greatest advantage. [1955–60]¹

Brinkmanship is the ostensible escalation of threats in order to achieve one’s aims. Originally the term brinkmanship was coined...during the Cold War. Eventually the threats involved might become so huge as to be unmanageable at which point both sides are likely to back down.²

This exhibition brings together two artists who have been sharing an ongoing conversation since their first encounter in 2002. Unfolding over the last several years in a number of locations, the dialogue between Park Chan-Kyong and Sean Snyder has revolved around, among other things, a particular intellectual affinity: North Korea and representations thereof. Their common interest in North Korea is in large part derived from the fact that the arguably most self-isolated nation-state in the world presents something of a hermeneutic challenge and thus invites continual considerations. While the exhibition includes examples of two artists’ distinct approaches to this common topic, it also extends beyond them to provide a small survey of their respective practices.

Educated at Seoul National University and the California Institute of the Arts, Park Chan-Kyong (born 1965, lives and works in Seoul) has addressed in his work South Korea and many of its political and philosophical vicissitudes, contradictions, and pathologies. In his thinking, this ongoing problematic is the result of a national history marked by a violently disruptive process of modernization, a devastating internecine war, and an extreme local manifestation of Cold War geopolitics. For Park, one may say, South Korea is a particularly intriguing subject not simply because it is his homeland, the reality he knows best, but also because it is a phantasmagorical site, where anachronistic throwbacks and futuristic projections together improbably constitute the logic of operation. There, atavistic narratives materialize like inconsolable ghosts, bursting the seams of the shiny surface of the everyday. American-born Sean Snyder (born 1972, lives and works in Tokyo and Kyiv) studied at the Städelschule in Frankfurt and initially focused his attention on seeking out and investigating obscure yet loaded sites as far-flung as Brazil, Japan, China, Romania, and North Korea, where the modernist principles of architectural and spatial organization have been forcibly applied and in the process have engendered unintended conditions of absurdity, subversion, and collapse. Rather than simply boring into local specificities, Snyder discloses the vectors of forces and interests that create almost invisible linkages across political borders. He sees these revelations through the general question of representation and, in recent years, has increasingly gravitated toward contemplating the strategies and operations of media and visuality per se.

Park’s and Snyder’s work exploits subtle modulations of the space between documentary and subjective in order to disclose the courses of—and blind spots in—the construction of collective imaginaries. Their methodologies are akin to and combine those of archivist, librarian, documentarian, cartographer, and journalist. Their almost obsessive research-based processes examine specific events, scenarios, and situations that both exemplify and undermine political and social ideologies. Park and Snyder acknowledge that they were critically shaped by the Cold War realpolitik, especially of the 1970s. This may very well be a point of convergence, and also a point of divergence, for them, not least because of the interconnected yet irreconcilable experiences of growing up in the United States and in South Korea. Although they would be understandably reluctant to attribute their artistic practices and abiding concerns to the memory of heightened and sustained ideological, geopolitical tension, it may be that their obsessions have been driven by the unresolved yet forgotten brinkmanship of a now bygone era, for our neoliberal age supposedly operates with a reconfigured global network of power. The recent history of the Cold War is anything but a closed chapter for Park and Snyder, however. At times, they strategically traffic in the nostalgic anachronism of that history. At other times, they struggle to dispel it with information, with specificities. The push-and-pull that occurs between the two positions—and the crossbred clarity and obscurity resulting from it—are perhaps where one may say their art lies.

The exhibition features two newly commissioned projects. Park’s **Three Cemeteries** (2009–10) consists of photographs with succinct explanatory texts that tell the fates of those buried at the sites, accompanied by environmental sounds from each location. Of the three cemeteries, the clearly best-kept one contains the bodies of those whose hometowns are located on the other side of the DMZ (demilitarized zone); its organized sections correspond to the administrative districts of North Korea where the deceased originated. If this cemetery is available only for those who can afford to carry their yearnings for homecoming into the afterlife, the other two mass graves are instilled with even more heart-wrenching pathos. One holds nameless North Korean and Chinese soldiers killed during the Korean War and North Korean armed spies dispatched to the South after the war. The other is a heaping mound of the bodies of anonymous female sex workers from a campsite town near several U.S. military bases in South Korea. The three rather muted images and their unsentimental descriptions allude to the exceedingly complicated politics and the human costs on the Korean peninsula.

Sean Snyder’s archive for a video essay in progress, **Smoke in Mirrors** (2009–10), takes its source material from recorded footage of the evening news broadcast of DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) State

Media. Snyder focuses particularly on the program’s “News of the World” segments, which give a peculiar portrait of the outside world riddled with natural as well as man-made catastrophes, political turmoil, and technological threats. On the one hand, Snyder’s reediting of the tightly controlled information delivery undermines the image of North Korea as a country completely sealed off from the outside world. On the other hand, this representation of the outside world in the source material is so peculiar—at least from our own Western, capitalist perspective—yet familiar that its completely distinct conception of history, progress, and evolution may even appear almost ingenious. If nothing else, the viewer watching *Smoke in Mirrors* is obliged to think about the inherently constructed nature of any world consciousness.

At first sight, the two works may seem to constitute a study in contrast between localism and internationalism. However, Park understands the North-South Korean relationship as nothing if not a synecdochical symptom of a larger condition, which simultaneously overrides and penetrates the individual nation-states. North Korea for Park, one may say, is the mirror image or inseparable Other of South Korea. Because the former remains infinitely beyond a reliable grasp, it motivates him to dig deeper into the latter, rendering the very local situation in which he lives increasingly bizarre and impenetrable. On the other hand, Snyder’s return to North Korea for his most recent project—after completing an extensive itinerary that included Macedonia, the Soviet Union of the past, and contemporary Iraq, as briefed in this exhibition—suggests that the country continues to hold a particular attraction for him with regard to his ongoing scrutiny of representation and representability.

While these two new works in the exhibition take North Korea as the point of departure, two earlier works by Park and Snyder illustrate both artists’ keen interest in finding and analyzing unexpected parallels and connections. In their work, local specificities are never purely local and can be comprehended only through extra-local, international vectors of design and accident. Park’s ***Power Passage*** (2004/2010) examines one particular moment in history—1975—and two events that took place in that year, one close to home and the other extraterrestrial. More than two decades after the Korean War but still in the midst of a tense standoff, an underground tunnel was found just south of the approximately 155-mile-long and 2.5-mile-wide DMZ, the de facto border between North and South Korea, which ironically is also said to be the most heavily militarized border in the world. The tunnel was believed to have been dug by North Korea for the purpose of sending invading armies south undetected and became the ultimate cipher of the Communists’ sinister plot against South Korea. At the same time, the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union, which had begun with the launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957, came to a symbolic end with the ASTP (Apollo-Soyuz

Test Project), the “friendly” bilateral collaboration that brought the spacecrafts of the two superpowers together when they docked in space on July 15, 1975. Park’s two-channel video constructs an apparently seamless yet intellectually jarring fiction of history out of images and texts culled from factual sources as well as imaginary depictions from popular American films such as ***Countdown*** (1968), ***Marooned*** (1969), and ***2010*** (1984). Here, the primitively belligerent labor of manually digging an underground passage in order to start a war stands in ironic contrast to the humanist détente facilitated by the most advanced technology, and the space-age futurism embodied by a real-world event and cinematic fictions intermingles with the sentimentalism of reunification. ***Power Passage*** is as much an investigation of facts as a testament to the power of associative imagination.

Snyder’s ***A Revisionist Model of Solidarity*** (2004–05) also concerns one remarkable moment in the history of modern architecture and urban planning: Japanese architect Kenzo Tange’s master plan for the reconstruction of the city of Skopje, Macedonia, after a devastating earthquake in 1963. International goodwill and cooperation facilitated by the United Nations took place across the ideological divide in a non-aligned Yugoslavia, of which Macedonia was a part at the time, transposing Tange’s ambitious design, based on his earlier, post-Fordist design, A Plan for Tokyo, 1960.³ The project was only partially implemented due to the complications to be expected in such a politically convoluted situation (and no less due to the presence of Croatian architects who had placed second in the competition) as well as the highly utopian nature of the plan itself. Snyder’s oblique representation of this episode relies on a rather sparse selection from in-depth research: photographs (two slides taken during the original survey of the site, Tange’s studio, and a model for the reconstructed city made by Tange and his team); videos (aerial and satellite images showing the successive transformations of Skopje, a documentary-style narration of the city’s destruction and reconstruction, and a seismograph shot at the Institute of Earthquake Engineering in Skopje); and an excerpt from an interview Snyder conducted with Jerry Sheerin, an American architect who worked on Tange’s team. This interview further adds Sheerin’s Vietnam War and civil rights–era American perspective to the exploration of the social role of architecture related to the already fascinating connection between postwar Japan and Communist Yugoslavia, between two different conceptions of internationalism.

A succinct description of the Skopje project by Tange’s team reads: “Our project, based on the preliminary Master Plan and studies compiled by the City of Skopje and collaborated on by the United Nations, manifests a system by which the mechanism of our contemporary society could be transformed into a spatial structure. This structuring system would continue to create the bridge between our ever progressing civilization and the constant

factor of humanity.”⁴ The utopian ideal encapsulated in the few sentences can also be said to generally exemplify the ideological convictions characteristic of the Cold War period. In a similar vein, Snyder’s ***Exhibition*** (2008) is another effort to look at an even earlier period infused with a belief in the reconstruction of the public through didactic apparatuses. ***Exhibition*** takes its source material from a Soviet propaganda film that documents and extols an exhibition of contemporary Mexican art at a provincial museum. Displacing the voiceover and inserting intertitles, and also reediting the sequencing of the film’s narrative, Snyder destabilizes the pedantic message of the “universal” value of art, which in fact is almost universally assumed in wildly differing ideological, political contexts, including our own.

If ***Exhibition*** marked an important point of self-reflection about art and art making, the creative possibilities of archival repurposing and reediting that characterize Snyder’s practice—and the inherent subjectivity of his methodology—are perhaps most strongly shown in his ***Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars*** (2004–05). Widely shown in numerous exhibitions as well as film festivals, the video incorporates moving and still images from the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan culled from “official” and “public” as well as amateur sources. As the title evocatively suggests, the work is an analysis of the involvement of corporate interests in politically justified invasions. At the same time, a rare artist’s voiceover analyzes and muses on the conventions of image framing and capturing, thus alerting the viewer to the construction of a consciousness of the world, which is inextricably subjugated to the regime of the digitally produced and distributed imagery of our time.

Park’s single-channel video ***Flying*** (2005) is an essay on the historic summit meeting of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il and then South Korean president Kim Dae-Joong, which took place in June 2000. It uses the footage taken from mostly unedited, unbroadcast video recordings procured from three different South Korean TV stations. Footage showing a casual aerial shot of North Korean territory outside the airplane window and a welcoming crowd lining the avenue from the airport into Pyongyang is interrupted by a brief insertion of U.S. military archival footage of the bombing of North Korea, linking wartime devastation with the treeless, dusty landscape of the present. In its economy and usage of archival sources, the work bears a certain methodological resemblance to Snyder’s ***Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars*** and ***Exhibition***. One clearly distinguishing aspect of ***Flying***, however, is its musical element: an ebbing and flowing soundtrack appropriated from ***Double Concerto for Oboe, Harp, and Chamber Orchestra*** (1977), composed by Isang Yun (1917–1995). The texts that punctuate the flow of images describe the music, effectively setting up a structure of two parallel and interwoven narratives. South Korean–born Yun was politically persecuted for

supporting a better relationship between the two Koreas and died in exile in Germany. Inspired by the tale of Gyeonu and Jiknyeo—the Korean myth of the Milky Way that is also a kind of Korean Orpheus and Eurydice—the music, though by a purportedly modernist composer, is undeniably sentimentalist.⁵

Indeed, Park’s work, belying its apparently clinical approach and look, is characterized by the notably consistent presence of the romanticist, and this aspect also leads to and facilitates his recent examination of the role of spirituality in hypermodern South Korean society. Park states that he has always been less critical of media than curious about its utilitarian potentials,⁶ and his work finds perhaps its most ambitious form in ***Sindoan*** (2009), a forty-five-minute-long high-definition film. The title ***Sindoan***, which literally means “New Capital,” derives from the fact that the basin adjacent to Mount Gyeryong in Chung-cheong South Province—the location and subject of the film—was chosen as the seat of the new capital by the founder of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), though it was ultimately passed over for another site, Seoul. Despite, or perhaps because of, its unfulfilled promise, Sindoan became a legendary site where numerous indigenous religions—many growing out of and combining elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and shamanism—proliferated over the centuries. Park’s ***Sindoan*** is a prismatic study structured in six chapters, encompassing a range of methods of representing the site and its fascinating history and mythology—from archival-historical and anthropological examinations to cinematic and performative reconstructions. It is also effectively a diagnosis of the spiritual foundation of a nation and society that has chosen to erase completely many of the unorthodox narratives of its past.

Although both Park and Snyder concede that their works are highly topical, their interests may also be said to share a dogged desire to contemplate modernity itself. That tyrannical condition and concept brutally homogenizes across distinct terrains and yet simultaneously repeats the cycle of creating and demolishing temporal fissures through its inherent progressivist logic. In the process, it rapaciously consumes differences while constantly generating new sets of difference. Utopianism, an indispensable tool in the blindly forward-looking movement of modernity, is a focal point for both artists, particularly because of its numerous failures. Just as “failed utopia” is an abiding fascination in their searches, “apocalyptic” continually surfaces in their work. These two terms form an undercurrent in their exploration of possibilities for combining information and speculation.

^[1] For a description of Snyder’s project, see Mattias Dusini, “Let’s Build a City—On Sean Snyder’s Work A Revisionist Model of Solidarity,” in Sean Snyder (Vienna: Seession, 2009).

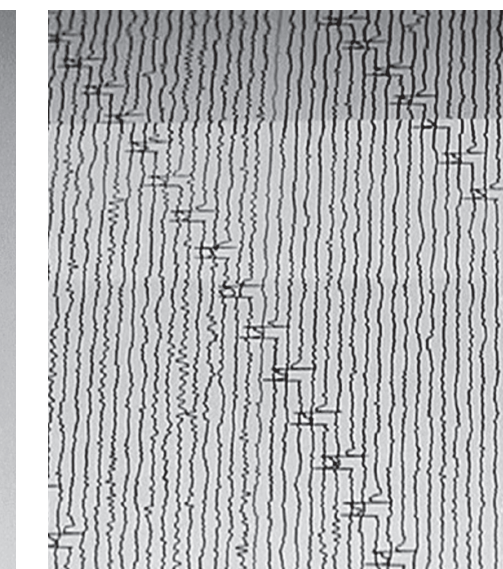
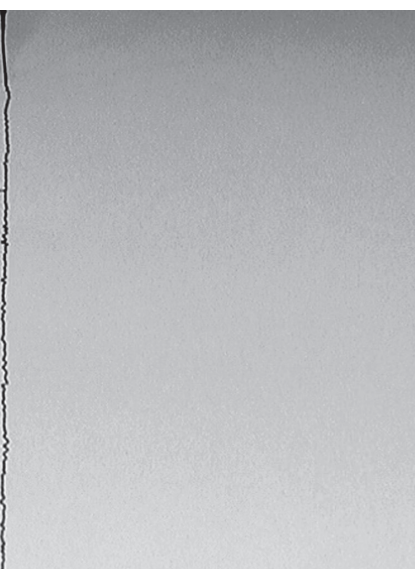
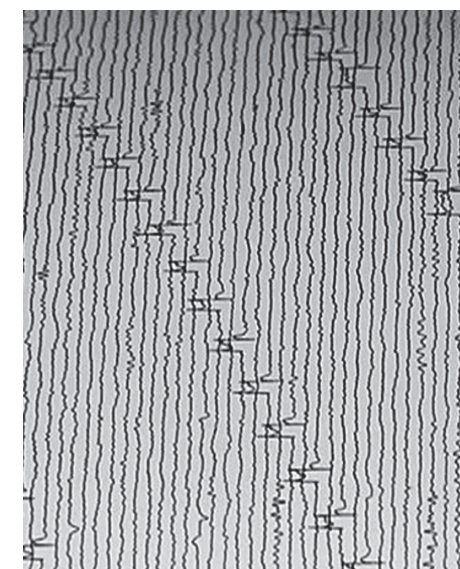
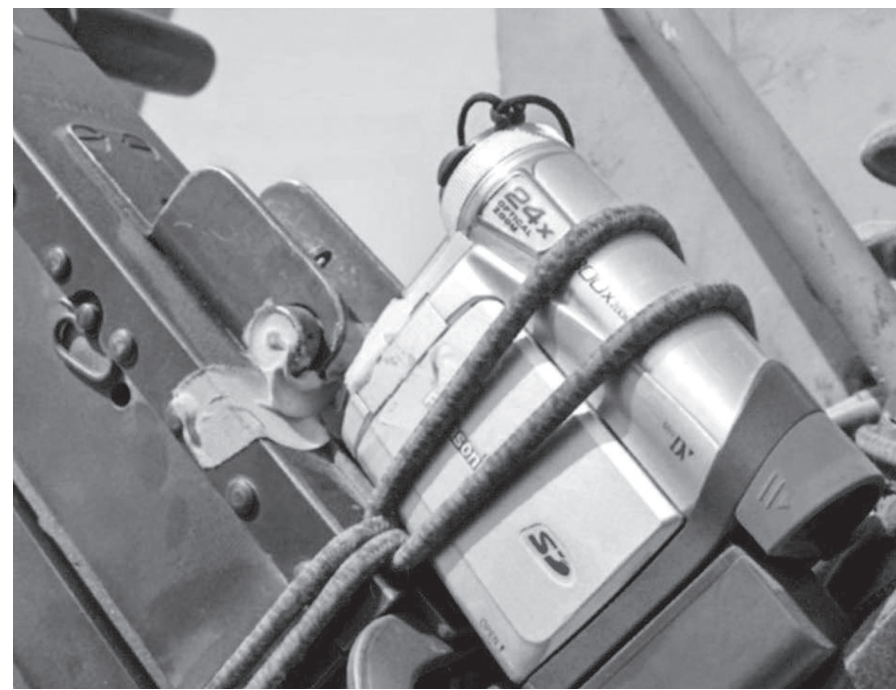
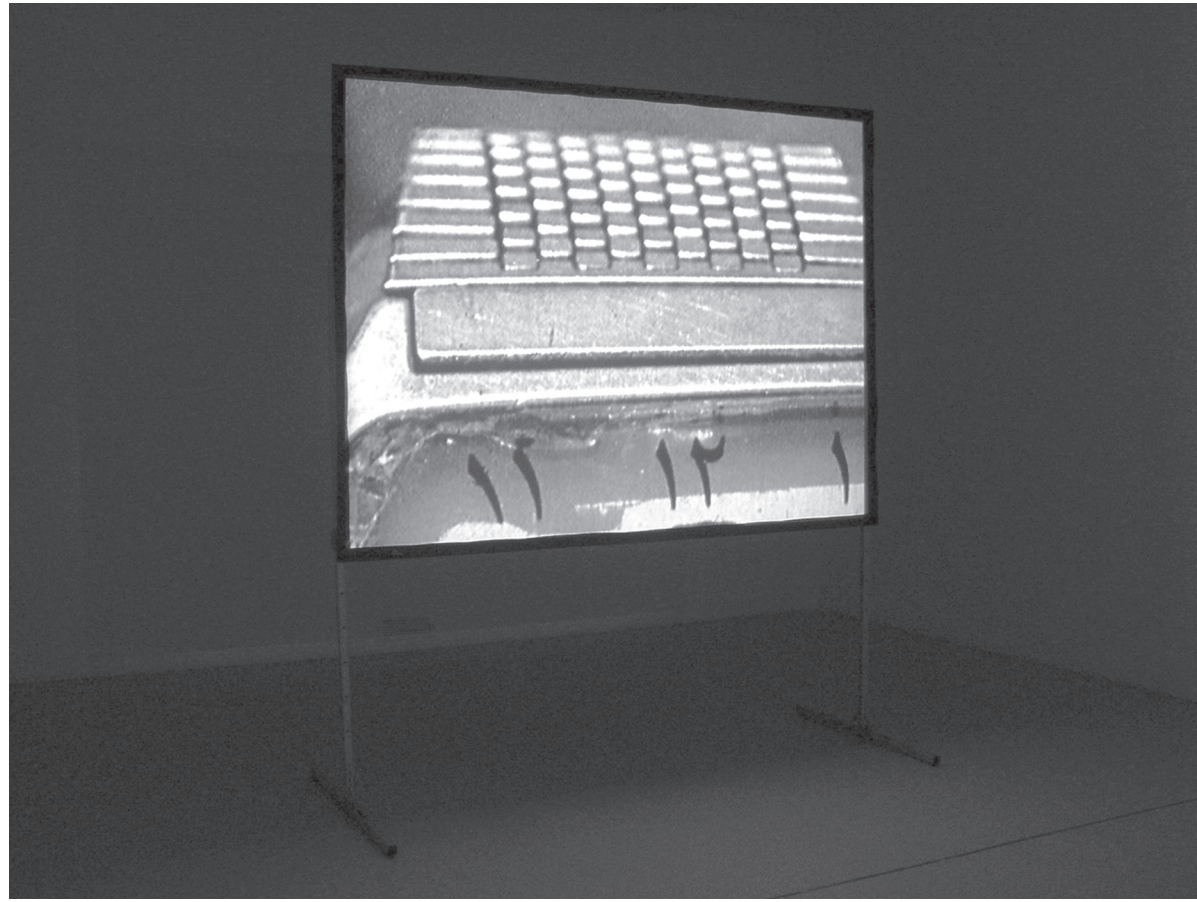
^[2] Sean Snyder, 22.

^[3] Versions of the tale of Gyeonu and Jiknyeo are found in China and Japan as well as in Korea. In the story, Gyeonu (Oxherd) and Jiknyeo (Weaver Woman) are banished to two different stars and separated by the Milky Way but are allowed a reunion once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month (of the lunar calendar), when they meet on a bridge formed by crows and magpies. Yun thought of this story as a metaphor for the North-South Korean relationship.

^[4] Conversation with the artist, December 26, 2009.

^[5] Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, 2001.

^[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brinkmanship (accessed February 1, 2010).



Sean Snyder
Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars (2004-05)

Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars is a video essay that is not a direct commentary on political issues of Middle East, but rather an investigation into the representational modes of events that are consumed second hand that outlines decades of foreign corporate involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Examining the acceptance of consumer products on all sides of ideological divides and the transforming role of photojournalists given the availability of consumer digital imaging products it questions conventions and complications of producing an iconic image of war. The video appropriates existing still images and video footage from amateur, governmental and photojournalistic sources accompanied by an essayist commentary.

Sean Snyder
A Revisionist Model of Solidarity (2004-05)

A Revisionist Model of Solidarity focuses on the reconstruction efforts of the city of Skopje following an earthquake in 1963 to explore the inevitable disparity between intent and realization of utopian projects. In addition to improvised prefabricated buildings, a Master Plan for Skopje was designed by the Japanese architect and urban planner Kenzo Tange as an adaptation of his urban development model for Tokyo from 1960. Construction of the proposal were interpreted by Yugoslavian architects and foreign contractors. Indeterminately inscribed in architectural history, the effort can be seen as an example of Asian modernism transposed on a European city. Using the United Nations publication *Skopje Resurgent* as a reference, as well as archival material, and interviews with those involved the project traces aspects between planned and improvised methods for rebuilding that involved cooperation between experts from more than 60 socialist and western countries.

On Power Passage

By Park Chan-Kyong

This essay was originally written in 2004 by the artist about his work *Power Passage* (2004/2010, two-channel video, color and sound).

In 1972, the year marking the beginning of détente, U.S. president Richard M. Nixon and Soviet premier Aleksey Nikolayevich Kosygin approved a rendezvous plan between a U.S. and a USSR spacecraft, and three years later, the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project (ASTP) was realized in space. There are those who collect everything related to the ASTP—from document files holding all records of the mission, photographs, pictures, and diagrams, to stamps made in the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Mongolia, commemorative coins, and collectible models. However, the obsession that far surpasses any collector’s zeal is the obsession found in the project itself: the vastly complex calculations, technical specifications, and political protocols all focused on one single mission—the docking of two spaceships.

There are also people who are obsessed with the underground, not space. The South Korean organization Underground Tunnel Hunters, composed of former high-ranking military officers, pastors, and college professors, maintains that North Korea has dug underground tunnels into the Seoul metropolitan area. During an excavation to prove the existence of a Hwasung underground tunnel, the hunters found a weeding hoe of a type that is not used in South Korea. They said this type of weeding hoe is used only in Vietnam.



Underground Tunnel Hunters digging in an area suspected of having underground tunnels

The second underground tunnel dug by North Korea was found in 1975, four months before the ASTP was concluded. Far more tunnels were dug in Vietnam during the same period. After an underground tunnel was found in the demilitarized zone, people at both ends could use it to infiltrate, regardless of who created it.

In 1969, the movie *Marooned*, directed by John Sturges, was produced based on the novel of the same title. The movie had a substantial impact on the ASTP six years later. Philip Handler, of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, who visited Moscow in 1970, used the movie’s scenario to stress the importance of cooperation between the two countries when he met with representatives of the Soviet space project. The Soviet representatives were quite surprised that a Soviet cosmonaut who saved the life of an American astronaut was portrayed as a hero in the movie.

In a scene from *Marooned*, a cosmonaut barely manages to grab the U.S. astronaut off the Ironman 1, which had veered off course in space. The contrast between the vastness of space and the confined interior of the spaceship is a typical feature of many science-fiction films set in space. But here, the nearness of two bodies that almost miss touching each other is more than just a contrast to the vastness of space, especially to Korean viewers.

Sci-fi films show images of the future created in the past. Robert Altman’s *Countdown* depicts the moon landing as it happened in 1968, one year before Apollo landed on the moon. A scene in the movie that carries many implications is the one in which an American astronaut discovers the bodies of Soviet cosmonauts who had arrived on the moon before him. This is probably a working metaphor for the



Film still from *Marooned*

present day. In this movie, the moon represents the earth ruined by reckless competition, while the earth becomes a beautiful planet that watches over the moon, which has been seized by destruction. The movie ends without a clear conclusion as to whether the astronaut will be able to return to that planet.

These sci-fi stories are set in the future, but the special effects are seemingly obsolete, allowing us to see the “futuristic imagination of the past.” These images give viewers the odd perception of being in a time warp. The special effects leak out of the illusionistic space, and the scientific images suddenly slip into the soap opera.

I imagine that one day, movies like *Marooned* and *Countdown* will be screened in the underground tunnels of Korea, and then tourists from all over the world will see marooned spaceships in the artificial caves, experiencing both the toil of excavation and high-end technology. Perhaps the tourists would enjoy Korean sci-fi films instead of U.S. ones. If we were to apply the U.S. sci-fi film chronology literally, the film about the space rendezvous between two Koreas would be produced around 2010. (The Korean War began in 1950, South Korean satellites were launched in 1995 and 2004, and North Korea claims it launched satellites in 1998 and 2009.)

Some Quotations for *Power Passage*

1. A Situationist’s note on space spectacle

“Power, which cannot tolerate a vacuum, has never forgiven celestial regions for being open terrains left open to the imagination.” —Eduardo Rothe, 1969

2. Apollo-Soyuz Test Project telecommunications record

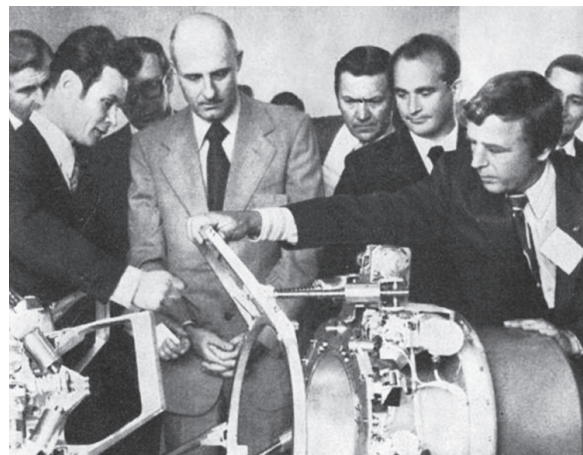


Plate from Soyuz-Apollo, M. F. (Mikhail) Rebrov, Mashinostroenie (Machinostroyeniye), Moscow, 1975

ASTP (USA) MC195/1
Time: 11:04 CDT, 51:44 GET
7/17/75

ACDR (Soyuz, please tell us when you begin your maneuver.)

ACDR (Soyuz, this is Apollo. How do you read?)

USSR Read fine.

ACDR (Yes, please tell us when you begin your maneuvering.)

USSR Soyuz initiating orientation maneuver.

USSR Ready?

ACDR (Yes, very slowly.)

USSR Visual orientation initiated.

ACDR (Roger.)

USSR Soyuz docking system is ready.

ACDR (We are also ready, Apollo is ready.)

USSR Do you see spacecraft?

ACDR Yes.

ACDR (We see it. It’s very beautiful. We see your periscope.)

USSR That’s a good picture.

CC-H Apollo, Houston. As far as our TV picture goes, it’s been real good. It is, as you maneuver around, and the sunlight rises on the 2 spacecraft it does get very bright. If you’re in average slave and linear.

USSR The maneuver is completed.

ACDR (Roger.)

USSR Visual orientation established.

ACDR (Garble) slaving.

CC-H Good show. Let’s stay there. Looking fine.

ACDR (I’m approaching Soyuz.)

USSR Oh, please, don’t forget about your engine.

ACDR (not readable)

USSR (not readable)

ACDR (One half meter.)

ACDR (Less than 5 meters distance.)

CC-H Deke, Houston. Can you close down the f-stop some?

ACDR (3 meters.)

ACDR (not readable)

ACDR (Contact.)

USSR

ACDR We also have capture.

ACDR We have succeeded. ‘Everything is excellent.

USSR Soyuz and Apollo are shaking hands now.

ACDR (We agree.)

CC-H Apollo, Houston. Deke, when you have a chance, we’d like to close down the f-stops. We do have a good picture but it’s too bright.

CC-H Yeah - right there, Deke.

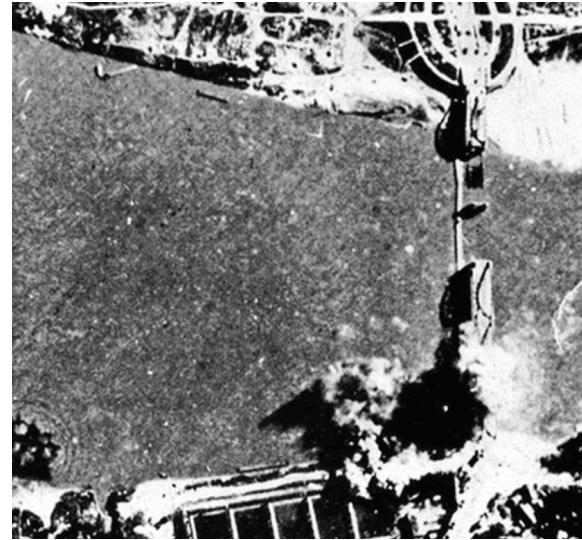
DMP Is that okay, Dick?

CC-H Deke, it got a little bit better, but it’s still a little bit too bright. While you were fooling around with it,

though, we did get a good picture when you were closed down a little more.

From 20th Century NASA History: Skylab Reference, Apollo-Soyuz Test Project (ASTP) Press Kit and Flight Plan, ring-bound catalogue published by World Spaceflight News, 2001.

3. Han River



Destroyed bridge on the Han River during the Korean War

Man: Why has this lady been staring at the river for so long?

Woman: (low sobbing sound)

Man: Why are you sobbing? For what reason?

Woman: During the Korean War, we crossed the river first, and he, he, said he would follow us the day after...

Man: So, that was the last time you saw him?

Woman: Yeah... if I had known that...

Man: Listen to me, many people lost their dear lives during the war, and many of those who were close have become separated. Forget it all...

Woman: But what he said when he sent us across still rings in my ears, and I can still see him clearly... then how can I forget him, how?

Man: Lady, look at this Han River. The river flows quietly as if to ask if there was a war. Time goes by like that. Time flows like the river. Forget it all. Float the past on this water.

Woman: How... how can I forget? How?

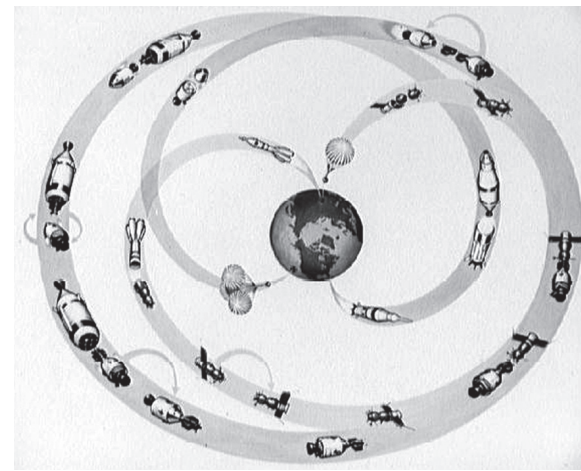
From “Han River,” lyrics and music by Choi Byung-Ho, performed by Choi Jung-Ja, 1952.

4. Docking Module

A system module inside the docking module contains control and display panels, VHF/FM transceiver, environmental control life support system components and storage compartments. Other equipment in the docking module includes oxygen masks, fire extinguisher, floodlights and handholds, a junction box (“J-box”) for linking Soyuz communications circuits to Apollo, the MA-010 Multipurpose Furnace and two removable stowage lockers containing TV equipment, spare carbon dioxide absorption cartridges and miscellaneous items. Gaseous oxygen and nitrogen are stored in four identical spherical tanks external to the pressure vessel and in two pairs shielded by insulated covers. A total of 18.9 kilograms of nitrogen and 21.7 kilograms of oxygen.

Apollo’s orbital atmosphere is 100% oxygen at 258 millimeters of mercury, while the Soyuz atmosphere is normally an oxygen/nitrogen mix at 760 millimeters of mercury. Transferring from Soyuz to Apollo in these conditions normally would require the cosmonauts to pre-breathe pure oxygen to purge suspended nitrogen from their blood streams, but by lowering the Soyuz pressure to 518 millimeters of mercury, crew inter-spacecraft transfers can be made without time-consuming pre-breathing. Hatches at both ends of the docking module and pressure equalization valves permit crew transfer without disturbing the atmospheres in either spacecraft.

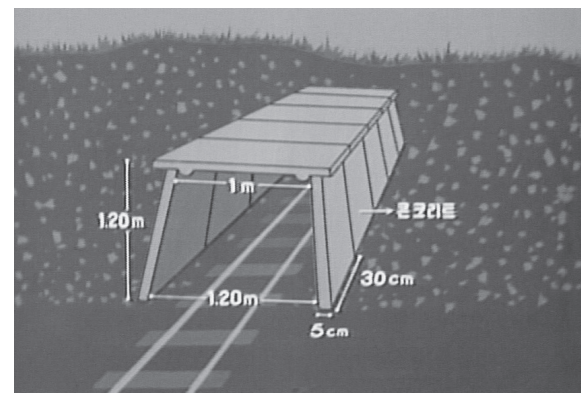
From 20th Century NASA History: Skylab and Apollo-Soyuz (ASTP) Image Galleries and NASA Documents plus Gemini Image Gallery, CD-ROM published by World Spaceflight News, 2001.



NASA photo ID: S75-27288
File name: 10076430.jpg
Date taken: 04/01/75
Painting by Davis Meltzer

5. Description from Daehan News

“This tunnel is assembled in the shape of a trapezoid that is 1 meter in height, 1 meter in upper breadth, and 1 meter and 20 centimeters in lower breadth with a 5-centimeter-thick wall of concrete.” —Daehan News, 1975



Footage from *Daehan News*, 1975

Park Chan-Kyong

Three Cemeteries

3 photographs and text, audio, 32 x 53-1/2 in. each. Commissioned by REDCAT, Los Angeles



Jeokgun-myo (Cemetery of the enemies), Paju, South Korea

The cemetery contains anonymous North Korean and Chinese soldiers who died in the Korean War. North Korean armed spies who were killed during their missions in South Korea are also buried here. North Korea denies the dispatch of spies to the South. This area was used as a waste site by the U.S. army. The graves face north.



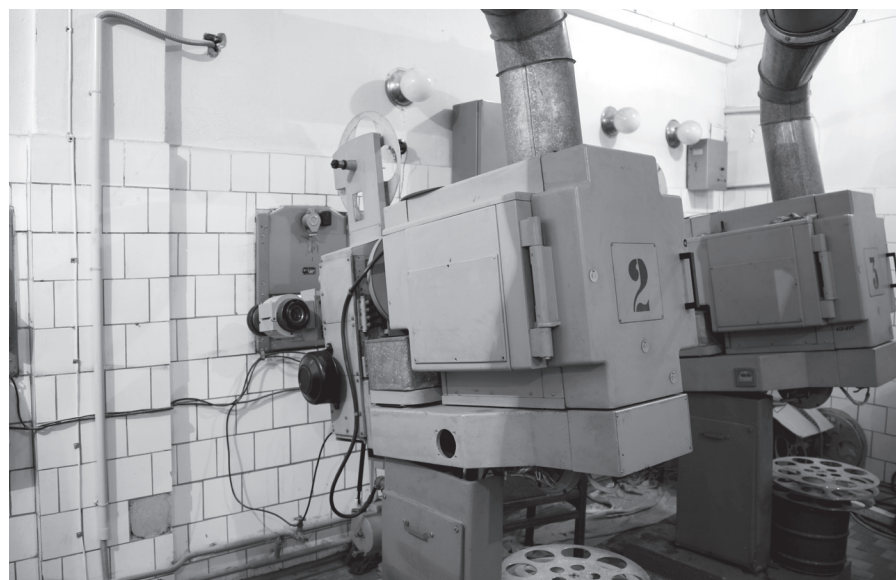
Sangpae-dong Cemetery, Dongducheon, South Korea

Officially, 1,224 bodies are buried here, mostly anonymous female sex workers who worked at the U.S. military campsite town in Dongducheon. Camp Casey, Camp Hovey, Camp Nimble, and Camp Gimhols are the U.S. army bases in Dongducheon. U.S. soldiers called the area “Little California.”



Donghwa Gyeongmo Park, Paju, South Korea

This public cemetery is dedicated to those who lost their homes in North Korea because of the partition. The area is divided into the traditional districts of North Korea as they are maintained by South Korea. The land of North Korea is visible from what are alleged to be the best spots.



Sean Snyder
Exhibition (2008)

Exhibition is a video about art, and the discourse and rituals it generates as well as the work involved in the production of exhibitions. *Exhibition* reflects the social dimension of art and the failure of educational projects based on assumptions of the universal aesthetic value. The video uses as a subject the Soviet documentary film *Noble Impulses of Soul*, 1965, by Israel Goldstein. In typical 1960s Soviet style, the pedagogical tone of the film's narrative praises the efforts of a provincial museum in the village of Parkhomivka in Eastern Ukraine where an exhibition of contemporary Mexican art presented at the museum accompanied by an art history lecture at a village farm. The reprocessed video restructures the primary components, eliminates the voice of the narrator, and reorders the chronology of the film to break the continuous realistic world of documentary.



Sean Snyder
Smoke in Mirrors (2009-10)

As part of ongoing research into North Korean media and image production, for an analytic video essay in progress taking as a subject the evening TV news, *Smoke in Mirrors* is excerpted from a working archive for a video essay monitoring the DPRK State Media during 2009.

The DPRK is the most isolated country in the world and its citizens live in the world's deepest information void. The only information accessible about the world outside North Korea is the program appearing irregularly during the evening news broadcast 'News of the World' depicts as a horrific spectacle with consistent themes—war, accidents, natural disasters, alienating technology, global protest, extreme physical human activity and endurance, and so on. Can we learn something from the image of this outer world which functions as an ideological supplement of the shrinking and self-destructive enclaves of resistance to the process of globalization?

On Sindoa­n: Some Scattered Views on Tradition and “The Sublime”

By Park Chan-Kyong

This essay is an attempt to organize the thoughts that served as the background for the production of my film *Sindoa­n* (2008, video, color and sound, 45 min.).

1. One day, I had an accidental encounter with Mount Gyeryong, and an indescribable shock came over me. Though covered in snow, with reflection from the full moon, the mountain revealed itself in its glorious fullness even in the middle of the night. Unlike other large mountains in South Korea, which one can rarely see fully because they are usually buried in neighboring peaks, Mount Gyeryong is a so-called protrusion-in-the-field type of mountain, whose overall shape is quite visible even from a distance.

I suspect that the experience I had is akin to what is termed “the sublime” in Western aesthetics. The theory of the sublime, which was introduced to South Korea piggybacking on the theory of postmodernism, seems to have been revived in the wake of September 11, 2001. In fact, looking at the culture of the relatively recent past, we witness the aesthetics of the sublime manifested in diverse genres in Western society. Its recurrent revivals in Western culture are exemplified by Werner Herzog’s film *Nosferatu*, which borrows from Caspar David Friedrich’s landscape imagery; Turner’s stormy seas and other Romanticist painters’ images of ruins simulated in all kinds of disaster films; and the montage of primitive sacrificial rites in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. The aesthetics of the sublime, more than its theory per se, has very much become part of the familiar visual-aural experiences of South Koreans. Furthermore, if the concept of the sublime is itself premised on given conditions such as death, nature, and the infinity of the universe, it is not specific to the West but can very well be universal for all humanity. If the sublime can be explained as a Kantian universal human experience (even though the German philosopher distinguished between peoples who are close to the sublime and those who are far from it), then we can also attempt an explanation for the sublime in Korea and Northeast Asia. My question, to which I have no clear answer, is this: How has the sublime manifested itself in Korean and Northeast Asian cultures? If certain traditions correspond to the sublime, in what ways might we now make works of art, and what meanings and values would such representations have?

2. In the well-known Thai film *Tropical Malady* (2004, directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul), the protagonist passes through bizarre locations, including a cave, on his way into a deep jungle. Then he suddenly enters the time-space of a fable where he can converse with animals. Ultimately, lost in the jungle in the middle of night, he comes face to face with a tiger, or the ghost of a tiger. On the one hand, I suspect that *Tropical Malady* might be yet another contemporary example of Orientalism. On the other hand, I have a strong sense of solidarity with such a sensibility. And this sensibility, perhaps, parallels my childhood memory of seeing golden Buddha statues and paintings of Buddhist deities and mountain spirits through candlelight and incense smoke in a temple deep in the mountains, when I accompanied my parents to the mass of the forty-ninth day for a dead distant relative by marriage.¹ I am also thinking about old Asian paintings of bizarre-

[[]*Author’s note*] Sindoa­n: the name of a basin located in the foothills of Mount Gyeryong, facing in the direction of the city of Daejeon. Currently situated in the territory of Gyeryong City, Chungcheong South Province, Sindoa­n was selected by Lee Seong-gye, the founder and first king of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), to be the location of his new capital; its name literally means “the new capital.” Adherents of the traditional Pungsu-Docham (geomancy and Confucian divination) Theory, folk religions, and new religions believed the site was the center of a utopian society. Since the Japanese colonial period, hundreds of religious and cult organizations have flourished in Sindoa­n. In 1984, with the relocation of the Joint Forces Headquarters, Gyeryong Base, the majority of residences and religious structures were demolished.

¹ [This and all subsequent notes are the translator’s.] The mass of the forty-ninth day is thus named because it is conducted on the forty-ninth day after someone dies. Originally a Buddhist rite, the mass is based on the belief that the soul of a dead person wanders without a body for forty-nine days until it reincarnates. In present-day Korea, the mass is widely practiced not only by Buddhists but also by people of various religious associations as well as secularists.

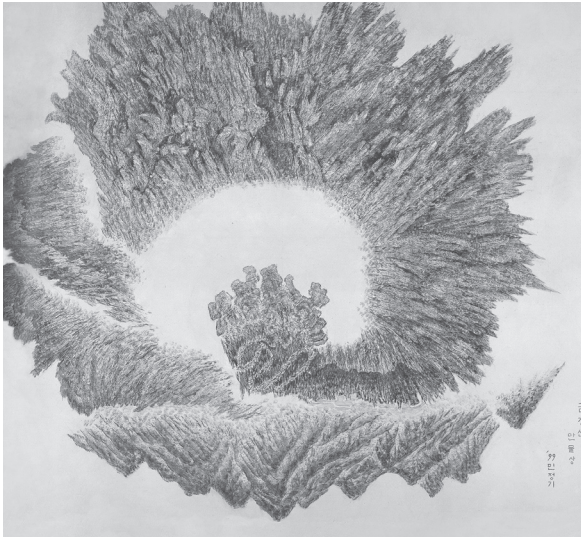
looking rocks I have seen in museums. Such experiences give me—and probably all of us—one of the most important human emotions, that of fear/awe.

This emotion of fear/awe, because it has long been inherent, is without a doubt shaped in correlation with local nature and culture. In that sense, Mount Gyeryong is not a Korean version of the Alps but is closely related to its own “site-specific” aesthetics. One may question, of course, whether my generation’s urban culture has already been severed from such memories and, furthermore, whether I may be forcing a theory. The point here, however, is that the question could just as easily be inverted. Precisely because of such severing, the hermitages and old temples one happens upon deep in the mountains can be even more unexpected, difficult to interpret, and possibly jolting. Ever since the publication of Yoo Hong-jun’s book *My Survey of Cultural Heritages*,² which inspired a traditional-culture tourist boom in South Korea in the 1990s, or in the current situation in which the world has become an enormous photographic archive thanks to technologies like Google Earth, the old, the deep, and the fearful have increasingly fewer places to hide. When poet Kim Ji-ha speaks endlessly and almost with a certain naïveté about the importance of Haewol Philosophy, and when Choi In-hoon feels a profound remorse when faced with the ruins of Goryeo Dynasty-era Buddhist temples, can we really not understand such emotions?³ Furthermore, when the dreams of Buddhist salvation found in the work of writer Kim Seong-dong and the Korean Romanticism that can be seen in film director Im Kwon-taek’s fixation on traditional culture are found to be at risk, do they not appeal to us even more poignantly?⁴ Or, to take examples from art, what about Park Saeng-gwang’s talisman-like pictures of shamans, Oh Yoon’s humorous images of demons, and Min Jeong-gi’s bizarre paintings of Mount Geumgang?⁵

² Yoo Hong-jun is a well-known art historian who also served as the head of the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea from 2004 until 2008. In 1993, he published the first volume of *My Survey of Cultural Heritages* (Naeu munhwa dabsagi), a travelogue/personal reflection for general readership, which contends that there are numerous, unrecognized cultural artifacts all over Korea. The book became an instant best seller and led to the publication of two additional volumes, selling approximately 2.2 million copies total.

³ Kim Ji-ha is perhaps best known for his poem “Five Enemies” (Ojeok). Published in the May 1970 issue of the journal Sasanggye (Realm of Philosophy), the poem is a trenchant critique and parody of the corrupt government of the time, and Kim was ultimately convicted of violating the National Security Law and imprisoned for one hundred days. Haewol is the sobriquet of Choi Shi-hyung, the second head of the Donghak (Eastern Learning) movement (see note 8 below). Haewol Philosophy refers to Choi’s interpretation of Donghak, which was organized for easy practice by the commoners and peasants who made up the majority of its followers. Choi In-hoon is considered one of the representative figures in modern Korean literature and is known for his existentialist works. For instance, his 1960 novel *The Square* (Gwangjang) portrays a young intellectual who struggles and then fails to find a third, alternative ideology to the binaries of North and South Korea, communism, and capitalism and eventually chooses to commit suicide.

⁴ Novelist Kim Seong-dong debuted in 1978 with his mid-length story “Mandala” (Mandara), which was published in the journal Korean Literature (Hanguk munhak). He also won the year’s New Writer Award. Published in a revised and expanded form in 1980, the story tells the struggles and confusions of a young practicing Buddhist monk who comes to enlightenment by realizing that the true path lies not in solitary meditation but in encounters and relationships between people. It was later adapted for a film by Im Kwon-taek. Director Im Kwon-taek has made more than one hundred films since 1962. One of South Korea’s most renowned filmmakers, Im has often set his films in Korea’s past and addressed the issue of Korean cultural identity in modernity. His films have been widely screened at international film festivals, and both he and his films have been honored with a number of awards, including Best Director for *Chihwaseon* (2002) at the Cannes Film Festival and the Honorary Golden Berlin Bear at the Berlin Film Festival (2005).

⁵ Painter Park Saeng-Gwang, trained in Japan in Nihonga, or modern Japanese-style painting, during the colonial period, was often criticized in his early career for the “Japanese colors” in his work. In the late 1970s, he started traveling around the country to study traditional architectural and artistic traditions and subsequently devoted the rest of his life to developing a native Korean aesthetics. Oh Yoon is an artist best known for his woodblock prints, which often feature thickly contoured, rough figural representations of farmers, workers, and dancers in dynamic compositions. He is considered to be one of the most representative artists associated with the 1980s Minjung (People’s) Art movement.

 Min Joung Ki, *Manmulsang at Guemgang Mountain*, 1999, oil on canvas, 333 x 224 cm

For members of the generation to which such figures belong, traditional culture and Korean nature seem to have been a critical problem or a grand exercise, something on which they could gamble their whole lives in order to rescue (modernize?) their virtues. Even if many among this generation either retreated into mysticism or ended up devoting themselves to a “cultural nationalism,” their efforts continue to be valuable in that they relentlessly demand correction of the excessive, violent imbalance between Western culture and Korean culture. (Of course, we still need to guard against absurdly conservative tastes, the kind exemplified by the Department of Oriental Painting in Seoul National University’s College of Fine Arts or the right-wing nationalism of Lee Moon-yeol.⁶) If the experience of that generation was defined primarily by a separation of city and countryside and the “battle of speed” of development in their lives, for my generation—especially someone like me who was born in Seoul and raised as a Catholic in a high-rise apartment complex—Korean traditional culture, especially traditional religious culture, is unfamiliar from the get-go and may even be said to belong more to the realm of imagination than to that of reality.

This is why all I do with regard to tradition is always to postpone doing anything about it, like a patient not wanting to go to hospital or a student not wanting to do his homework. However, the more you postpone something, the graver a countenance it assumes. Ultimately, like a rock that you trip over because you have neglected to put it away, it becomes something you end up regretting somewhere down the line. Might this recurrent return of postponement and the subject of tradition be a certain obsession, or could it be a type of wisdom that has yet to be defined clearly? At least one thing is clear. Whether it is an obsession or a prediction of certain wisdom, tradition is something that touches

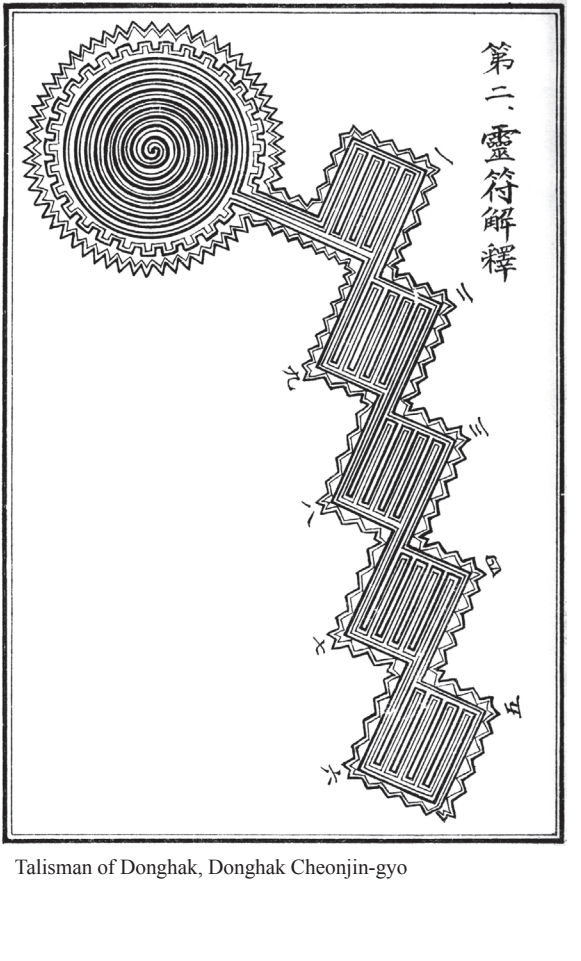

 Sindoa­n, 2008, video, color and sound, 45 min.

⁶ Painter Min Jeong-gi was first active as a member of the artists’ collective Reality and Utterance in the early 1980s and was also affiliated with the Minjung Art movement. His earlier paintings often employ kitschy figurative images as a way of expressing everyday social contradictions. Since the 1990s, he has focused on landscapes, in which he combines his intense observation of the Korean conceptual landscape painting tradition with Western oil painting techniques.

⁷ Writer Lee Moon-yeol is perhaps best known for his 1987 novel *Our Twisted Hero* (Urideul ui ilgeurojin yeongwung), which deals with the issues of politics and authority through an allegorical tale of young grade-school students. The novel won Lee the prestigious Yi Sang Literary Award in 1987 and was also adapted for a 1992 film of the same title. Since the mid-1990s, Lee has emerged as a prominent conservative voice through his lectures, newspaper editorials, and literary works.

on “the unconscious,” a force that grabs the back of your head, a fascination that disturbs “my modernization,” and, to use recent parlance, a typical “Other.” The anxiety I feel because I am outside of “this” seems always to take up half of my capacity for thinking and cultural reception. Therefore, what is more interesting to me than the reconstitution or modernization of tradition is the notion that tradition—as a kind of Other and in the sense that it appears like an unknowable specter—is a sort of “local wound,” which has only symptoms but no identifiable scientific diagnosis. If modernity was a traumatic experience in the recent past, then tradition is the resulting wound.

3. There are a number of traditional Korean things that have survived into contemporary everyday life, such as *ondol* (subfloor heating systems). Of those, religious cultures have the longest and most tenacious life. On the one hand, it goes without saying that traditional society maintained a far more quotidian and firmer relationship with things such as religion and mythology. On the other hand, the religious culture and mythological structure of traditional society were what contrasted most sharply with, and were thus most deeply hidden in, the process of modernization. More than anything else, traditional religious culture is the most significant trauma. For instance, it was *Donghak* (Eastern Learning) that fought most fiercely against Japanese imperialism and was most tragically defeated by it.⁷ *Donghak* is the greatest historical wound inflicted in the course of the modernization of Korea.



Talisman of Donghak, Donghak Cheonjin-gyo

⁷ Donghak (Eastern Learning) is a Korean religion established by Choi Je-wu in the 1860s, as the increasingly corrupt and feeble Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) was in its last phase and foreign intrusions and influences in Korea and Northeast Asia escalated. Responding to both internal and external urgencies, Choi preached a belief in a monotheistic god of heaven, an idea that had long been part of the native Korean belief system. Although it can be seen as an example of early modern Korean nativism and nationalism, Donghak incorporated elements of other religions that originated abroad but were long established in Korea, such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. It was also as much a religion as a political philosophy and advocated democracy, equality, and paradise on Earth, quickly gaining followers among the peasant class.

⁸ Donghak soon became the ideological basis for peasant uprisings, and Choi was accused of inciting the guerrilla warfare that began in 1862 and was arrested and executed in 1894. The leadership was then assumed by Choi Shi-hyeong (see note 4). In the same year, a large-scale revolution broke out against the government and the ruling yangban (literati-bureaucrat) class as well as against encroaching foreign presences in Korea, such as Christianity and Japan. Calling for social reform and expulsion of foreign influences, the revolt posed a serious threat to the Joseon Dynasty but was eventually defeated by Japanese army and pro-Japanese forces. Despite its failure, the Donghak Peasant Revolution led to modern reform efforts and the establishment of the Korean Empire (1897–1910). At the same time, it became the direct cause of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) over control of the Korean Peninsula and of increasing Japanese influence, which resulted in the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910.

At this point, it is necessary to recall a historical fact. Korea’s traditional religious cultures, such as shamanism and Daoism, as well as new national religions from the turn of the twentieth century, were suppressed throughout the Japanese colonial and modern/contemporary periods, not to mention during the era of the Joseon Dynasty, which adopted Confucianism as its national religion. In the wake of Westernization and globalization, folk beliefs and traditional religions are now viewed simply as resources for tourism or products of mysticism. As a result, we are used to critiquing Korean folk beliefs, new religions, mountain worship, and so forth, using the standard of sophisticated dogmas. I do not particularly believe that the standard per se is distorted. Yet there is a deep-rooted popular impression that a prayer is purer than an incantation, that religious symbols are more logical than shamanistic talismans, and that singing Christian hymns is more sophisticated than chanting sutras. *Sangje* (literally, “ruler above”) is a literal translation of “God,” but the latter has assumed a position superior to the former, just as wine has become the so-called well-being beverage, preferred over *makkullli* (unrefined Korean rice wine). In actuality, however, the majority of the institutional religions that have undergone rapid growth in South Korea in the last hundred years have unashamedly utilized prayer for good fortune and mystical experience, grudge-soothing and ecstasy. It is well known in the fields of religious studies and folk cultural studies in South Korea that shamanistic beliefs have been absorbed by Christianity and other religions and have given birth to a peculiarly “Korean religious culture” that is strongly tinged with mysticism.

The more that foreign-originated mass religions utilize local traditions, the more necessary it becomes for them to distinguish themselves from the superstitions that they defined as such. And when foreign-originated mass religions endlessly attempt to define themselves as distinct from superstitions, the local beliefs that they consider to be superstitions—Heaven on Earth, tiger, mountain spirit, *Sangje*, Great King Yeomra, Medicine Buddha, and numerous other sacred beings—remain alive and well without their knowledge in the midst of their “counter-superstition.”⁹ Here we find the possibility of reading the situation in an inverse way. Rather than seeing traditional folk beliefs as having been transformed and reduced by the Westernization of spirit, wouldn’t it be truer to see that whole process of transformation as a wise method of dealing with things on the part of those traditional beliefs that are under threat?

4. If there is religion on the other side of modern science and technology, there is superstition on the other side of religion.

I do not like modern science and technology, nor do I like organized religion. That does not mean that I can follow “superstitions.” The materialist’s cool brain is not my lot either. Nevertheless, I like religion when it warns against the dangers of modern science and technology. I like superstitions that touch upon the unconscious of religions. I also like rational thinking when it rejects superstitions. For me, Mount Gyeryong stands proudly, or vaguely, in the midst of such thinking of mine.

I do not believe that this attitude is exclusively mine. Baridegi, Donghak and its Sangje, Cheongsan Geosa,


 Sindoa­n, 2008, video, color and sound, 45 min.

⁹ Great King Yeomra is the ruler of the underworld and the judge of the dead in Buddhist mythology. “Yeomra” is the Sino-Korean transliteration of the Sanskrit name Yama Raja (King Yama), and this wrathful and fearsome deity is often depicted in Buddhist paintings and entrance gates to temples.

¹⁰ Medicine Buddha, or the Master of Healing, is the Northeast Asian manifestation of the Indian Bhaisajyaguru. In Mahayana Buddhism, Medicine Buddha is understood to represent the healing aspect of Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha.

 One of Sindoa­n’s religious organizations in the 1960s.

and the ghosts in our grandmothers’ stories are not mere leftovers that modern cultures have tolerated with fanfare but rather could very well be sources of anxiety that shake the very roots of those cultures. The contradictory metaphor of Northeast Asian Gothic culture is, in a sense, unavoidable. It is difficult to compare the structure of mythological narratives in which humans converse with wild animals with the social ethics of mass butchery. Of course, because of its inherent mysticism, it falls, over and over again, into the most corrupt forms of capitalism.

But in the worst cases, even the politics of heresies that deceive people and delude the world are entangled in far more complex motivations and values than can be judged by a simple rationalist yardstick. There are no grounds for excusing the behaviors of such ill-famed cults. Nevertheless, this phenomenon is a separate problem from the universal human desire to seek utopia. Stubbornly sprouting cult groups take advantage of that desire and prove the fact that this society is not equipped with appropriate solutions for that very desire.

Although a collective search for utopia can easily corrupt and be dangerous, to have the dream is a right that belongs to everyone. There have always been, and will always be, great figures who could not but seek out that right or be driven out trying. Is there really that much distance between Henri de Saint-Simon and Suwun Choi Je-wu? To me, Ilbu Kim Hang and Charles Fourier seem to resemble each other.⁹ Of the many people who were deprived of opportunities for institutional education or universal happiness, those who were particularly intelligent or fell into metaphysical agonies went to Mount Gyeryong, Mount Jiri, or Mount Myohyang.¹⁰ Many of them were genuine, while many others were fake. What we need to examine first, however, is the contemporary urban dweller’s dull desire to distinguish easily between truths and lies, facts and fantasies.

The sublime is something that can be discussed with regard to not only Barnett Newman’s painting but also the quasi-Romanticist pictures used for ideological purposes by North Korea, the war aesthetics of CNN, Hollywood’s disaster images, and terrorism’s political sublime. If the sublime, in this way, is an aesthetic at risk, it can also be an aesthetic of “a misfortune turned into a blessing.” A variety of folk beliefs, traditional religions, and new religions prospered in Sindoa­n, on the foothills of Mount Gyeryong. They were all shut down in the 1970s and 1980s by the New Community Movement and the relocation of the Gyeryongdae Joint Forces headquarters. There are no longer gods flying in the sky there. Instead, almost every hour, the sonic booms of fighter jets reverberate. There is definitely no room left for mysticism, romanticism, and idealism. Yet I am attracted to the fact that this undeniable absence still gives us a shock. This is a certain “encounter.” It is not an encounter with a reality that is assumed to be there and can be revealed merely by removing “false consciousnesses” but rather an encounter with the violence that accompanies the strange absence of a reality that is presumed to be there.

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⁹ On Choi Je-wu, see note 7. Kim Hang and Choi Je-wu were fellow students. His interpretation of Zhouyi (Korean: Jooyeok), also known as Yijing or I Ching, or Book of Changes, became the foundation of modern Korean studies of the ancient Chinese classic.

¹⁰ Mount Jiri and Mount Myohyang are located, respectively, in southwestern South Korea and northwestern North Korea. Like Mount Gyeryong, the two mountains are considered to be imbued with sacred spirits.