

Encounters With the Trans-Glocal

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Min Joong art is most usefully seen not only as a nationalist movement, seeking to unify a divided nation, but also as an anti-imperialist movement, seeking to—if not overthrow—at least contest the imposition of an imperial “foreign culture.” That at least, has always been part of its stated aim, but I’m hesitant with the terminology of both “foreign” and “culture,” since—even in the twenty years since Min Joong’s appearance—it would now be insufficient to talk about “the imposition of American culture onto Korea.” To use a variant of an old term, it is the academic/military/postindustrial/electronic/corporate complex, operating across national boundaries and bigger than any one nation or group of nations, or even superpower, that imposes a global mimicry of culture.

That is quite a mouthful, and I want to begin digesting it by addressing my title’s conflation into the intentionally unwieldy “glocal” of the supposedly oppositional “global” and “local.” The latter are increasingly indivisible; as they infiltrate one another, one cannot be spoken about without its supposed nemesis. Furthermore, it is increasingly necessary to speak of the two together, as a single entity of simultaneously convergent and divergent forces. There is no pure locality that is untouched by the global; and there is no global that is not dependent upon and scavenging the local.

A familiar critique of globalization is that it doubly destroys “place”: first, by shrinking the distance between “places,” so that a TV or internet viewer in Frankfurt, say, can watch “live” and in real-time what is happening in Seoul, or in any place else on the globe; second, by homogenizing space—the local *kafe klatsch* replaced by the corporate Starbucks—so that each “place” loses its particularity and becomes indistinguishable from any other. And yet, glocalization also re-inserts the particular, repackaging the foreign with a veneer of familiarity, so that McDonald’s in India, for example, lures consumers with Maharajah Macs made of mutton.¹ The “new” hybrid product re-invents the consumer, re-investing them with a renewed sense of locality, of “place.” By re-inscribing the local with a renewed sense of belonging, one could even say that McDonalds creates customer loyalty and fills the coffers of the multinational by rekindling desire for the national. Ironically, the corporate-invented product creates an experience of authenticity for the glocalized individual, providing a *semblance* of agency. (The art biennale, with its vaunted internationalism and attempts to distinguish itself from

¹ The scathing comic strip, *Boondocks*, by Aaron McGruder, (in Los Angeles Times, July 19-21, 2005) depicts McDonald’s trying to expand its urban market by incorporating hip-hop iconography; McGruder has one of his characters posing the questions: “Do you think hip-hop is gonna make McDonald’s cool? Or do you think McDonald’s will make hip-hop uncool?” Elsewhere in the Los Angeles Times (*If It’s Hip and Trendy, They’re Not Interested*, Christian M. Chensvold, July 20, 2005) the term “hipstream” is mentioned, meaning the mainstream or corporate takeover of “hipster” culture.

other biennales by emphasizing its local particularity, is not dissimilar from this corporate model.)

However, it would be too easy to suggest that the corporate product acts as a uni-directional force, a simple case of imperial imposition upon the unwary native; there is an equally active, if not equally powerful counter-process of indigenization, the hybridity that Homi Bhabha has theorized, whereby the consumer perverts the product from its original intention. Arjun Appadurai writes that, in Asia, such an imposition is “filled with ironies and resistances, sometimes camouflaged as passivity and a bottomless appetite ... for all things Western.”² I have written elsewhere about the use of English signage in Korea and the possibilities for its re-interpretation, that “[I]anguages are jumbled, not to reveal meaning to the outsider, but as encryptions of style and affiliation for the insider, less for the benefit of tourists than for Koreans themselves.”³

Let me briefly digress with a different example of the glocal, with a convergence of two discursive moments. The first was at a recent panel in (my locality of) Los Angeles at “The Play Between,” an exhibition of five Korean artists’ drawings and paintings.⁴ The exhibition curator, Lee Kwan Hoon had posited in his catalogue essay that one of the attractions of drawing as a medium was that it returned to a more Korean mode of working—the linearity of drawing invoking the traditions of calligraphic brush painting—in response to the period of Westernizing modernization and its artistic counterparts of formalism and new media.

Min Joong artists began from a similar stance of reconnecting to the past as part of a critique of Westernization, but had sought a collective, more social and socialist solution; whereas twenty or so years later, the artists in *The Play Between* celebrate the individual, a position that is perhaps more in keeping with the current primacy of the commercial art sector. Rather than a politics of authenticity, which both groups of artists—the collectivist and the individualist—have claimed in different forms, we need to view cultural practices as having multiple genealogies, with unboundaried influences and precursors. Min Joong came into being within a national debate between the efficacies of tradition versus modernization, both of which are predicated on the assumption that the two can be separated. What we name as traditions are, in fact, continuously re-invented as ideological practices even if their methodologies and products remain ostensibly similar (and “tradition’s” insistence on similarity, self-generation and continuity is also ideological).

The panel and subsequent audience discussion focused mostly on the “truth” and “authenticity” of the work. Such ideas presumed and naturalized the Euro-Modernist and,

² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, U.Minnesota Press, 1996. p.29.

³ deSouza, Allan, *Postcard from Seoul*, in *X-TRA, Contemporary Art Quarterly*, Vol.7, No.2. p.45.

⁴ Organized by AndrewShire Gallery, Los Angeles, June 25 –July 30, 2005; also at Arenal Gallery, Santa Monica, June 24 – July 30, 2005.

paradoxically, a nativist Korean position that drawing enabled an unmediated conduit to an interior and authentic self; and that these artists, through their revelation of the culturally-untainted self, were also revealing something authentic about Korean culture and something more primary, even immutable: Korean-ness itself.

In their acceptance of drawing's ability to express the self, the artists were inadvertently pigeon-holed into the role of native informant, that is, as guides for the touristic consumption of Korean-ness by a non-Korean audience, and perhaps also by a Korean American audience in search of cultural validation.

For each grouping—the Korean artist, the Korean American and EuroAmerican audience members—a desire for return, a nostalgia was activated for an imaginary of what might have been lost, whether a lost self or a lost nation (and of course, in the case of Korea, this imaginary is further complicated by the geopolitical division of the nation). In the case of the EuroAmerican audience, I am reminded of Frantz Fanon relating that, “When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance.”⁵ When contemporary metropolitan life creates a feeling of alienation, one seeks re-connection through another being or culture that one places closer to nature, closer to a primal state, closer to a spiritual state, closer to shared experience, closer to all those things that one feels is missing from one's own life, from all those things that have been taken away by one's own climb to civilization. And it is that placement, that relegation of another person or culture into the past, into a “pre-civilized” state, that Fanon pounces on as being racist. How, then, does the third world artist avoid becoming the conduit for this nostalgia? And for us, as viewers, how do we resist this “easy viewing”? Can we pinpoint and isolate the entry of nostalgia? Can we turn it into a positive force, driving us towards social change; can individualized nostalgia for a lost past provoke a social imaginary for a potential future? Can, for example, the image of bountiful harvests so common within Social Realism and often repeated by Min Joong artists, become a spur for environmental activism?

The day after the panel, I received an email attachment that, after reading it, I assumed must have been from someone in the audience in response to a question I had posed about how, in the West at least, one of the ways painting has responded to the loss of faith in modernism's ability to represent an authentic self through the (expressionist) gesture has been through a certain self-reflexivity of the mark as an indication of performative style and cultural sign rather than of a singular self. I wanted to know how the artists in the show might have considered this in relation to their work. I discovered a week later that the attachment was a section of an essay sent by a student analyzing the role of the grid in the work of American contemporary artists. His specific point revolved around Rosalind Krauss' declaration about art's “will to silence,” that is, its erasure of narrativity and textuality, and what resistances to this silencing can be made by artists invested in questions of race.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, Grove Press, NY., 1967. p.129

Bringing these two together, the panel discussion and my student's essay, raises fundamental questions about how one looks at artwork from a different social and cultural context. How does one view across barriers of difference when one's self is constructed through a certain investment in maintaining that difference? In the context of glocalization and the newly internationalized art world, who is silenced by art's will to silence, and who else is enabled to speak? Who listens and who refuses to or is prevented from listening? And more than that, what gets spoken and in turn, what gets heard and what gets lost, muted and mutated in the migration from tongue to ear? And can art's will to silence, its tendency to speak only of itself and of nothing beyond its frame, be turned around, investing its formal languages with renewed speech?

One continues the viewing process with the obvious and most difficult question to answer: what am I looking at? Questions of quality, of what's good or bad become almost irrelevant if one doesn't have relevant criteria with which to judge. One is left then with signs of familiarity or with wondering what one is missing, recognizing the syntax and grammar of these visual languages but unclear about the particularities of what's being said. A primary intent behind Min Joong art was to protest social conditions and effect political change, but when such art is removed from its social context and placed within the mainstream (or hipstream) gallery space, it encounters the gallery's separation of politics from art, its "will to silence," its rejection of speech that refers to anything beyond its walls. How then, as viewers, do we recontextualize or re-politicize ourselves in order to listen to and look at such art?

Although a number of artists in this exhibition attempt an act of ventriloquism, speaking through the formal languages of EuroAmerican modernism, one who does it most explicitly is Joo Jae-whan, who reveals claustrophobic existences trapped within the walls of Piet Mondrian's grids. Similarly, Jo Hae Jun transforms another icon of Capitalist Realism, the Coca Cola logo, into demonic caricatures that seem to have strayed from a manga comic. Or Shin Hak-chul, who combines the heroic aesthetics of Social Realism with the anti-war brutalities of German Expressionists such as Otto Dix, with the psychedelic utopias of underground commix.

This ventriloquism is one of many strategies within Min Joong's attempts to create counter-hegemonic nationalist narratives. The counter-hegemonic is necessarily responsive and strategic, yet history is rife with such attempts becoming fixed, codified and petrified within a new nationalist legislation. Yong Soon Min explicitly challenges the re-inscription of the nation. In a recent exhibition in Seoul⁶, she focused on the plight of migrant workers in Korea and their challenge to the still-prevalent Korean idea of a "one-race" nation (while the one-race ideology has a part to play towards a politics of unification, in *South* Korea "what it means to be Korean" has to encompass migrant workers and bi-racial Koreans, such as the children of Korean women and U.S. soldiers; if we transpose these questions to a German context, we uncover past terrors and current

⁶ Yong Soon Min, *Xen: Migration, Labor and Identity*, at SsamzieSpace, Seoul. August 13 – September 18, 2004.

tensions). In this exhibition, Min again poses the problems of ideological difference within the nation, and within the nation divided against itself.

While ventriloquism (and mimicry) suggest parallels or links with EuroAmerica, it is equally necessary to situate Min Joong in relation to the anti-colonial, pro-independence cultural movements that have sprouted across the globe, from British-occupied India, to Pinochet-era Chile, to apartheid-era South Africa, to the anti-authoritarian resurgence of post-Cultural Revolution China, to the Zapatistas in Mexico, to first world activism that is modeled on anti-imperialist movements, such as Aborigine activism against the Australian bicentennial, or the Irish Republican murals in Belfast and Derry, or the Black arts movement⁷ in England, or the Harlem Renaissance, the Chicano and Asian American movements in the U.S.A.

Can we map these different manifestations, linking them as nexi, as zones of resistance and efflorescence, within a shifting global network? How do we undertake a “cognitive mapping” (Fredric Jameson’s term) of geo-cultural and socio-political zones instead of re-treading the imperial territory of modernist universalism? And if we do link them, how do we map them as encounter-zones without using the imperial model of encounter between explorer and “native” and its present-day manifestation of tourist and toured? How does one look at art from a different glocality without retreading the imperial or the anthropological, without retreating to the safety of one’s tent, especially now that the natives know that the tent’s walls are so flimsy and so permeable?

If we momentarily sidestep the anthropological and attempt to site Min Joong within the EuroAmerican model of the avant garde, we run into limitations there too. Okwui Enwezor⁸ has suggested that the built-in failure of EuroAmerican avant gardes stems from their inability to address their own positions as beneficiaries of imperialism. How then, can this model of the avant garde be imported as part of an anti-imperialist project? And is the avant garde also limited by its oedipal will to usurp the previous generation and its ultimately fundamentalist desire to be born-again, thereby providing only a stunted, adolescent (and masculine) model for cultural change?

Other layers of questions (as I have already indicated) are added by this exhibition being sited in Germany, which has struggled with its own nationalist formations. Artists like Anselm Kiefer have attempted to engage critically and “archeologically” with this history, excavating myths and desires embedded within totalitarian nationalism, following an imperative to engage with historical and ideological formations. One can also see Gerhard Richter’s renowned aversion to ideological positions as a response to such history. Also, how do post-unification Germans respond to and see themselves reflected within a pre-unification Korean movement?

⁷ A loose affiliation between predominantly African Caribbean and South Asian artists and cultural workers, most active between 1980 and 1990.

⁸ At an Asian American Art symposium, organized by Margo Machida and Yong Soon Min, NYU, New York, March 19-21, 2004.

The problems of translation and mistranslation are revealed by a transposition of Min Joong—People’s Art—into one German counterpart, the historically troubling terminology of *Volk* and *volkische* and the repressive ideologies to which it became anchored.

This problem of translation extends beyond language to broader contexts of historicized and politicized place. How does one view an art predicated on communication of a shared experience when it is removed from its communicative context, i.e. from its intended primary audience, and from its languages of communication? How does one read it when it is removed from its sites of activation?⁹

How does one and is it possible to overcome these problems of translation and potential silences then, to engage in (to use Stuart Hall’s phrase) “systems of shared meaning”? Such an engagement is not dependent on translation where one language is converted into another, but is an encounter where each language, each system of meaning remains not intact—since they are changed by their encounter—but mutable, while not surrendering each one’s independent function.

In my earlier description of the Los Angeles panel, was the discussion between the Korean artists and the largely American audience a system of shared meaning, or was this a reinscription of already prescribed meanings and positions that prevented exchange, that left each system of meaning intact, un-communicated and possibly reinforced?

To continue this question of communication, if the artist has situated their practice within a broader social moment (if not to a defined movement), how is that shared across national boundaries and to an audience trained to emphasize the individual? One of the possibilities within Min Joong, and similar socially-motivated art practices, is to cast a critical eye on constructions of the “self” and their relationship to a collective—questions that are generally evaded by more mainstream practices. Rather than retreating, even strategically, to an “authentic” self, a claim can be made, even if provisionally, to a collective identification based on a relational self, that is, a self as constructed and performed in relation to its social context, and therefore always in the *process* of formation.

The need for return, re-assessment and continuation, as this exhibition does, is a necessary counter to each avant garde’s rejection of its predecessors. The artist Keith Piper has described the 1980s as a “misread, misaligned, and misinterpreted decade.”¹⁰ Given the current dominance of the marketplace and the celebrity status of artists, how does one assess the utopian activism of twenty years ago? Does one see it as unmitigated failure, akin to the collapse of communism? It’s worth quoting Stuart Hall at some length: “It witnessed an explosion of creative work by artists from places historically

⁹ I want to emphasize that a site is not only a geographic space, but a temporal one, and is therefore historicized and politicized; additionally—though not directly applicable to the works in this exhibition—a site, such as a website, can operate across geographic and temporal zones, and therefore needs to be differently historicized and politicized.

¹⁰ Piper, Keith, *Wait, Did I Miss Something? Some Personal Musings on the 1980s and Beyond*, in *Shades of Black*, eds. D.A. Bailey, I. Baucom, S. Boyce, Duke Uni. Press. p.35.

marginalized from the centers of power and authority. It ... defined an “economy” of themes and images with which contemporary practitioners are still reckoning Broadly speaking, it is driven by the struggles of peoples, marginalized in relation to the world system, to resist exclusion, reverse the historical gaze, come into visibility, and open up a “third space” (between the weight of an unreconstructed tradition and the impetus of a mindless modernism) in cultural representation It challenges the institutional spaces, established circuits, and validated canons of critical achievement of the metropolitan mainstream.”¹¹ Piper and Hall are not talking about Min Joong, although they could quite easily be, but about the black arts in Britain, also operational during the 1980s. The similarities of the two, and one could apply these descriptions to any number of different cultural movements across the globe, emphasize that we are not looking at localized, “failed” phenomena. If anything, we are looking at an ongoing, alternative cultural mapping of the globe.

I hope that artists still hold onto the idealist fantasy that they can change the world (and the global) through their art. But let’s be realistic: it is equally the viewer who has to do the work of changing their perception. The ongoing value of Min Joong and other activist cultural movements is that they ask us to do just that.

Allan deSouza, July 2005.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, *Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge—and After*, in Shades of Black. p.2.