

**Oral Introduction to the presentation of Korean Contemporary Art and Korean Contemporary Photography at PAFF (Peace Art Freedom Festival) the Sarajevo Winterfestival 2014, Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> February**

**Annelise Zwez**

Dear all

It is fashionable to say that we live in a global world and that therefore the only criteria for contemporary art are “good” or “bad”. I deny this position in this radical form with conviction and ask for more distinction. Especially when the Western World is looking to the Far East and vice versa. In the Western World the most important cultural influence is Christianity with **everything** that this implies, affection as well as refusal. And in the Eastern World the most important cultural influence is Hinduism if you think of India and Buddhism if you think of the Far East; despite of a lot of differences. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century we can see exchanges between the two worlds in the visual arts (misunderstandings included), but in the depth the antagonism stayed nevertheless.

The main difference that we have to keep in mind through all our arguments is that western art is representational in the sense that art shows and deals with the material world, even if the topic is heaven or hell. Therefore Western Art treats the themes in a very direct way or if it doesn't it is a conscious opposition. Art with Buddhism in its background is more or less the contrary. It is figurative as well, but it is – to say it with a Pre-Christian picture – only Platons shadow-world. Landscape is not landscape, it is the idea of a landscape. Nature is not nature, it is the universe behind the worlds material appearance of nature. It is something that you can only grasp with your breath and not with your flesh. So it is informal, virtual, although we can walk – or maybe fly - trough it.

Let's go from here directly to contemporary South-Korean art, keeping just in the background what I have been saying. Because on a second level the history of an area – maybe a country, maybe a community, a people – lays its characteristics on this cultural ground. I realised in the last years, since my first visit in Seoul, that people around me are aware of the fact of Korea as a divided country – North- and South-Korea – and some also that there is a strong presence of the United States in

the South, but the main event in Korea's history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is forgotten. I mean the occupation of Korea through Japan from 1910 until the Pacific War right after the end of Second World War. This history has a direct influence on Korean art. Because after having been liberated from the Japanese yoke by the American troops and after the war between the south and the north, the South-Korean people had to rediscover their own cultural heritage. Traditions of all kind became fundamental. At the same time the presence of the US and – more important – the gratefulness for the liberators opened the doors to the west. Up to now the US are considered as some sort of protector state – although critical views exist as well.

However the development of this new South Korea was not an explosion and artists often left the country to get in contact with the international art scene. The most prominent: Name June Paik who was always aware of his home country, but he studied in Japan and Germany and lived afterwards in the US. Nobody would however deny that in his art he combined East and West – an immaterial world vision and a very direct approach to life and society. In Korea itself “the simply beautiful” that we still, and often in a not sufficiently well reflected way, connect with Korean art stayed the main stream of visual expression.

With some important exceptions. One of them is the meanwhile 82 years old **Lee Seung Taek**. It is a great honour to have an important work of him of 1970 here in Sarajevo. It is called “Paper Tree” – you see it on the photograph during the installation. It dates of the late pioneer period of the artist, when he tried to build sculptures in direct connection with natural phenomena, such as wind and light and to get with this procedure as close as possible to the spiritual presence of things. Only in the last years the full importance of the work of Lee Seung Tak has been



discovered in the western art scene. He was somehow too early with his work.

Because it is only around 1990, when the economies allowed a new sight, that the Koreans started to overcome their inferior feeling of being a lonely island not reachable overland of the rest of the world. The young musicians and visual artists started to invite colleagues from abroad to renew the art scene. One of the promoters

of this new vision was the here present **Park Byoung-Uk** – a student of Lee Seung Taek. So we understand that he started with events that combined nature, movement and performance. All have strong roots in the Korean tradition with its spiritual feeling for nature as the source of life, and music and dance as possibilities to get in connection with both sides of the curtain that connects the visible and the invisible world. The Environmental Symposia of the Nine Dragon Heads were not events for a great public – Park Byoung-Uk saw them as creation of art beyond the limits of his “lonely island”.

As the different mentalities and visions of life, philosophy and art media of this new international group started to exchange, the characteristics of the different positions became visible and fertilised each other. Of course there is behind of this the influence of Buddhism on Western Art since the 1960ties on the one hand and the Korean artists knowledge of western art history on the other hand, but a meeting in reality cannot be compared with the abstract way in that John Cage integrated the far east in his minimal music.

There is above all one thing that the Korean artists have to an extent as I did not find it in other countries – it is the capability to reduce complex thoughts into signs that still have the complexity of their starting point. Signs that say a lot but do not need words. That is something we find seldom in Western Art. Park Byoung-Uk is a master of this reduction and knowing him now for quite some years, I know that he can take this method wherever he goes, wherever he puts his objects in a corner of an exhibition hall. Just have look: In 2011 The Nine Dragon Heads visited my home-

town in Switzerland, that is close to a lake. In the context of one of the meetings with short performances Mr Park –as we call him often - did nothing but stand next to an SOS-pillar. As we all now what these three letters mean – Save our Souls – we immediately understand the meaning. But the meaning is not all – understand does not mean art – it is the absolute precise way he – in an outdoor jacket and a reflecting gilet and the pillar get one and stand there in

harmonious proportions with landscape, the lake, the villages, the forest, heaven or



better the mist. This turning around in a picture that is figurative and abstract (in the sense of composition) at the same time, something emotional in us wakes up and makes us speechless. He often makes himself part of his art, but not always – in Gwangju in Korea last year he presented an object that was an outdoor jacket on the one hand – standing as a sign for him going out– and a little stone with dense writing on it on the other hand. If you go close you see that he wrote all the names of the



artists of this exhibition on it, so that it became a sign of being part of a community. But the way it is written on a stone recalls something that goes far back in a time or a dimension that is timeless. And here again the artist finds this special Korean position of combining the awareness of reality of today on the one hand

and its being networked with another side. And in this way presence and past do not contradict each other but on the contrary go into a fusion.

The reason why I am staying here for quite a while is, that Park Byoung-Uk's art is a good example to explain this “simply beautiful” as something very important on the bottom but that in contemporary art it does not mean that the artist is not aware of today's reality, which can be defined as an influence of Western Art.

I feel that the Koreans in the public follow my words with interest, but there is a point where they might say: Halt! Stop! – It is the fact that nowadays about half of the population of Korea is Christian. This is a very complex topic because when you see with what kind of methods American Christian groups practice religious mission in the streets of Seoul, you would like to deny that you are Christian as well....but this is not the theme here and of course it does not affect the whole Christianity in Korea. I know that for instance that **Pang Hyosung** is an active member of a Christian community in Seoul. Pang Hyosung is an excellent performer. I have seen him



performing several times. When I try to compare the work of Park Byoung-Uk, who has a Buddhist tradition in his backpack with the work of Pang Hyo Sung who has a Christian background – it is interesting – because there is a difference. In Mr. Pangs work this dominant abstract nature moment does not appear. The dance, the movement, the reduction on signs, the simple as source of something larger – yes, this we find, but the vision is slightly different. In Biel/Bienne for instance he showed a performance with a tomato – symbol of sensuality, blood, love. I was astonished and impressed about the emotional tension Pang Hyo Sung could create with the



modest things he used: A white shirt, a pair of scissors, a needle, a thread, the tomato. He cut the shirt on the level of the heart and sewed it again, took the red tomato caressed it in his hands, gave it to spectators to do the same, eat of it and rubbed it into the injured and re sewed shirt. The title of the performance, „therapy“, allows the interpretation that Pang Hyo Sung wanted to give us with his performance a possibility to overcome pain with love. The whole performance reminded me of one of the most important Christian sentences: Love your neighbour as yourself. And yet: Pang Hyo Sung is – no doubt – a contemporary artist with an

experimental approach to visual expression. But the same performance – in germany for instance – would be accepted as a Korean position, yes, but probably not as an European – not critical, not political – which means not in opposition to the establishment - not sufficiently conceptual, not radical enough. Art with a positive vision has - unfortunately – not really a chance at the moment, at least not in the great collective shows of nowadays western curators.

Behind this position – that we find in the work of other Korean artists as well – is, once more, the history of the country. 30 years ago South Korea was a developing nation, but nowadays it is a country with an important economy, the greatest harbour of the world in Busang – by the way the home town of Park Byoung-Uk – and you can almost feel it when you visit the Mega-Cities like Seoul or Busang in two or three years intervals – here a country believes in its future – maybe blind, but the optimism

is of course part of a collective feeling and therefore also visible in the art of the country – except of the few who dare to look behind the curtains...of the societies behaviour for instance or the situation of women and so on.

So it is interesting to look whom did Pang Hyo Sung choose for the PAFF-Exhibition of Contemporary Korean Art in Sarajevo.

But: Let's think first on a third general aspect. We had Korean art with buddhist background, we had art with a Christian background. What about Korean artists that studied abroad and took the western sight into their vision? What happens? If they try to react on the west, it becomes difficult – because then it might be neither nor...In Germany there was recently a great exhibition with German and Korean artists – “Transfer” it was called and the result of an exchange of more then two years. Among them there was **Kim Kira** – an artist born in 1974, living in Seoul. He studied at the Goldsmith Collage in London – there where the famous “Young british artists” of Mr



Saatchi studied – and of course this influenced him a lot. He showed among other works an ironical portrait of Queen Elizabeth and laughable “Oriental masques” that are Korean on the one hand, but made in a manner that does not fit with Korean

mentality where irony is a rather foreign word and I am not sure weather this artist really felt what he showed or if there is some sort of Mannerism behind his art.

To switch between cultures is not so easy as we might think....

I have a last thing that I want to show you before entering the exhibitions here in Sarajevo. It is a about the work of a Korean women artist, that I saw in December in Germany. It is brilliant from its concept and also the persistence with which she followed it during years and years. It is a political work, one that is only possible in Korea. **Ham Kyungah**, born in 1966, managed through Chinese agents to send drawings from South Korea to North Korea requesting to give them to an embroidery studio and to realise the drawings as embroideries on silk. It was clever to choose topics that are not suspicious of any political statement but rather something like a play. Not all her tentatives were successful and sometimes she had to wait for more

than a year, but examples shown in Germany showed that at least some works did come back – first you do not want to believe that you see embroideries –they are marvellous, I was fascinated, that these works have a clear political impact, but at the same time they do NOT contradict Korean art.

She also wrote on the wall of the museum that she has been fascinated by this North Korea since she was a child and managed also to get in email-contact with some of the manufacturers of her works, but she asked



them only – “how do you feel” and so on and told them little things of her life, but of course she hopes that these small informations have an effect on long terms.

The exhibition of Korean Contemporary Art and Korean Contemporary Photography are not events that are in direct connection with Nine Dragon Heads. But that these events take place here has got to do with Nine Dragon Heads, because despite the fact that this collective consists from artists from all over the world, it has a strong South Korean impact and it was Park Byoung-Uk who brought them, for many years now, to Sarajevo and Sarajevo became like a branch of the Dragons, especially with the presence of **Gordana Andjelic** and **Jusuf Hadzifejovic** in the international Symposia. Through this collaboration the invitation of South Korea as guest-country to PAFF became what it is now.

During my last stay in Seoul, I had the opportunity to visit the atelier of **Shin Yoo La**. I was surprised – the work of Shin Yoo La was the most unKorean I had ever seen, because it contradicts the “simply beautiful” clearly. Shin Yoo La has a Christian background, but – what is surely more important – she studied in the US for a certain time and – you realise it very soon when talking with her – she has a large knowledge of western Art History and western contemporary forms of expression. But – different to Kira Kim, of whom I have been talking before – she treats Korean topics, she dares to look behind the curtains of Korean mentality and behaviour – that is extraordinary. Not necessary to say that this is a very difficult position in Korea, but for us, it is easy to follow her. The point in common you find in most works – especially the installations and objects - is a form of “dissonance”, on the level of



the used materials and objects and in parallel on the symbolic level of the topic, the story she wants to tell us with her work.

“Dissonance” is in western art something very common, but in Korea it is in the greatest opposition to what this society likes to show to the outside. Shin Yoo La does not go as far as some American artists, does not want disgust as reaction, she can even choose a very subtle way as for instance in the audio-installation “Conga –Sacred Life” where little fibre lights seem to dance in

front of a black board, in an alliance with a sound track combined of two similar tunes, that both want to appeal to us in a very direct way – “March for the Beloved” is however used during a strike for instance, so on a political level, “Heralds of the Light, Be Swift” is a hymn as it is used by Christian mission groups in the streets - as I showed you already. So the power of music is used here and there...and what is the difference now??

For the exhibition here, Shin Yoo La created another installation – we see an iron on a cloth for a wiper, we see that the iron is not connected to electricity, but to a bamboo and there is a rope in a triangle that looks for balance. It is easy to connect the iron and the wiper with women’s work, but what about this bamboo, standing upright – on a wall paper, but at the same time connected with this women’s world with a real fragment of a bamboo. Is it a dream, a hope, a vision, a symbol for the potential of women?

Choose yourself!



Another atelier visit lead us in the atelier of **Kwon Sun Young**. A completely different world. If her Collage-Paintings were made by a European artist, I am almost sure that there would be some special categories behind the layout of the birds (or – in other works - mushrooms, houses and so on), but to be honest, I do not think, the work could be made by an European. I know a Swiss woman artist who makes excellent

Collage-Paintings, but they look for instance like this...important is the transformation – the appropriation of found pictures in order to make individual works out of them. Whereas looking at the works of Kwon Sun Young, we have to reflect on the term of “simply beautiful” once more. First: The artist has lots of bird (and other)-



encyclopaedia in her atelier and cuts out the birds or whatever without making any notes on the name, maybe the area where they live etc.

So the bird is just a sign for a bird, just the idea of a bird – as I said right at the beginning – important is not the variety of birds that exist, but the rhythm of their flying from left to right, from right to left,

up and down and the flow of colours, of light. There is no threat going out of the picture. We are not asked to find out the individuality; on the contrary, we are invited to let loose, to develop in ourselves a feeling of flying and find – at least temporarily – a way to an immaterial reality.



The mushroom-collage-paintings Kwon Sun Young shows here in Sarajevo are not made in the same

all-over style – perhaps because of the size – but in a set with an architectural situation and so the groups of mushrooms go closer to a story with little dwarfs.

Pang Hyosung has chosen nine very different working artists, to give a wide range. Five of them are women – I suppose that is exceptional, but as an old feminist, I am



of course happy about it. The position “video” is hold by **Song, Cha Young**, a woman artist who studied in New York for a certain time.

This can be felt, not because of the technique, think of “grandfather” Name June Paik, but in the choice of the topic with a defined historical background – the battles in the bay of Incheon in 1904 and 1950. But Song, Cha Youngs video is not a documentary, it is a reflection on time and the changes and that nobody visiting the fun park of Incheon remembers the ship that sank here 110 years and the city that hade been on that ground 65 years ago. Where has it gone??? Does the installation as two channel-video tell us that it is still here, but invisible?

“Memory” shows also up in the title of the work of **Heo, Eun Young** (Ho Yun Jong): “Surface of Memories”. The artist has been working with tea- or coffee-cups for quite some time, arranging them on different grounds, indoor and outdoor. Here the challenge was, that floor is flat and yet she wanted to give us the illusion that they are about to disappear. I like the trick how she has cut them.

The stories that people exchanged when they drunk the cups of coffee have not vanished yet, we see them printed on the brownish paper – nature is present, families are visible, but also pictures on

events of the actual time. Once more we look at a work, that has abstract aspects – in the flow and the rhythm of the cups – and narrative ones at the same time. And together this makes – maybe – the typical Korean Poetry.



An entirely different position is shown in the work of **Lee, Hong Jeon**. What is



interesting is, that it shows us the gap. In a Korean Context, the works are exceptional, because expressionism is in opposition to the cliché of the “simply beautiful” of Korean art. To work out of the body – far away! When I asked him how he is working, he immediately started to move with a virtual brush, saturated with Korean ink, in his hand. And I could imagine the splashes that “paint” the picture. “I imagine a

landscape”, he said, and “I have to be very much with myself”. This “landscape” is probably the link to Korean art, but at the same time it is difficult for western eyes not to evoke the comparison with the American Abstract Expressionism of the 1950ties and the European New Wild-Wave of the 1980ties. So we see how complex art and culture are linked with each other.

On the first look we could say the paintings of **Lee, Young Mi** answer best to the aspect of the “beautiful”. It is correct that there is



not a narrative background - we see fans in a poetic dance playing with bowls and suggesting a garden party with little birds as symbols for the sound in the air. A seducing sound shown in the melody of light and shadow, the gradation of the grayish colours and the spatial effect of three dimensions. The work of Lee, Young Mi also shows – what is not specific for Korea – that the most typical art of a country is often made abroad and not at home. Lee, Young Mi has lived in Japan and her actual residence is Austin/Texas.



Some kind of a bridge to the exhibition with Korean Contemporary Photography make the two works of **Kim Yong Wook** round the corner. They show birch trees in a very fine rhythm. We feel that not the birches themselves are the topic, although the man – or is it a ghost? – that passes by, carries a book about birches under his arm. The artist says it in very simple but precise words: “I want to show a long period of time within one frame.”

The exhibition on photography from South Korea is curated by **Moon Sang-Wook**. He has invited the great number of 16 Korean photographers and 13 of them are here these days. “That’s part of the game”, says Park Byoung-Uk and immediately we think of the concept of Nine Dragon Heads, that is not only a platform for art works, but also an event to create an open community for art.

It is impossible to give you an entire introduction in the exhibition with chapters on each – you would get asleep until I would have finished. But I can share with you some observations I made on Thursday this week when I had the opportunity to get to know the photographers present here and the lucky chance to have Shim Myung-Hee – the coordinator of the exhibition - as some sort of information-office. Do not forget that I cannot even divine whether a Korean name refers to a woman or a man. I am for instance astonished that the two youngest photographers are not here, **Nam**



**Tack-Oon** and **Kim Sun-Hoi** and at the same time their works are different from all others, in the sense that they represent a very international contemporary language. A new generation? In the photograph of a crowd of young Chinese people leaving the city of Shanghai packed with the things they just bought, Nam Tack-Oon seems to ask himself whether money has become the only ideology of today. And in the three photographs of Kim Sun-Hoi we are confronted with young, hardly adult Korean men and women, that wear the typical Korean headpieces like a mask, so that we cannot see their faces, cannot enter in a communication with them. Both have a very direct critical position towards nowadays life.

It is easy to recognize that this is not a typical Korean position, they gave up the well known reservation towards the outside. They comment the society and do not reflect on themselves as part of the universe.

In many other photographs of the exhibition we however find this specific view. **Shim Myung-Hee** for instance presents two abstract round forms – two cups of tea seen from above as if they were deep fountains – and says in her comment in the catalogue that they are for her a platform to reflect, to meditate on herself in order to find harmony. Similar positions we find here and there. And we realise that Mr Moon has not really created an exhibition with a theme, but that there is something in

common, that reflections on life, on our birth, our being and our going and maybe coming back is something like a red string through the different positions.

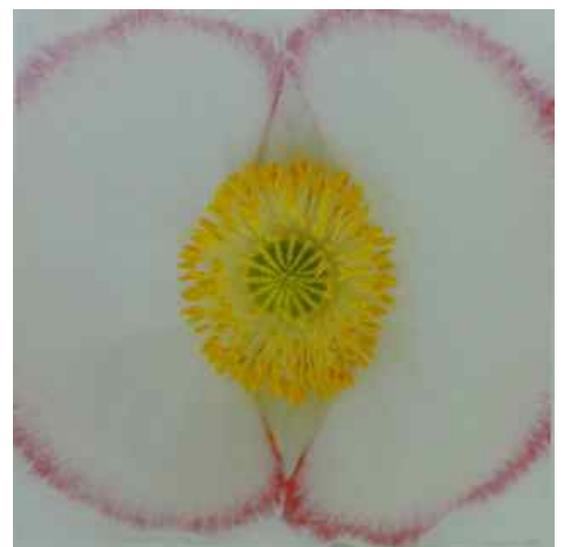
**Kim Tae-Geun** gives us in his text in the catalogue a comparison between East and West that I have never heard before. He says: “East means tree” and “West means metal” – hmm – If I look at the many trees and

branches here and there, I cannot contradict him and I also see that these trees are signs for nature's invisible life power rather than mighty umbrellas on a public place in

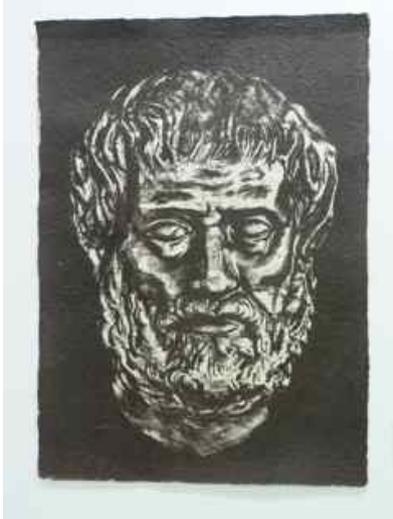


the middle of a town. The work of **Whang Hee-Sun** is a good example. I took it first for a reflex of a tree in water, but Mr Moon told me that the artist took the topic a bunch of times and came through these layers to the impression of vibration.

It was in that talk that I realised that the curator of the exhibition is not an art historian, but a photographer who knows the actual possibilities of photography in combination with computer tools at his best. You just have to look at his own works – where you have to look twice and you probably still do not believe that it is a photography. But the microscope, the changing of colours, the working with the photographic material brings him to the result we see and I am finally not 100% sure whether the wonder he wants to show us – the wonder of the beauty of sexuality - is not also an example for the “wonder” of the technical possibilities.



I come back to Kim Tae-Geun and the “metal” as embodiment for the West. In the



work he shows we have it in coins of which he took photographs and developed them with a special chemical product containing iron on thick Korean paper. It is difficult to me to understand the “iron” portraits of Lenin, Aristoteles and Raffael as symbols for the West, although it is true that the three men stand for important western philosophies (Aristoteles for the Greek, Raffael – the artist of the “Sixtin Chapel” in Rome – for the great period of Italian painting and Lenin for Communism).

But perhaps it is as suggests **Jeong Sang-Wun** with the three great fragments of a street, with the thousands of traces that old carriages, cars, shoes and whatever have left on the ground. He asks us with them – following the well known linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure – which photograph is the right one and makes obvious – through the photographs we see - that there is none, because each “language” has its own culture, each culture has its own “pictures”. To find the common roots is not so easy. Who are you



and who am I?? And even if you understand the words I am telling you – do you understand them really?? And do I understand you? –

Thanks for listening to my lecture.

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