



COMPARING THE CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN AMERICAN, SOUTH KOREAN AND CUBAN ARTISTS

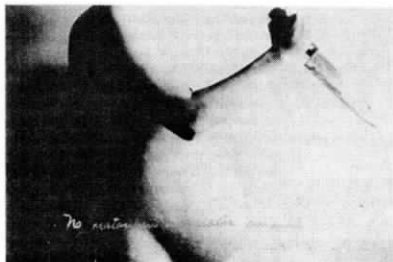
by Yong Soon Min

We live in the era of the Coca Colony. Dynasty, Dallas, Rambo, McDonalds, Madonna and Michael Jackson all head the list as our foremost cultural ambassadors to the world. Their fame and popularity in many countries supplant that of native pop products and stars. In the more rarefied heights of High Culture, it's hard to imagine contemporary artists anywhere in the world unfamiliar with the likes of Henri Matisse, Picasso, Andy Warhol and Frank Stella. How many of us have been jolted by the all too familiar sights and sounds lifted from U.S. media and transplanted to some remote reaches of this planet making us feel as if we've never left home even if we'd rather go native? It's difficult to escape from the all pervasiveness of the "Voice of America" sort of cultural dominance, the handmaiden of multinational capitalism.

How Western cultural hegemony impacts on non-Western cultures both here among Asian Americans and beyond our shores is the focus of this presentation. I have singled out Cuba and south Korea to be the foreign components of this examination. This selection for a comparative study must seem quite arbitrary or farfetched considering all the many factors that set them apart. And yet, these enormous differences do not undermine some critical historical connections, and upon closer scrutiny, an unexpected confluence of issues and concerns can be discerned in the contemporary art fields of both countries. Furthermore, the questions and issues raised by the experiences of Cuban and south Korean contemporary artists are essentially identical to those discussed widely here. A crosscultural analysis of these two dynamic art centers offers significant perspectives relevant to a greater understanding of the relationship of Asian American artists and other artists of color (a term preferable to "minorities") to the mainstream here in the U.S.

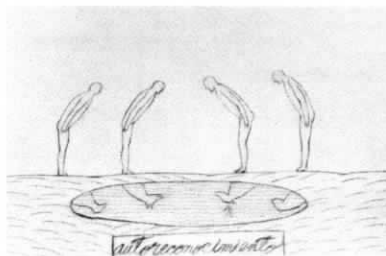
A further focus is Cuban and south Korean contemporary art since 1980 as this recent period offers the most fertile field for our comparative observations. For both Cuba and south Korea, the eighties have signaled a revitalization, or a renaissance by some assessments, of a contemporary art scene which by Western standards is exceptionally sophisticated and developed relative to other third world countries. (1) In both contexts, a younger generation of artists have emerged whose works reflect a significant departure from the status quo of the previous generation. This new artistic "wave" in Cuba represents a liberalization from the stagnant and reductionist orientation of revolutionary culture which prevailed during the 70s. The Korean counterpart is identified under the rubric of "Min Joong" Art which roughly translates as "people's" art. Min Joong Proponents consider this new spirit broadly as a new multidisciplinary cultural movement. Highly politicized, Min Joong cultural movement is engaged in efforts to invent and promote a new cultural identity.

Those who adhere to stereotypical assumptions about what art from a socialist country should look like in contrast to that from a rapidly industrialized capitalist country would understandably wonder whether the Cuban and Korean artists had exchanged roles. Ironically, Cuban



Marta Maria Perez, "To Conquer" 1987

artists are faulted for not being socialist enough by many Western observers even though it is precisely for this socio-political system that the Cubans have been outcast from the Western world. From just the appearance of the work, the currently touted Cuban art which has official government sanction and support has no easily recognizable political form and could easily blend in with much of the art found in mainstream soho galleries. In comparison, much of the current Min Joong work conveys with emotional directness all the earmarks of a social-commentary descriptive realism. While most of the younger Cuban artists have abandoned the more populist oriented formats such as mural art or poster art which was the stellar achievement of Cuban art in the 60's, these and other more populist oriented strategies aimed at getting the work out of the galleries and into the streets form a strong component of the Min Joong cultural activity. Unlike the Cuban situation, it must be understood that this Min Joong cultural movement is linked, directly or indirectly, to a growing socio-political opposition movement in south Korea which is pressing for the withdrawal of US troops as a concrete step towards realizing aspirations for reunification between north and south Korea and greater self reliance and democracy in government. In a political climate in which opposition to the government's staunch anti-communist ideology and its quest for modernization is deemed subversive, draconian measures have been imposed to censure and suppress the more militant manifestations of this movement.



Jose Bedia, "Self Recognition" Crayon on paper

An instance of the earliest government crackdown on the Min Joong movement was the founding exhibition in 1980 of a group exhibit entitled, "Reality & Utterance." This exhibition which gained initial public attention for the artists, some of whom began to identify themselves as part of an organized art movement, was shut down by the authorities right after its opening at a government sponsored gallery. Later, in 1985, the government intervened in another exhibition "Power" by confiscating works and detaining some of the exhibiting artists. A 1987 National Security Law has convicted artists whose works display anti-US or reunification of north and south Korea sentiment or themes. Much of the overtly political Min Joong artworks are blacklisted from mainstream commercial galleries which are for the most part purveyors of the more commercially viable and academically accepted range of abstract art.

Coincidentally, in 1981, a year after the aforementioned pioneering "Reality and Utterance" show in Korea, a Cuban exhibition entitled "Volume One", showcasing works by recent art school graduates marked a watershed moment of public recognition for a new generation of artists. This show drew an incredible audience numbering 9000 in the first ten days and generated intense debate. What was evident in that exhibition and in others which followed was the absence of any unifying theme. A great pluralistic syncretism became predominant in which Western influences of conceptualism and neofiguration and postmodernist eclecticism were experimented with and reassembled with playful irony and confidence. For the generation of Cuban artists educated within the revolution, there is a surprising prevalence of individualism. Cuban artists have never expressed a wish to break radically with the Western history of art. There is rather a move to expand rather than contradict this history.

Beneath this veneer of internationalism and openness to Western influences lies a strong dialectical presence of nationalistic concerns and localized idioms. Some of the most interesting recent works synthesize an international aesthetic formal vocabulary with elements of or alluding to popular culture and kitsch as well as the diverse indigenous Indian, African and Spanish cultural heritage. The current liberalized official cultural policy reinforced by Fidel Castro's recent pronouncement amending his earlier infamous dictum of 1961. "Within the revolution, everything; outside the revolution, nothing," to include the exploration of both form and content within the revolution has tolerated works which contain pointed social critique. Many of these younger artists are keenly sensitive to criticisms that their desired participation in an international dialogue may place them in a neo-colonized dependent position; likewise, they are equally mindful of the pitfalls of a defensive and isolationist form of cultural nationalism. This dilemma is clearly expressed by Armando Hart, Cuba's Minister of Culture: "The world marches toward a deeper connection of the many countries and culture. Such interrelationships pose serious identity problems for each of our cultures. But it shall not be through isolation and chauvinism that we will maintain our own identity. We are obligated to live in an interrelationship with the rest of the world; we cannot flee this dilemma."(2)

A way of bringing-it-all-back-home, so to speak, is perhaps found in this statement of Vietnamese filmmaker Trin T. Minh-ha: "...there is a Third World in every First World and vice versa." Asian Americans constitute along with other people of color, the Third World within this belly of the beast First World. As such, Asian American artists encounter and struggle with the same issues stemming from a Western cultural hegemony which marginalizes artists of color here by virtue of their racial difference and "otherness." Works by artists of color here suffer the same patronizing acceptance or critical dismissal as those from non Western countries in being considered derivative and/or provincial or too specifically political and lacking "universality."

Any attempt to examine or evaluate cultural production of non Western sources raises issues which are currently at the heart of the crisis experienced by several interrelated disciplines dealing with cultural studies such as art history/criticism, anthropology and ethnology. In all these fields, there are voices expressing the urgently felt sense that a fundamental reassessment and departure from the Western European and North American hegemonic and monocentric cultural perspectives is long overdue. Global socio-economic shifts and the growing emergence and assertions of third world liberation and independence

movements alongside the struggle waged by people of color on the homefront for socio-economic and cultural parity have pushed the more progressive sectors within Western institutions to question its basic assumptions and privileges in relation to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the forces operating to assert North American interests in the world are an everyday reality for all of us to confront.

The experience of Cuban and Korean contemporary artists offers some complementary insights to our situation here about crossing over or hanging tight in relation to the mainstream. In plain talk, it's OK either way just so you don't forget who you are and who you're doing it for and why. In reality, there are few instances of "all-or-nothing conversions or resistance", rather, a lot of in-between cultural "ad hoc engagements." (3) Asian Americans are put in a particularly ambiguous relationship with mainstream American culture. Regardless of the generations of Asians who have made this country their home, Asians are still considered the eternal aliens at the same time that we're designated the honorary whites or the more recent appellation, "model minority". No matter what they call us, it's all derogatory and condescending and serves to keep us in our marginalized place.

Considering the notion of crossover first, it's interesting to take a closer look at the Cuban artistic new wave. In spite of the fact that these artists are seeking more eclectic and individualistic directions which question many of the strongly held notions about what revolutionary culture should be and look like, they still uphold an underlying consciousness that art is fundamentally linked to their society and is meant for their society. This was expressed by one of the artist in this way: "The artist always has a social function. As mythmaker, the artist has always created the personality of each culture. I am interested in the social repercussions of my work. But not in a simple, schematic way as in the case of the pamphleteer. I want to make people conscious of things, make them think. I'm not interested in elitism; rather, the artist should cultivate the minds of the people, enrich their cultural development. This does not mean giving them goods, entertaining them or making them happy... I do not believe in art as a palliative."(4) An art for art's sake attitude, which prevails in mainstream context here is virtually nonexistent in the Cuban context. Rather, there is an underlying assumption that art should be for the common good. "The common good is not defined; what is defined, implicitly, is the notion that the artist has an organic responsibility to think out for himself or herself, what connections with the common good are possible interesting and individually satisfying. There is, in other words, a palpable moral dimension to the intellectual life of the Cuban artist, a dimension that arrests the attention of an outsider stumbling upon this discourse."(5)

The situation of the Korean Min Joong artist shares much in common with Asian Americans involved in cultural work. First and foremost, both of these entities are striving for empowerment within a capitalistic society. Min Joong artists' effort to critique their socio-political system parallel some of ours but also differs from and surpasses ours in terms of the depth of its commitment to collective cultural practices, its militancy and its effect in its respective contexts. Numerous associations large and small have been organized by Min Joong artists to promote collective support and strength as there are few outside sources of support. For some sectors of the movement, these kinds of collective cultural production represent a means to challenge the commodification tendency and personal profit motivation of individualism. Another model for socially engaged cultural practice lies in the close working alliances formed by some of these artists with other sectors of society such as the farmers, the blue collar workers and the students who are also striving for the same socio-political empowerment. Likewise, community based Asian American



Jung Ki Lee, Painting on rice bag

arts and cultural organization function in a similar manner with deeper ties to the fuller dimension of community life. However, there is less urgency and less at stake within the Asian American context as there is for the Min Joong movement because of its ties with a national political struggle.

For Asian American and Min Joong artists, another areas of common concern and emphasis is history. How is it



Jung Ku Lee, *Painting on rice bag*

told or suppressed, and by whom? Like other histories of non-Western people, Asian American and Min Joong artists insist on telling their own history in an effort to set the record straight. This stems from a shared sense that much of their history has been distorted, when not suppressed, to serve the interests of various foreign powers or its own ruling class or power. In contrast to the split between the political and the poetic inherent in Western cultural canon, much of the current literature and artwork by both Asian American and Min Joong artists assert their interrelatedness and interdependence. Historical analysis is a prerequisite in almost all art historical and critical discourse relating to the Min Joong movement. One of the foremost Korean critics, Wanyung Sung began his essay contribution to a catalogue of a recent exhibition of Min Joong art in Manhattan by expressing skepticism about the North American response to the artwork due to their ignorance of the full Korean history and in particular, it's complex history of problematic encounters with the U.S. This strong nationalistic sentiment and rhetoric is tempered by the recognition that, "it is dangerous for Koreans to dismiss Western culture altogether."⁽⁶⁾ On a similar note, a prominent Cuban art historian posits that "the most effective Cuban practice in relation to "international currents" has been, in my opinion, critical and independent assimilation, except for the mercantile and alienating mechanism typical of the distribution channels operating in the capitalist world."⁽⁷⁾

This presentation highlights only a few of the many interesting relationships which can be drawn from the observations of these three groups of contemporary artists in their complex relationships to the dominant Western cultural influence. Clearly, artists and the arts alone cannot substantially decenter or counter the unidirectional flow of information from the centralized Western mainstream. But I hope that this discussion challenges to a degree this monopolistic flow of information by looking and listening elsewhere and in our own communities of color. Great potential for meaningful and empowering dialogue exists when we begin to talk and listen to each other - our multitude of diverse non-western voices. Imagine that over the relentless drone of "Voice of America" muzak, could be heard a lively discussion by Korean Min Joong, Cuban and Asian American artists who have never before had the opportunity to meet all together. Other voices, Native American, Namibian and Palestinian to name just a few, join the conversation. Can you hear them?

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