

Certain Latitudes
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Five sites, some 15 flights and major latitudinal (and longitudinal) shifts. Beginning at the Tropic of Capricorn with the Korean-dominated garment districts of Bom Retiro and Bras in São Paulo; north to the 43rd parallel Soviet-planned city of Almaty nestled beneath the picturesque snowcapped Tien Shan mountains; below the 35th parallel to the bustling Korean business-lined alleys of Osaka under the din of a train line; back on the 43rd parallel to the lively city of Yanji with ubiquitous colorful, bilingual signage; and last but not least at the 34th parallel, driving through the sprawling multi-ethnic streets of Koreatown of Los Angeles. From a bountiful prism of images, these were some of the distilled sights/sites recorded by a research team consisting of myself as curator, an anthropologist, a filmmaker and a photographer-assistant. (Refer to Soo Young Chin's essay for why these five sites were selected and their socio-historic and demographic information. Additionally, a diasporic timeline runs throughout the catalog that tracks the significant events in the histories of the five sites as well as of North and South Korea. [For simplicity, I refer to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as North Korea and the Republic of Korea as South Korea.] The catalog also includes writings by contributors from each of these five sites.)

Our whirlwind research travel was undeniably exhilarating and exhausting. The greatest challenge in such feverish border crossings is the inevitable challenges of linguistic and cultural translations. Frequently, since I have only English fluency, at each site I needed at least two sets of translators--one for Portuguese to Korean and another for Korean to English; the same would be the case with Russian to Korean to English or from Japanese to Korean to English. In Almaty and Japan, we found it difficult to understand even when Korean was spoken due to unfamiliar dialects and accents or the uneven or faulty grammar of those for whom Korean is a second, if not foreign language.

Our trip vividly reinforced the fact that global migration has reached unprecedented levels since the mid twentieth century and that the lives of people everywhere have been radically changed by the experience of diaspora. Koreans play a significant role in this globalized phenomenon as they constitute the fourth largest diasporic group relative to the size of the population. It is estimated that nearly 6 million Koreans live in 160 different countries of the world.

This project's aim is to generate interest in and understanding of the nascent yet growing body of research and discourse that has developed about the Korean diaspora, and about diaspora in general. The project is unprecedented in bringing together emergent cultural formations from the Korean diaspora, broadening its geographic margins. In doing so, it presents a particular diasporic perspective and its overall provisional and highly qualified nature need to be noted loud and clear. The fact that the research team is based in Los Angeles, one

of the five sites, obviously privileges this site in both conscious and especially unconscious ways. Also, the fact that this project is sponsored by and held in South Korea for a predominantly South Korean audience also exerts undeniable effects. This project then has to be interpreted within these two dominant brackets, that of the U.S and South Korea with all the attendant baggage beholden to each. Although the title of the exhibition, "THERE" is no doubt inflected with the HERE of these two particular vantage points, its intention is to suggest fluidity as opposed to a fixed notion of place or location, with no overarching vantage point from which the diaspora is to be considered or positioned.

This suggested fluidity of location also aims to extricate the notion of authenticity that is problematically tied to an origin and in most cases to a nation. Prevalent concepts associated with diaspora such as exile, dislocation or displacement perpetuate this linkage of authenticity with origin, implying a sense of separation from what is considered to be the real, or from the authenticity and wholeness of the origin(al). This may be true in some respect but it hardly encompasses the full range of diasporic experience. For many the decision to leave was voluntary, and a choice. No expressions of desire for return were expressed among those we met. For many diasporic subjects, their sense of displacement is not from a nation of origin but from a more general sense of dislocated history and culture. As such, they feel "half home" and ambivalent about their sense of belonging wherever they are, even when they return to the nation of "origin."

The problematics of origin are singularly acute in regard to Korea because of its division. If Freud's theories of mourning and melancholia can be applied to analyze this historical condition, it can be posited that Korea and Koreans are psychically stuck in their grief over the loss of wholeness. Korea's foundational myth of a homogenous people cannot be reconciled by their division and this contradiction gives rise to a melancholic condition that is according to Freud "interminable in nature and refuses substitution." Furthermore, the melancholic feeds on its loss, creating a mutually perpetuating cycle.

Nowhere in the Korean diaspora is this entangled condition more intense or poignant than in Japan, in the belly of the former colonizing beast, so to speak. Many would assert that persistent colonial policies still maintain a stratified social system reminiscent of the Jim Crow policies of the pre-Civil Right era in the U.S. In this untenable context, many Koreans here have projected allegiance elsewhere, either affiliating with the North or the South, resulting in their own division. Curiously, most of those who align themselves with North Korea were originally from the South. Many diasporic subjects envision an imaginary whole, a unified Korea as their homeland. Other Koreans are multiply displaced, such as the Korean from São Paulo whose family originated from what is now North Korea and who briefly settled in South Korea after the Korean War; or the Korean in Kazakhstan who was forcibly relocated there from the Russian eastern seaboard; for these and others, the question of origin is complicated. Many

Koryo Saram (self identified term used by Koreans in Kazakhstan) consider their *gohyang* (Korean term for hometown) to be Vladivostok, not Korea.

Questions that lie at the heart of this project are not whether someone, for example, who is a fourth generation *Koryo Saram* is Korean or Kazakh, but *how* this subject is Korean or Kazakh and by extension, *how* the artwork reflects their subjectivity. Identity formation is endlessly varied and complex. Every person we met on this trip, even those who spoke no Korean and seemed highly assimilated in their present locale, identified themselves as Korean. The only exception may be in Japan where an estimated 80-90 percent of Koreans try to pass for Japanese. Denial of one's ethnicity is but one extreme in the myriad play of identities in adapting to different conditions. Many have found new ways to be Korean in the different places where they are settled. "We are actually creating new cultures that did not exist before," according to artist Y David Chung. For many Koreans in the diaspora, home has become any place where one's family resides such that the real concern is the prospect of dwelling not outside the nation but outside one's clan or extended kin. Akin to the Chinese transnational networks theorized by the Chinese scholar Aihwa Ong, "[Korean] subjectivity is at once deterritorialized in relation to a particular country, though highly localized in relation to family." We have found on our research trip that the tradition of *gesah*, (korean ancestor worship) however modified, to be widely practiced in all the diasporic sites and that it serves as a testament to the enduring importance of kinship networks.

Writing about the Black British diaspora, Stuart Hall, the British cultural theorist hailed the critical role of cultural production in producing " 'new ethnicities' that speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as 'ethnic artists' "...and creates an art informed by a "cultural politics that engages rather than suppresses difference..." The contemporary post-colonial era sees newly emergent cultural producers from the diasporic margins who signal new issues of hybridity and critiques of orientalism and exoticism with an acute attention to their own positionality between the centre and periphery.

The artists in this exhibition engage this artistic paradigm shift in vastly differing ways. In the process of curating, it became abundantly clear early on that if I wanted representation from all five sites, I would have to use flexible criteria for the selection of work. I could not rely on the prevailing criteria of looking for 'cutting-edge' work. It became more pertinent to adopt a visual cultural approach that crosses the usual divide between art and popular culture. The resulting catholic mix reflects a truly heterogeneous global art reality of artists who are engaged in different dialogues with distinctly different sets of references. For example, selected artists from the U.S. and São Paulo work in a contemporary post-modern mode while others work in more traditional or modernist genres. There are also pieces in the exhibition, such as puppets, journalistic photography and film and video works that are more in league with popular culture. (For film and video artists, see Paul Yi's introduction to his selections.)

Given my location in Los Angeles, and given the rapid increase and visibility within the last decade of highly talented artists of Korean heritage to choose from in the U.S., it was the easiest site to make selections. My only limitation was to select Korean American artists who were new to South Korean art audiences. Otherwise, I gave myself free rein to select artwork that represented a diversity of artistic practices. Of the ten artists selected from the U.S., six live in the Southern California area. Since many of the country's top art schools are located here and since the national art market in Los Angeles is next in importance to New York, it is to be expected that a larger pool of artists are located here. As for the non-L.A. based artists, Joseph Park lives in Seattle but exhibits in a prominent gallery in LA; Jin Lee is based in Chicago, Y. David Chung in Washington D.C. and Seong Chun in New York City. These artists also represent a diverse range of diasporic experience, from the mixed parentage artist David Kory to the American born Jennifer Moon, to Byoung Ok Koh, who came to LA as a *yu haksaeng*, or college student, and is the most recent immigrant of the ten artists.

As for my selection process in the other sites, I relied on an array of contacts that I established before the all too brief site visits. In the case of Almaty and Yanji, these were mostly Korean community contacts. Although more artists are located in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, our research was focused on Almaty which has historical importance as the initial site of the 1937 forced relocation of Koreans to Central Asia, and it remains the Korean cultural center in the region. After meeting a number of artists who were part of an artists' organization based in Almaty, I ended up selecting a puppet maker, Sergei Mikhailovich Song from Almaty and Viktor Ivanovich, a journalistic photographer based in Tashkent whose works I saw in Almaty. Their works impressed me the most. These two are well known in the Central Asian Korean community and are considered their unofficial cultural ambassadors.

From Yanji, which constitutes the oldest Korean diaspora site, I selected two painters, Hee Man Suk, an octogenarian who is regarded as the godfather of Korean artists in China, and Xianji Cui, 40 years Suk's junior who was born and raised in Yanji. Suk has a complicated history of migrations between Korea, Japan and Yanbian but considers Yanbian—where he spent his youth and later established his artistic career—to be his home. Cui, whose Korean name is Choi Heun Gi, has been pursuing a professional career in Beijing since 1994 where he goes by his professional Chinese name. Although there is no overt discrimination in China like there is in Japan, Cui feels that passing for Chinese gives him an advantage with the commercial foreign art market's current interest in Chinese artists.

In Yanji and Almaty, and to a lesser extent in Japan, most of the Korean artists were making traditional genre paintings of landscape, portraiture, and scenes of daily life. In China, I suspect that its vast size is another strong factor for the pronounced lag in cultural development between cosmopolitan centers and the distant provinces. Signs of change were evident at the Yanbian University art department, the main university level art program in the province, which

recently added photography and digital design to its curriculum. At this time however, most of the established artists who are affiliated with the university were painters nonetheless.

In finding artists of Korean ancestry in Japan and Brazil, some local contacts were helpful, although in most cases, especially in Japan, mainstream art contacts had no knowledge of Korean artists in their midst. This points to the extreme marginalization of Korean artists in these sites. In Brazil, one artist, Lina Kim was readily identified by both the mainstream art contacts and Korean community contacts as the crossover success. In a Korean community that is small enough such that most everyone knows everyone else, she is known to the community and yet she keeps her distance and has her feet firmly planted in the contemporary art scene of Brazil. She has exhibited at many of the major commercial and public institutions and has gained the recognition of being selected for this year's São Paulo Bienal. The other Korean artist from São Paulo, Sang Won Sung has a successful commercial design business but is unknown in the Brazilian art world. Unlike Lina who is a São Paulo native, Sang Won is a relative newcomer to Brazil who after a back and forth movement from Korea, is committed to staying in São Paulo. He, along with his artist wife share a studio in Bom Ritiro, the garment district and participates in the activities of a Korean artists' organization.

To represent the Osaka site, I chose two independent artists and an artists' group, Areum, which in turn chose to represent itself with works by five members. Collectively, these artists live vastly different lives in Japan. Areum (represented by Che Jun, Fung Sok Ro, Il Nam Park, Sung Min Kim, Young Suk Kim) is an impressively large artists' collective numbering over 100 members who are spread throughout Japan with concentrations in the major cities of Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto and Tokyo. The group has been in existence since 1999 and has a very efficient top-down management structure. Their primary collective activity is holding an annual group exhibition. Members range in age from college students to emeritus professors. Most members are associated with the Chongryun community in Japan which continues to affiliate itself with or is sympathetic to North Korea. Many of its members teach in the network of private schools that culminate in the flagship Chosun University that is located in the suburbs of Tokyo. In complete contrast to these artists of Areum and their sense of identity and artistic sensibility is Yoon Heechang, who was born in Japan and is based in Tokyo. Although his use of his Korean name prevents him from completely passing as Japanese, Heechang is nevertheless wary of too much emphasis being placed on his Korean identity for reasons already discussed about Japan's intolerant social attitudes. The third selection from Osaka is the well known Japanese artist, Yoshiko Shimada, included here because of the relevance of her project to the diaspora theme. Her installation, "Pachinko: Family and Nation" which I first saw at her solo exhibition in Vancouver, Canada was made in collaboration with Hwangbo Kangja, a Korean feminist and a founding member of Mirine, a collective organization of Korean Japanese women that focuses on discrimination issues and the Junshindae (Comfort Women) issue. This project represents a rare instance of collaboration

between a Japanese artist and a second generation Korean Japanese. Pachinko is an apt visual motif for this project about Korean family histories in Japan because of the enormous popularity of this gambling game and the fact that about 60% of the Pachinko business in Japan is controlled by Koreans.

What is strikingly shared by four of the sites, excluding Yanji is the existence of well organized Korean artists' organizations. The role of the artists' organizations vis à vis the more mainstream art world reveals a lot about the position of Korean communities in relation to the mainstream of a respective country. These artist groups play a similar role that churches in the U.S. diaspora had and continue to have, albeit waning in their influence, in providing a haven and a support base in an otherwise alien or unreceptive cultural environment. The large artists' association in Los Angeles is less dominant an influence for Korean artists than its counterparts in São Paulo, Kazakhstan and Japan. The absence of such organizations in Yanji can be attributed to the fact that Koreans constitute the dominant ethnic group in the region (although this is changing with an increasing emigration of Koreans mostly for economic reasons) in which the official policy promotes bi-lingualism and bicultural attitudes.

While there are differences in production from one site to another, it is revealing to consider some unexpected common themes that have emerged across the overall selections.

Landscape emerged as a significant trope in the works of six artists. Hee Man Suk and Xianji Cui both draw some of their inspiration from the Yanbian countryside. Relying on his memory his native Yanbian, Cui's bold applications of paint with an austere monochromatic palette abstractly evoke a sense of quiet stillness of its wintry scenes. Hee Man Suk is known for his paintings that describe the local scenery with great painterly flourish. The works in this exhibition however are mostly recent still lifes which are as bold and fresh as many of his paintings from his most prolific years. The abstract canvases by Il Nam Park of Kobe are from a series based on the experience of the devastating earthquake of 1995 that destroyed his house and nearly took his life. The high-keyed coloration of Los Angeles artist David Korty's landscapes may seem surreally over-the-top to outsiders but we Angelenos know better. Korty faithfully captures with an economy of blended washes or just the right saturated blot of colors the fickle moodiness (and magic) of this smog-enhanced cityscape, where the enchantment of city lights are never beyond reach. Wonju Lim is also fascinated by city lights, but in her case, it's the beacons of industry that make Faustian promise of progress and modernity. Her multi-media installation, "Elysian Fields," juxtaposes modular, Bauhausian plastic building blocks with projected images of other 'real' buildings that are fragmented by the complexity of the built surface. While the installation seems at once to be a seductive homage to modernist architecture, it also provokes unsettling questions about the symbiotic and incestuous relationship between artifice and substance. A re-read of Robert Venturi's Reading Las Vegas might come in handy here. In stark contrast, Jin Lee takes us far, far away from the citylights to the vast fields of the Midwest prairie. She uses digital processes to create extremely wide panoramas

that conceptualize landscape not as a fixed place in time but as an experience that unfolds over time. These landscapes also blur the distinctions between painting and photography, fact and fiction.

Another grouping of artists play upon ideas of abstraction. Manhattan based artist Seong Chun's labor-intensive and intricately crocheted sculptures made of paper, text and thread are paradoxically craft-based and "quote" high modernist icons such as Piet Mondrian. The fragmented re-arrangement of a Mondrian composition in "Further/More" engenders unexpected figurative associations with an offhand humorous aside. These and other works evince her disciplined fearlessness in the pastiche of materials, process and references. While it may appear that Hee Chang Yoon mines a similar terrain, his works adopt a far more reverential attitude towards formalism. Yoon's deceptively simple clay pieces that resemble generic forms such as a corner bracket or a shelf, strategically activate the surrounding architectural space in such a way as to demand a slow and deliberate apprehension. Byoung Ok Koh's conceptual sculptures slyly transform familiar everyday objects. Temporality or some form of interactivity is an added critical factor. Above all, he aims to create the "best meaningless thing" that nevertheless accrues meaning.

Issues of gender and sexuality are often sidelined in the diaspora in which masculine authority and heteronormativity are reinforced and reasserted in the face of displacement and racism. However, in the works of Young Suk Kim, Young Chung, Susan Choi and Yoshiko Shimada they take center stage. Much of their work is also engaged in various readings "against the grain" of dominant cultural gender and sexual codes. Young Suk Kim is the youngest of the five artists selected to represent Areum. She paints her large canvases in a tiny apartment in Tokyo decorated with posters of pop stars such as Bjork and Marilyn Monroe. Her life-size depictions of naked male figures are at once clinically detailed yet erotically charged. Susan Choi uses her own body as a narrative source to critique dominant/conventional notions of sexuality in popular culture, in particular, Japanese pop cultures of manga and animé that have become major globalized exports. Choi is also represented in the exhibition with a photo series in which 18th century European orientalist paintings serve as a backdrop for sexual fantasies that ritualize the play of dominance and servitude. Choi toes a fine line separating art from pornography, troubling easy assumptions about the gendered nature of visual pleasure. Young Chung is a versatile artist whose works in video, installation and photography incorporate socio-political themes in various disarming ways. Recent photographs included in the exhibition are highly staged studio images that center on the representation of the body as a vehicle for the examination of certain fears and desires, not just of the individual but of the body politic. His works would suggest that what is considered abject, alien or the "other" are inextricably linked or embodied in expressions of eroticized desire or sexual pleasure. Like Mapplethorpe, some of his images are seductively subtle while other are emblematically blunt. Yoshiko Shimada's "Pachinko: Family and Nation" also incorporates photography--in this case, snapshots from family albums of Korean feminists members of Mirine in which the personal is political and is historicized.

The stories are set against Yoshiko's multi-media narrative of her grandfather who she speculates had persecuted Koreans during his service as a policeman during the 1923 Great Earthquake in Tokyo. These reconstructed and gendered histories of a past that were buried or evaded recall Walter Benjamin's expression, "to brush history against the grain."

The final grouping of eleven artists share a similar interest in history and socio-political issues. Joo Young Kim, is not based in any of the five sites but divides her time between France and South Korea. She is part of this project because her newly created work concerns the history of the forced relocation of Koreans from the Vladivostok region to Central Asia. She retraced the historical train route from Vladivostok to Ushtobe, a settlement located about three hours drive north of Almaty, and the final destination. The highlight of her journey is the ritualized performance of a 'gesah,' conducted at the grave site of those initial deportees. Viktor Ivanovich An's black and white images capture various aspects of life among the Koreans of central Asia. Some of his images, such as "Onion Field" achieve iconic effect in their ability to transcend the mere descriptive qualities of a vast field of onions. One suspects that Viktor's deep lived knowledge of his subject matter lends his work a level of authority that is difficult to assume otherwise. Several members of the Areum group address aspects of the history and status of Koreans in Japan. Jun Chae is the oldest of the group who, like Magritte, observes and represents social and political realities with a keen surrealist edge. A consummate draftsman, he is equally adept at drawing biting, satirical, political cartoons as he is at rendering the human figure on the scale of a canvas. Like Jun Chae, Sung Min Kim who is part of Areum's younger generation, also relies on highly stylized renderings with a strong graphic quality. The intimate paintings such as "White Shipment" depict the harsh history of boat passages that initially brought Koreans to Japan. His rendition of this grim experience is tempered with lighter moments that can be discerned upon closer examination. Like the previous two artists, Joseph Park, a U.S. artist, also paints in a highly stylized graphic manner. Park is adept at straddling the fine line between caricature and the definition of characters with individual personas. With equal doses of humor and pathos, the compelling characters who inhabit Park's contemporary world enact their daily melodramas which has the audience staying tuned.

In a similar vein, Sang Won Sung in Sao Paulo and Sergei Mikhailovich Song in Almaty tinker and produce an amazing array of characters who come to life in their own universe. Sang Won's witty, intimate figures are much more quirky and unpredictable and made from an unlimited array of materials. Like pieces from a "cargo cult," found in some parts of the Third World, refuse or discarded materials are as good as gold in Sang Won's hands. Sergei Song's puppets assume larger than life proportions but come from humble papier-mâché origins. Although these figures are intended for performances, some of which are simple and presented solo from his wheel chair and others, more elaborate, involve collaboration with various non-professionals, they are equally compelling as still sculptural figures.

In Fung Sok Ro's sculpture, "The Gate," a commanding ceramic tower uses the portal as a metaphor for depicting the five defining stages of Korean history. In this highly schematized work, the present is depicted at the base of the structure with a male figure standing on one side of an opened passageway. The present bears the weight of the past both literally and figuratively. The portal also figures in Y. David Chung's "Stripmall," a multi-media installation composed of four suspended walls that create dynamically contrasting spaces. The interior is brightly illuminated by video projections while the exterior walls are covered with bold, mural-size, stylized monochromatic drawings. Chung's slow-motion animation in the interior space creates a hallucinatory world dominated by floating commodities: think Barbara Kruger on acid.

Jennifer Moon and Lina Kim also present room-sized installations. Jennifer's interior resembles a *norebang* or a karaoke with its comfortable couch, mikes, and a video. Video shows Jennifer singing songs that viewers can sing along with; songs about the search for love and aspirations for enlightenment and social struggle. Jennifer really wants to know if you can be a hero, if just for one day. Steeped in the rich Brazilian history of conceptual art exemplified by the works of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark and Cildo Meireles, Lina, like her predecessors probes the complex relationship between word/object/image. Inside her room in the exhibition, viewers are confronted with sets of small circular mirrors arranged in concentric circles and spelling out the words, "Per Visibilia Ad Invisibilia" (also the title of the work). Long strings of crystal beads extend out into the room from under a line of flour sacks stacked against the far end wall. This provocative play of materials begs questions about their role in the relationship between visibility and invisibility. Is the bunker-like arrangement of flour sacks protecting the precious tentacles of crystal (and the viewers?) from invisible forces that lie beyond our field of vision?

It is worth noting in closing that this selection of artwork attempts to look beyond the prevalent "international-style" seen in the mainstream showcases and biennials, and considers localized, dialogue-specific art forms that function beyond the homogenizing scope of globalization. Looking for art in the extremely diverse cultural terrains of the five selected Korean diasporic sites that are in some cases far from the cultural centers, where artists operate from a myriad of different art historical timeframes and influences, necessitated the adoption of flexible criteria with "a certain latitude." The irrepressible heterogeneity of this selection suggests that the vitality of artistic endeavor is everpresent, even outside of major metropolises, and is able to withstand many social and economic obstacles. A number of artists with distinguished and prolific practices, such as Hee Man Suk, work despite the lack of a public or commercial cultural infrastructure of museums and galleries. Others, such as the equally distinguished Jun Chae, struggle against extreme marginalization within their local contexts, in which it is difficult to attain visibility. Both cases result in deficient preservation and management of works.

This project owes a debt to a broad range of precedents that likewise have asserted the critical importance of artistic and cultural production to the

understanding of emergent social formations. Discursive histories of earlier cultural confluences such as the Negritude movement, Harlem Renaissance, Multiculturalism, the Black Arts movement in Britain, and Minjoong cultural movement in South Korea present viable models for the critique of new cultural formations in the diaspora. This exhibition of the artistic and cultural dimensions of the Korean diaspora can be best understood as a beneficiary of and an intervention into this enduring legacy.