

Transcending Borders in Thought

On the Work of the German-Korean Artist Jae-Hyun Yoo

The artistic work of Jae-Hyun Yoo is marked by a unique constellation of biographical experiences and the political issues arising from them. Born in South Korea, he grows up in an environment of political surveillance. The tensions between the two states of North and South Korea mean that he makes early acquaintance with such topics as otherness, borders and the resulting consequences for human togetherness.

The decades spent under Japanese rule, the role of being a political football in the Cold War waged between the Soviet Union and the USA, and the fate of becoming a theatre of war between the two emergent states in North and South mean that Korean history is characterized by division, destruction and separation. Many families suffered under these conditions of turmoil, not least that of Jae-Hyun Yoo. At his birth in 1974, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) has been under the control of the military for 13 years and he grows up in an atmosphere of comprehensive state controls. For many intellectuals, this is a reason to emigrate to North Korea, which up into the late 1970s experiences swifter economic growth than South Korea. But, as with many other issues, this too cannot be talked about openly. The state plenipotenaries prescribe the correct length of hair and forbid artists to use the colour red; these and other prohibitions are all-pervading, as is the propaganda against the "other", communist state in the North.

Looking back, Jae-Hyun Yoo is astonished to acknowledge that he did not, for example, know what the North Korean flag looked like. When still young, he finds out that it can be problematic, even dangerous, to express one's own opinion – above all, if it involves a negative attitude to the state and the military. Intuitively, he begins to resent and resist being totally subject to propaganda-governed opinion and being automatically appropriated for the purposes of "his country". He wants to claim the freedom to decide for other positions and/or to adopt different attitudes.

When in the 1980s an uncle of his, then a student, takes part in demonstrations against the unacceptable state-run political circumstances in South Korea, he observes the

mounting politicization at the universities and for the first time begins to ask the questions which will occupy him for a long time thereafter. Why is there this separation? Who decides which states are "good" and which "bad"? Is there such a thing as an "objective" and "true" position?

His majors in Western and Asian Philosophy and his studies in German Language and Literature, which he is the only student in South Korea to pursue, help him to come closer to finding answers in the years 1995 to 2001. When he then decides to study the Fine Arts, he is one of the first to concern himself with contemporary art in South Korea. For it is only with the establishment of the Gwangju Biennale – which takes place for the first time in 1995 and always focuses, among other things, on political and historical interfaces with the country at large – and no doubt also because of the simultaneous expansion of the global art market that the funding and presentation of contemporary art slowly begin to take off in South Korea. Jae-Hyun Yoo is not only early in his choice of foci: he is also the only student in South Korea to have this unusual combination of subjects, which allows him, among other things, to discover many areas of common ground between Germany and Korea.

Like all South Korean men, Jae-Hyun Yoo has to do his 26 months of national service as a soldier and is confronted with the ultra-severe conditions of military life. The two years in which he is stationed at the DMZ (the de-militarised zone on the border running between North and South Korea) leave a lasting mark on him. His own experiences and the observations he makes of the manifold interests and functions that the border serves and fulfils as a political, an economic, a personal, a touristic and a military space all play their part in stimulating *the* questions and visions that are to be reflected in his later artistic work.

When in 2001 he has the opportunity to go and study in Germany, he applies successfully to the *Universität der Künste* in Berlin, becoming a member of Katharina Sieverding's media art class and graduating as a master pupil in 2006. The discussion culture prevailing in the Sieverding class, where everyone has equal rights when it comes to voicing his or her opinion, creates precisely the atmosphere he now needs. His interests – partly encouraged by his study of the Fluxus movement – focus more and more on artistic strategies that intervene in social, political and societal processes. He develops a variety of formats for the artistic ideas he now realizes and is also active as an initiator, a co-

ordinator and the _ideas man_ behind projects (e.g. for "Shared.Divided.United", 2009). Some of these projects are designed in the form of ongoing, continually expanding forums ("Global Alien", from 2008 on).

The stimuli for his work he derives from all the previous encounters of his life, from his day-to-day observations and from the international networks he is part of: the artistic results are always based on intensive research work (e.g. "DMZ Message", jointly with Farida Heuck, 2009). This can then lead to formally highly reduced objects and installations which, when viewed more closely, allow the dangers and threats of an undocumented border-crossing situation to become tangible in sensitive, empathetic structures ("Border-Crosser", 2005). His multi-media video and audio installations, on the other hand, which in an ideal case can provoke a _change of view_ in the observer, reveal how difficult it is to tie him down to any *one* formal language ("Exit", 2006). It is almost superfluous to say that in his projects the notion of the border is worked up in a wide range of ways, running also for example between cultural and social strata ("Island", 2008).

Jae-Hyun Yoo has crossed borders in the physical sense and has encountered borders in the psychological sense. It is this experience that sets him observing life and distilling its essence so as to use his artistic works to de-stabilize intellectual constructs, which in this process ideally become increasingly involved and intricate. Just as Jae-Hyun Yoo himself, so also those who study his work and concern themselves with his projects are to gain practice in not taking anything as a given, in viewing everything from all sides, and in so re-assembling knowledge anew. For Jae-Hyun Yoo, our supposed reality, composed of information received and sightings made, remains a _white, vacant blank_ until – via many changes of position, by listening to the voices of those involved, and by involving himself in the multiplicity of their experience of life and their hopes for life – he has achieved a many-layered perspective and picture. Only then can he approach a subject, the approach immediately casting up further questions.

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