

Art as an Interface between North and South Korea.
On the Reception of *Chosŏnhwa* in South Korea.

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–work in progress, handle with caution–

Introduction: Art as an Interface

As a geographical concept structuring spaces an interface is a border zone, an area of contact and division. More than just the outer confines of a circumscribed space, an interface is at the same time a spatial concept in its own right, straddling two clearly defined spatial entities, where the presence of the one defines the other. In this ‘grey’ area in between spaces, there is the possibility of encounters. Inter-Korean relations are examples of such an encounter taking place in the in-between space between North and South Korea.

In this project on North-South interfaces on the Korean peninsula, I apply the concept of interface to a context that is not strictly spatial. Focusing on the development of cultural exchanges following the June 2000 summit, I treat fine arts as a non-spatial interface, a locus where the divide is tangible but a meeting of minds is possible. That I specifically focus on the reception of North Korean art in general and *Chosŏnhwa*-style painting in particular is a consequence of the one-sidedness of the exchanges taking place. There is currently no framework in place to allow South Korean art to travel North. Furthermore, as it happens, I have since 2004 developed a research interest in North Korean art theory and practice. A certain familiarity with the North Korean art scene gives me an interesting perspective on the reception of *Chosŏnhwa* in the South.

The decision to particularly deal with *Chosŏnhwa* follows from two contradictory facts. On the one hand, *Chosŏnhwa* has been defined as the quintessence of North Korean art by Kim Chŏng Il. On the other hand, based on traditional ink brush painting, *Chosŏnhwa* is a familiar idiom for a South Korean public. In other words, while *Chosŏnhwa* is at the heart of the development of art in the specific North Korean context, as an art medium it is instantly recognisable for a South Korean public. As an interface, *Chosŏnhwa* divides as much as it brings together. As an artefact, it is recognisable, but the interpretation imposed by the viewer may be at odds with the context in which it was generated. The division becomes all the more palpable when the production of *Chosŏnhwa* is taken into consideration. Under what conditions is art produced in North Korea? What is the position of the artist in North Korean society? This is particularly relevant when one thinks beyond the scope of the current flow of artworks and ponders the possibility of an exchange of artists, which in any case should be considered an integral part of

inter-Korean cultural exchanges.

Art in the DPRK

The role of art and artists in the DPRK differs fundamentally from the position of art and artists in the South. Art does not exist in and by itself, but it is in the service of revolutionising society. Artists in turn are in the ideological forefront of the revolution, unflinching defenders of the Leaders and their cause. Their training is a mixture of technical and ideological education, the latter being even more important in the eyes of the theoreticians. In terms of style, socialist realism is the only accepted mode of expression, though within socialist realism a surprisingly wide range of expressive forms is tolerated. As long as an artwork originates in and depicts reality, and it is imbued with a proper ideological gloss, there is considerable leeway in allowing expressive forms. What makes a work of art a socialist realist work of art is the proper ideological reading of reality. An artist is groomed in party doctrine and seeks to support the party line by producing works of art that are uplifting and appealing to the people. Only by immersing oneself in life, side by side with the toiling masses, can an artist produce works of art that appeal to the people. In experiencing life, the artist looks in the diversity and complexity of reality for a kernel of life that in its essence represents both the material and more importantly the inner life of man (= seed theory, 종자론). An artist has to find a proper subject that allows the figurative depiction through shape and movement of the inner life of man. The measure in which an artist is able to single out a subject that appeals to and uplifts the people and endorses the party line is decisive in determining the success and fame of an artist in the DPRK.

This is obviously most recognisable in genre paintings depicting the Leaders, portraying historical revolutionary scenes, showing the construction of the workers' paradise. But even in such mundane subjects as landscape or folklore painting, North Korean artists claim the same revolutionary zeal. As far as landscape painting is concerned, the choice of the location to be painted is often imbued with ideological connotations, representing sites of historical or revolutionary importance. Even in the case of sites where the Great Leaders never set foot, or in the case of folklore scenes, their representation is warranted by the wish of the artist to show the beauty and "superiority" (우수성) of Korea. Even depicting such traditional themes as tigers or 'flowers and birds' (화조) is proper in as far as it is done with a proper mindset.

Professional artists join art studios where they work regular hours. As members of an art studio they are required to produce a certain quota of works, but the subject matter and the way they depict it is their own free decision. Artists are permanently trained, both technically and ideologically. This is done through guest lectures within the studio, but also through weekly collective appraisals of the work produced within the studio (합평). At times, artwork is produced on demand. Often, such a work will become the subject of a speed battle (속도전) and

be produced collectively (집체작).

Artwork is judged not just on its aesthetic/technical merits (예술성), but more importantly on its ideological quality (사상성). A masterpiece is produced when a balance is found between aesthetical and ideological quality. These criteria are used by artists in their discussion meetings, by the juries that select art work for exhibitions and by art critics. But it is also apparent in the way the people appreciate artworks. Aesthetic quality is not disconnected from the story a painting tells. The way an artwork is read by the North Korea viewer (at least at exhibitions) is fundamentally ideological.

Inter-Korean Cultural Exchanges

This ideological face of North Korean art has unsurprisingly stood in the way of a rapid development of inter-Korean art exchanges. Art is also a weapon in the political struggle between the two states over who represents most “Korean essence”. North Korean artists will tell you that they are all too happy to show the South Korean people the beauty of the land they cannot visit. In the same way, the North does welcome South Korean artists, but has never hosted a South Korean art exhibition. There is an understood superiority at work in this unbalanced relationship.

In any case, for both governments, other imperatives than the exchange of art were more urgent and important. It suffices to glance at the outcome of the second North South summit meeting of October 2007 to understand that when both states talk about socio-cultural exchanges, they mean something else than art. First and foremost on the agenda is the fate of divided families and how their needs can be addressed. Secondly, the leaders agreed that cooperation and exchange in the fields of history and language, education, science and technology, art and sports should be further developed. But when one considers the detailed proposals, they were confined to the development of tourism and the dispatch of a joint North-South cheering squad by rail to the Beijing Olympics (something which ultimately never happened). During the summit meeting, discussions were held, but not finalized, on the establishment of an academic and cultural multiplex in Kaesŏng, the exchange of movies, a North-South writing workshop, and the use of wood from Mt. Paektu for the renovation of Kwanghamun in Seoul.

In any case, politically sensitive and too small scale for the government to be involved, art exchange is largely left in the care of citizens initiatives such as the Korean People’s Artist Federation (한국민족예술인총연합, 민예총), co-organizer of the first ever inter-Korean art exhibition (hosted in Japan)¹. In 1993, this was still very much a political statement. Following the 2000 Summit meeting, it had become possible to engage in exchanges with North Korean artists, but several practical constraints continued to hamper such contacts. It remained

¹ 코리아통일미술전, 1993.10.12-17 (in Tokyo), 1993.10.18-23 (in Osaka).

politically sensitive (the National Security Law hangs as a sword of Damocles over any North Korean exhibition) and financially challenging (because of hefty financial demands on the part of the North. Despite efforts by NGOs to engage in a dialogue with North Korean counterparts, what little has happened in terms of exhibitions has not been so much the result of such contacts, but rather personal initiatives by South Korean (or overseas Korean) entrepreneurs introducing North Korea art to the South in a haphazard and piecemeal fashion.

The Reception of *Chosŏnhwa* in South Korea

Not until 1992 did a first ever exhibition of North Korean art take place in the Seoul Arts Center (그리운 산하). As of the end of 2006 more than 50 exhibitions of North Korean art have been held in South Korea. Contrary to what one might expect, the appreciation of North Korean art has however plummeted. North Korean artwork has been labelled “barbershop art” (이발소 그림). Several causes are apparent for this decline in interest and appreciation of North Korean art. Foremost is the unequal quality of the work introduced, a consequence of the shady process of acquisition of art works, often through third parties. This situation has only partially improved since the establishment in Kaesŏng of the Korean National Economic Cooperation Federation (조선민족경제협력연합회) in August 2003. *Min’gyŏngryŏn*, the acronym by which it is known, handles the direct transfer of goods between North and South Korea, providing in the case of art certificates of origin (원산지 증명서). Still, practices in North Korean art studios do not preclude the sale of both copies and fakes. For North Korean art studios, artworks have become a profitable commodity sold to the highest bidder. With the surge in South Korean tourism to the North, the direct sale of art has soured. Art Studios in the North are also developing their international sales network. Practices in the North Korean Art Studios are at odds with the international art trade. Artists make copies of their own masterpieces, whole groups of painters are involved in making doubles of existing artworks (technically no forgeries since they are signed by the painter making the double, often in a different size).

Artists will tell you that once a painting becomes a national treasure (국보), the painting disappears into the State Treasury House for safekeeping. Subsequently, only copies of the original painting (원작) will be shown to the public. In the fierce competition among various outlets of North Korean art in the South, the Ilsan-based K Art Gallery made a splash in the media in September 2007 by accusing its rivals, particularly internet traders, of selling fakes.²

² This gallery is run by Shin Tongp’il, younger brother of Shin Tonghun, owner of US-based SASCO gallery and president of the Korean Art Association, 조선미술협회. He was the curator behind the successive exhibitions organized at Gallery NK (갤러리 北). In an interview with KBS, Shin Tonghun lashed out at internet traders, claiming that they were selling up to 80% fakes (가짜) or forgeries (위작) in the case of work by Sŏn Uyŏng.

<http://news.kbs.co.kr/exec/print.php?id=1392264> (30)

This is the latest example of this recurrent issue. Particularly susceptible to forgery are works by artists

Fact is that the North Korean art trade suffers from a lack of transparency and is dominated by dilettantes deserved of much expertise, with their mind focused on making money more than anything else.

A further problem is that neither art critics nor art historians provide much relief in this respect. There remains a staggering lack of knowledge in South Korea on North Korean art history. Though over 50 exhibitions have been organised, all were one off events. Little effort was made to build a knowledge base on North Korean art. Artworks seem to float in a vacuum. Little attention is paid to the historical development of North Korean art. There again, North Korean art practices are also partly to blame. When North Korean exhibitions tour abroad, the artworks are served raw, without much –if any– information on the artists or the works. Another curious phenomenon is the fact that for exhibitions both in the North (e.g. the yearly National Exhibition, 국가미술전람회) and abroad, painters feverishly work to finish new paintings. Older work is difficult to come by, making it all the more difficult to situate North Korean artwork in a historical context. Seen from the perspective of the role of art in North Korean society, this is less surprising than it seems at first sight. Art is finally supposed to express and support the Party line.

It is the role of art critics to properly frame North Korean art for a public unaccustomed to the specific art culture of the North. Understanding the development of North Korean art would go a long way to help foster some understanding for the specificity of North Korean art. More than just focusing on rather abstract art theory, a genealogy of artists and styles would contribute to a context conducive to a better understanding and appreciation of North Korean art. Surprisingly, even in North Korea itself, this seems to be lacking.³ During my recent stay in Pyongyang, I tried on several occasions to purchase a modern art history, only to be told that none of the bookshops I visited knew of any such book. (My persistent attempts to visit the Fine Arts University have so far proved futile)

Though all these rather practical constraints impede the proper appreciation of *Chosŏnhwa*, there are also less palpable ideological constraints at work. For one, the variety of subjects shown in the South is largely limited to landscapes and still life paintings. Overtly ideological genre paintings are not introduced in South Korea.⁴ North Korean art is de-ideologised for

who fled to the North (월북화가). In August 2000, the Han'gyore Newspaper was forced to cancel an exhibition of what it thought to be work by Chŏng Ch'angmo, who was part of a North Korean delegation taking part in a family reunion.

<http://www.hani.co.kr/announce/2000/20000816jcmkungwe.html> .

³ The 1999 조선력대미술가편람 is a useful biographical dictionary but hardly qualifies as a genealogy as meant here.

⁴ In this respect, it should be noted that North Korean citizens also favour landscape paintings or other rustic subjects for decorating the walls of their houses.

consumption by a nostalgic clientele. Any reference to the context in which the art work is produced is discarded in favour of a mantra-like incantation of national homogeneity (민족 동질성). The curator of the K Art Gallery, Shin Tongp'il, in an interview on VOA (2007.05.27) even went as far as stating that North and South Korean art should be considered as one and the same Korean art. He acknowledged the ideological nature of genre paintings, but added that his gallery did only deal with what he termed "pure art" (순수한 미술). From that perspective, all that mattered was a shared artistic quality (예술성).⁵ Though this is an apt way of lowering the threshold to North Korean art, in the long run, it seems counterproductive. Only an understanding of North Korean art from within its own context and history can help raise an appreciation that does justice to the specific qualities of its artworks. A confrontation of *Chosŏnhwa* with South Korean brush painting (*Han'gukhwa*, *Tongyanghwa*) can be interesting and highly rewarding, but this should only be the opening move for a proper dialogue to take place.

North Korean artists do understand that *Chosŏnhwa* serves as an interface between South and North Korea. They are glad and proud that their works are seen (and bought) by South Korean citizens. For them, it is their small contribution to the grand project of reunification. Through the kind of work that is introduced in the South, they share their love for the eternal beauty of the Korean landscape with their estranged brethren and sisters in the South. In saying this, they sidestep the ideological minefield that looms between both sides. This is however what strikes those who have engaged North Koreans in art exchanges. It is difficult to move beyond the reiteration of the homogeneity of the Korean people, because in all other areas, there is a fundamental ideological gap that separates both sides. The challenge is to try and grasp this difference while affirming the ties that bind. The challenge is to sit down and reach across the table, accepting and engaging the differences instead of sidestepping them.

Until here, the story has been about the introduction of *Chosŏnhwa* in South Korea. This only partially fulfils the potential of art as an interface. This does not move beyond the confines of other past inter-Korean cultural events that had been staged before. Sponsored by TV stations, such large scale, nationally broadcast events have been carefully choreographed, sanitised occasions where nothing was left to chance and where the spectators were just that: spectators, passive onlookers to something happening on a stage. This gap between the spectator and the stage is a telling metaphor of the way people are kept at bay in the grand game of inter-Korean politics.

The full potential of art as an interface is not reached by putting viewers in front of a canvas. In

⁵ <http://voanews.com/korean/2007-05-29-voa8.cfm> (12)

viewing art, a sublimated dialogue can take place, which by default is better than no dialogue at all. But art can also facilitate the actual meeting of people. Art is what brings artists together. Art could be the forum for a meaningful encounter. Such a meeting could prove the full potential of art as an interface. People-to-people exchanges as far as possible removed from any centre of power are the most important gateway to a successful reunification of Korea.

For those who have had a taste of inter-Korean art exchanges, they are reluctant to admit the difficulty in having a proper dialogue. Part of the problem stems from the fact that until now, in the rare cases when the artworks were accompanied on their travel South, the North Korean counterparts have mostly been cadres of the Korean Artist Federation (조선미술가동맹) who have had their eye turned more to politics than to art. The reluctance to admit this stems partly from an equally ideological determination on the part of South Korean associations to adhere to the imperative of reunification. As long as one sidesteps the fundamentally different nature of the art world in North and South Korea, it is hard to see how a meaningful dialogue can be achieved. Beyond the system waits a person. Only people-to-people contact can make that sufficiently palpable.

The answer is people-to-people contact; in this specific case, for artists to meet face to face and to get to know each other through their work. As artists they will recognise each other, while they will be puzzled by how different they are as persons. Only when meeting the artists does one realise that ideology is not a coat thrown across one's shoulders when leaving the house. In meeting artists in person, one realises that they have gone through a fundamentally different socialisation process which structures the way they look at themselves and how they function in society. To encounter this directly is a humbling and intensely moving experience because it is deeply human and instantly recognisable.

By way of conclusion

The project on North South interfaces is ultimately an attempt at imagining a different approach to the study of Korea as a divided nation, but also an attempt at overcoming the division by focusing on specific zones of contact and the promise these hold.

As a periphery, an interface is outside of the centre of the (ideological) production of meaning. In that sense, art as an interface – a zone where division rules but contact is possible – is defiant. It is potentially a mirror casting the gaze back at the viewer. It confronts the viewer with entrenched complacency, and rattles self-confidence. It calls for self-reflection and the suspension of judgment. But this only happens when the consumer of art is willing to engage the artwork, when the viewer is willing to leave preconceptions behind and accept the challenge

of the artwork. Away from the centre, on the fringes of the ideological cloak, art as an interface calls for the fundamental affirmation of difference and diversity. In that sense, art can be unsettling. Only when a viewer is thus rattled, can some recognition and respect for the other be born.

Only in mutual respect can the inter-Korean interface be a space for a real encounter of equal human beings.

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