

## IN SEARCH OF AN OASIS<sup>①</sup>

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### 1. "What is Asia?"

In the course of the past three years that began with a organized working seminar by the Japan Foundation to discuss "What is Asia?" and culminates with the current exhibition, I have been thinking about "Asia," the region in which I live, and about my place in it as an "Asian." I used to think that I know Asia well, that Asia exists in my daily life, and that I naturally encounter Asia. Through preparing for the workshop, meeting with curators from other countries, and visiting with artists, however, I have come to realize how superficial and one-dimensional my understanding of Asia had been. Just like the expression "frog in the well" (found in a number of Asian cultures), perhaps I was looking Asia only through my own partial frame of reference. Meeting with a number of collaborators of diverse backgrounds from different countries through the occasion of the current project, I was able to look back upon my narrow, partial perspective.

Since I had always felt that we had only limited exposure to the works by or sources on Asian artists (in Korea at the time, one had access to sources on Chinese and Japanese artists only, and it was rather difficult to learn about artists from other Asian countries), I thought that the invitation to the Japan Foundation working seminar was a great chance to educate myself about contemporary art from different countries in Asia. To the seminar, curators, critics, and directors of alternative spaces (i.e., "art workers" from various backgrounds) initially came from the eight Asian countries — China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand in the beginning. In my presentation, I borrowed the well-known parable of Tzuang-tzu's *Dream of a Butterfly* <sup>②</sup> and used it as a metaphor to explain the ways in which Asia is changing. I wanted to ask: is the Asia that we are seeking in the midst of its rapid change a dream or a reality? Perhaps we can? and must? grasp Asia only as a process of transformation. My "Asia" is not the Asia of fixed shapes, but an Asia shaped by diverse thoughts and developments, an Asia that assumes different images in the eye of the beholder. To borrow from another figure of speech, it is like water which changes its shape by virtue of its container. My "Asia" is abstract and devoid of any particular shape since its shape is contingent upon the shape of its container.

When all the participating curators finished their individual presentations, it became clear that we all have different images of Asia in our minds. After the seminar, each curator had an opportunity to travel to three Asian countries, and we continued our discussion on an "Asia" exhibition curated by Asian curators. Is there a fundamental difference between the shows on Asia by non-Asian curators and those by Asian curators? If there indeed is difference, what is it? Keeping this line of questioning in mind, we decided to first mount smaller "local" exhibitions before organizing the main exhibition titled "Under Construction." These satellite exhibitions offered the participating curators to put together projects of their preferences in their own countries. It is not easy to discover within Asia the true face of Asia. That is, one usually discerns something from an outside perspective with greater clarity and visibility. Looking at Asia from outside Asia can produce more objective observations and also better perceptions of changes within Asia. We Asian curators who work in Asia are more prone to be confined by many problematics and issues close-at-hand and to easily lose sight of our objectivity. We are often less equipped to portray all these things in one broad stroke.

### 2. "Fantasia" the Everyday, Selfsame and Different

"Fantasia," one slice of the "Under Construction" project that took place in Seoul and Beijing, takes the notion of work-in-progress as its organizing concept. The Seoul venue was a

<sup>①</sup> The title of this essay "In Search of an Oasis" is inspired by the recent Korean film, *Oasis* (2002) by Chang Dong Lee. The film deals with love between a handicapped woman and an ex-convict and stories of their surroundings. At the 58th International Venice Film Festival, *Oasis* won 'Premio Speciale per Regia' for the director and 'Marcello Mastroianni Award for Best Actor or Actress.'



<sup>②</sup> Tzuang-tzu is a Chinese thinker from the Song Dynasty period. One day, he dreamed that he became a butterfly. Elated, he forgot that he was Tzuang-tzu. But awakening from the dream, he was no longer a butterfly. Tzuang-tzu realized that he was a butterfly that did not even know that he was Tzuang-tzu in his reverie, but once it was over, he was indeed Tzuang-tzu. He, then, began to question his own identity: 'Am I right now really Tzuang-tzu, or has the butterfly in the dream become Tzuang-tzu?' "Am I really I, or am I the 'I-which-the-butterfly-has-become'?"

factory building that had been left unoccupied for a long time, and the Beijing venue was a conventional white cube.

Until recently, the exhibition that travels to multiple locations tended to maintain its original artist list and structure as they were determined before the first opening. Of late, however, the traveling exhibition often flexibly shifts its contour to fit each of the sites on the itinerary. Partaking in this tendency, "Fantasia" changed its spatial characters, and evolved from one to the other by adding more artists to its list. The Seoul venue, Space imA, is a factory that had been unused for over ten years. When the site of an exhibition is a vacant space, there are two ways of dealing with it; first, to use the space as is, and second, to fix it up and turn it into a space specifically designed for art exhibition. For our project, we decided to go with the former strategy, for we preferred to de-emphasize the sense of independence of the works as well as of the space itself. While the physical-spatial nature of the works was downplayed in Seoul, the Beijing site naturally called for the "work-ness" of the works.

"Fantasia" had three distinctive characteristics. First, it was co-curated by three curators; instead of each curator introducing artists of his or her own country, three of us together met with artists through our research trips, conversed with them about their works, and sought to find shared points in the conversations. Instead of working with a predetermined theme, we discovered, through our research process, daily life as the characteristic shared by many artists' works, and then settled on it as the theme of our exhibition. We also discussed amongst ourselves how each one of us understands daily life. Based on that discussion, we sought to relate our thoughts with the artists' works in order to construct a foundation.

Second, residency program was an integral part of the project. In order to overcome the limitations inherent in showing one's work in a foreign setting, the curators and the artists participated in two three-week-long residencies. Through this practice, all of us formed a network and learned about one another's works and the exhibitions in depth. In actual practice, the residency program generated and posed a host of practical problems to mounting the exhibitions. Nevertheless, we came away with a newly formed complex web of relationships among the artists, between the artists and the curators, and among the curators.

Third, the initial form of the exhibition did not dictate its later form. In other words, the structure of the Seoul exhibition was not simply transferred to the Beijing counterpart. Between the two cities, three additional artists — one Chinese, one Korean, and one Japanese joined the group. One of our primary curatorial concepts was to continue adding artists. From the beginning planning stage, we dispensed with the fixed way of making a show and instead opted to develop it over time as a work-in-progress. Such a method crucially necessitated constant close discussion amongst the three curators.

In putting together an exhibition, not only its external aspects but also the internal narratives are important. Since we relinquished the usual approach of first deciding the contents and then selecting the artists, we had to think hard about the curators' common interest in daily life in relation to its manifestations in the works of artists from various Asian countries, such as Korea, China, Japan, and Thailand. One may say that the daily life is not only an important subject in contemporary art but also an element found in the works of all artists. Interestingly, however, though we all resorted to the identical term, the three curators had divergent attitudes towards and interpretations of the notion.

For the Chinese curator Pi Li, the daily life is an idea with a social and political cast. Kamiya Yukie, the Japanese curator, reads it through the idea of fantasy that surpasses the literal daily life we live in. I myself see it specifically as the way in which the reality is channeled into works of art through diverse methods. Seeking to crystallize such a notion of the daily life, alike and dissimilar at the same time, we curators spent much time, discussing with one another and forming a shared platform.

Since this project began with the discussion on the topic of "What is Asia?," it was imperative, then, that we visit artists in many countries and converse with them. Doing so, we all thought hard about a way in which we can show not the exotic Asia of the Western gaze, but the Asia of this very moment in which we are living. Many cultures and customs are mixed in our everyday. In its diversity, its rapid changes and fantasies exceeding it, we realize that the image of the everyday is far from stationary, but is constantly shifting. Although the daily life seen in the works of the participating artists may seem similar, it is actually a plural, rendered differently by their individual experiences and memories.

Both of our venues in Seoul and Beijing were not originally meant to be an exhibition space. The Seoul venue used to be a printing factory for *Dong-A Ilbo* (Daily Newspaper), and



unoccupied in the previous ten years, it had fallen into disrepair. We encountered a number of difficulties in turning the space into an exhibition space after the ten-year-long vacancy. Nevertheless, because the space was an everyday space rather than a rarefied space of exhibition. It was, in fact, perfectly suited for the topic of "Fantasia." There were indeed particular conditions that rendered the space unsuitable for exhibition; for instance, the entrance was also being used by a private institute located on the second floor of the same building. To make things worse, the newspaper company was still claiming a part of the small entrance area as its storage. Since we could not get rid of the stored materials, we had to work with the situation a kind of problem a professional exhibition space would not need to deal with. Korean artist Lee Mikyung worked on this problem to redesign the space itself, so that the entrance would be clearly distinguished from the storage (mostly for books and magazines). In her work, she facilitated access to the exhibition without compromising the original function of the space. The Beijing venue was another unoccupied open space, located on top of a show room for an apartment. Lee also worked on the design of this space. In comparison with the abandoned space in Seoul, the Beijing space better allowed the viewer to focus on displayed works.

Advertising the exhibition also posed a significant challenge. Both Space imA in Seoul and East Modern Artcenter in Beijing were far from each city's art districts and had never been used for exhibition. We printed simple leaflets to attract potential viewers/visitors. During the pre-exhibition residencies, we all visited many schools and gave lectures and artist presentations. Japanese artist Ozawa Tsuyoshi held parties as part of his performance work. We also invited students to participate in the exhibition as artist's assistants.

### 3. In Search of an Oasis

When preparation for the current exhibition "Under Construction" commenced three years ago with the seminar "What is Asia?," what Asia is was much clearer. In the course of preparing for this exhibition and thinking continuously about what Asia is, however, the question has grown more and more complicated and unclear. So what is Asia? Clearly, Asia is more than a mere geographical designation. Asia ties together numerous cultures, each complex and unique, and altogether layered upon one another. Underneath the visible geographical proximity and cultural connectivity, one finds intricate webs of interrelationships. Looking for Asia may be likened to looking for an oasis in the middle of the desert. Before one enters (or gets stranded) in the desert, they may think that spotting an oasis shouldn't be so hard. But it is no easy task.

An oasis is in the desert. An oasis can only be in the desert. We look for an oasis because we believe that oases are bound to be found in the desert. Sometimes the sheer will to find an oasis can even deceive us and make us run after a mirage an illusion of the oasis, but not an oasis. In the endlessly expansive waves and dunes of sand that is the desert, an oasis seems like a paradise. It may not necessarily be beautiful in itself, but it is so because it is in the desert.

Might the Asia we are in search of, be such an oasis, longed for by us suffering from heat exhaustion and thirst? An oasis looks beautiful because of its surroundings. "Under Construction," made up of many local exhibitions, attempts to show the contemporary imagery of Asian artists. The exhibition does not represent the moment of discovery of an oasis. Rather, it stands for the process of searching. In this large project, we have experimented with many methods to find Asia. Needless to say, it is a challenging enterprise to put up multiple local exhibitions in multiple countries, then to draw them together to fashion a new exhibition. Each of the previously held local exhibitions was organized through its own processes. And they all had wildly differing contents and concepts. But two large groupings seem to emerge — those that place more emphasis on the present, and those that stress tradition and history. Looking at the results of one another's endeavors, we witness ideas common but distinct, different but shared.

The course of making "Under Construction" through the collaboration of the participating curators has been similar to the path to an oasis in the desert. To find an oasis, one is bound to run after a mirage several times, at least. It is only after such errors that s/he will come upon an oasis. May I say "Under Construction" is an oasis? More precisely, I hope that "Under Construction" has been a quest for an oasis. The eight curators began this project

from all distinct perspectives and standpoints. "Under Construction," therefore, takes the act of understanding one another's differences as its premise, and the effort to discover points of connection amongst us as its purpose. The process of overcoming our differences in terms of environment and background and assembling the exhibitions of divergent angles is, indeed, not unlike a path to the oasis.

