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THE MEMORIAL

- Sunday, May 18th 1980 -

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ABSTRACT

When people die from political movements, their deaths are used by other people, often painted and printed on the piquets aggressively held by angry protesters. Being the visible evidence of social suppression, the images of the deceased is capable of easily arousing people’s anger and hatred against the source of malice, which, in many cases, is the government. Indeed, their deaths can be the effective stimulators for public activism. People would justify their exploitation by saying that they are expressing their lamentation for deaths by attacking back what caused the tragedy in the first place.

In the following essay, I am going to talk about my latest art project *Sunday, May 18th 1980* in relation to a number of works done by historical precedents such as Trevor Paglen, Allora and Calzadilla art duo, Yue Minjun, and Sarah Honan. I will also approach to a certain Korean political event that results in massacre, interpret it through my personal perspective, and investigate the way I can truly mourn for the loss through my art practices.
THE MEMORIAL
- Sunday, May 18th 1980 -

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“...the tower of bodies was transformed into the corpse of some enormous, fantastical beast, its dozens of legs splayed out beneath it.” (Han, 52)

from *Human Acts* by Han Kang

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On May 18th 1980, South Korean military authorities that just recently subverted the former government by using armed forces called out the most horrible, terrifying mission of all time history of Korea. Guns and tear gas were fired without hesitation into the students and civilians in Gwangju who were protesting against the government dictatorship. According to the casualty data, there were 163 deceased, 166 missing, 101 died from severe wounds, 3139 light wounds followed by sequela, and 1589 arrested and imprisoned. However, none of this information about civilian casualty was broadcasted to the rest of the world by Korean media while an accidental death of a soldier by his colleague’s misfire was distorted into a ruthless murder committed by armed communist guerillas and spies from North Korea. The students who longed for justice to be served were degraded as terrorists.

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Fortunately, the misdeeds of the Korean government were soon exposed to the world through a German broadcast, but hundreds of students and civilians were dead by the time soldiers ceased their fire. Today, if people visit Gwangju on May, they will inevitably witness that every other houses in the entire city holding memorial services for their children, siblings, parents, relatives, and friends for a whole week. Some would sob, others would be devastated, and some others would humbly accept the harsh reality that many people have already forgotten the death of their friends and that they, the people who would honorably protest against injustice, all died in vain. And I was there, standing among the visitors, sided by my father. I was holding his hand, trying to get behind him to subdue the flood of my emotions, only to find out that the strongest man I have ever known in the world was shrieking and shivering his shoulders from the relay of regret, sorry, and anger. My thesis already started then, the summer of 2017, when I visited both my parents’ hometown Gwangju with my father on a bright sunny day on May.

Fig. 1. An unidentified photographer, a woman crying over her son’s death, May 1980
Born in 1991 in Seoul, I would not feel any immediate emotional connection either to the event that happened more than 10 years prior to my birth or to the city where I had never lived in. However, the fact that either of my parents could have died from it,—only if my father had cared about well-being of the country back in 1980 as much as he does now or my grandfather had not been adamant enough to prevent my mother from joining the protest—the fact that my “big man” was shedding tears over his dead friends, and ultimately, the fact that I might not have existed at all overwhelmed me with melancholic sentiments. As a painter, I could not help but painting the victims of the massacre in order to express my personal gratitude for their legacy and help others to also commemorate their short but meaningful lives through my art practice.

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Sunday, May 18th 1980 consists of a portraits of the victims in Gwangju Democratization Movement. Each portrait is painted on a 24” x 18” wood panel, and the figures portrayed are bigger than life-size. It is displayed on a white wall approximately 45 inches above the ground-level, meaning that the figures’ eye-levels match those of the viewers. The relatable sizes and heights of the paintings allow people to share direct mutual interactions with the figures. Although harshly damaged, the figures convey a degree of dignity through its intense colors and lightings. The mouths of the figures are the most focused features throughout the series, metaphorically offering them freedom of speech that they

Fig. 2. Sihyun Max Shin, Sunday, May 18th 1980 (part 1), oil on wood panel, 24” x 18”, 2018
never had. They are painted directly from the photographs taken by either foreign reporters or family members of the victims. Among the photographs, I selectively chose those of young college students, who were about the same age as my father was back in 1980. The reason I chose the photos of students is that the way I relate myself to the event and the figures is through my father and his sentiments.

Next to the horizontal alignments of the portraits is a “fake newspaper”, recreated with a collage of non-Korean newspapers and printed images. In 1980 Korea, every local broadcasting media and newspaper company was either regulated or compromised by the government. As a result, people outside the city of Gwangju were unaware of the situations in the city and government’s unethical, inhumane handling of the political event until a courageous German reporter Jurgen Hinzpeter ventured into the locations, recorded the horrifying scenes, and broadcasted through a Western media (*Tagesschau*, ARD, Germany).²

The “fake” newspaper written in “English” ironically contains more truth than any other local newspapers issued in Korea at the time period. It does not only provide viewers with more contexts about the unfamiliar historical incident, but also satirizes the Korean broadcasting and newspapers for not being reliable when people needed them. In order to emphasize the idea, I deliberately present the artificial quality of the work by putting the date (Sunday, May 18th 1980)³, which is also the very title of the series, above the headline.

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² a German broadcast on May 21st 1980 about Gwangju Democratization Movement in Korea, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k32zaQwOaR4&t=451s
³ this date does not make sense because there are no newspapers on Sunday. The artificiality of the work suggests the twists—a fake newspaper is telling the truth while the actual newspapers were not.
The fake newspaper exists as an extension of the portraits rather than an add-on; it mutually communicates with the portraits as much as it does with the viewers in order to provide crucial information about the figures and the event. The thematic red and blue strips and bloodstain are integrated within the design, creating visual connections between the portraits and newspaper.

Fig. 4. Sihyun Max Shin, *Sunday, May 18th 1980* (part 6 detail #1), oil and collage on wood panel, 24” x 18”, 2018

Fig. 5. Sihyun Max Shin, *Sunday, May 18th 1980* (part 6 detail #2), oil and collage on wood panel, 24” x 18”, 2018
“…don’t have a specific meaning, they don’t have a specific agenda. They’re not trying to convince anyone of anything. It’s art. We are artists, we are not politicians.” (Davis, 67)

from *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* by Ben Davis

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In *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, the author Ben Davis analyzes through the scopes of Marxism theory the social positions of artists in capitalism society and the relations between arts and politics. Officially called “Aesthetic Politics” by art pundits, the connections between arts and politics are often determined by the degree to which art-making may or may not contribute to the actual political movements. In his essays, Davis points out that the major problem of political art is that they are often dramatically removed from any serious analysis of the forces that actually affect the world through artistic abstraction and impression, and thereby lacking the complexities of the real political questions. For instance, he exemplifies “Limit Telephotography” by a geographer-turned-photographer Trevor Paglen and the

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analysis of the project by Karen Beckman. For his project, Paglen endeavored to go to remote, desert locations in order to capture “dark doings” of USA on the blind sides. As the title implies, the photos for his project were taken in a telephoto lens from extreme distance, which ends up having the images with foggy, distorted, and overall, “abstracted” looks. Beckman analyzes that Paglen’s project offers the way aesthetic can be successfully integrated within the politics. However, Ben Davis questions the problematic nature of her review, or contemporary arts in general, for lacking connections to the actual relevant social problems as much as the project is aestheticized through abstraction.

In fact, there is nothing wrong with personal interpretation of social problems, for art is, after all, another form of viewing the world through artist’s vision. However, what has to be clear, based on the Marxist theory, is that the core of political arts lies on their capability of functioning as a device to stimulate or maintain the spirits of political activism; it is more likely to encounter Paglen’s photographs in art galleries than in public, appreciated more as regular artworks rather than political catalysts arousing radical social changes.

Fig. 6. Trevor Paglen, Open Hangar, Cactus Flats, NV, Distance ~ 18 miles, 10:04 a.m, C-print, 30” x 36”, 2007

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The question is then, “Is Sunday, May 18th 1980 considered a Political Art?” My project certainly has some political aspects from its root in that it illuminates the actual historical incident in Korea that has established the overall national distrust in government and fear of militarism today. In a way, the whole project is an implication of Korean culture and history. I also believe that my political concerns and interests work as the main catalysts and inspiration of my art-making process. However, if I were to answer the question asking whether my series have direct relevance to the real social issues, I would say that “not necessarily.”

Just as Paglen’s distant photographs are aestheticized through the use of telephoto lenses, the portraits of the victims are stylized through the textures of oil paint applied with palette knives. Although visually striking, the portraits barely demonstrate the subjects to which people shall react. The fake newspaper explains a glimpse of Korean history in 1980, but its contents are way too informative and objective to arouse active social responses. The title of the work—Sunday, May 18th 1980—indicates but the dates written on top of any newspaper that surely would not be enough to evoke one’s criticism against the Korean government. After all, I am presenting this project in the United States of America 38 years
after the outbreak of the event, where and when even its slightest political aspects would be
minimized due to people’s lacking social contexts of South Korea.

In the following subsection of the chapter, Ben Davis presents a potential answer for
the problem.\(^6\) The art duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla are famous for their
“Gloria” project: a series of theatrical installations of US power symbols integrated with the
performances by real-life Olympic athletes. Juxtaposing the imageries of coldhearted US
military / capitalist culture such as a fifty-two-ton army tank and prestige airline seats with
the universal symbols of multi-culture and peace, Allora and Calzadilla’s works are generally
known as critical, political arts that acutely satirize the duplicity of US powers.

However, in describing their own works, the duo pointed out that “there’s a difference
between a critique and being critical” (Davis, 67). In fact, their works neither have definite
answers nor intend to “convince anyone of anything” (Davis, 67), for everyone has different
political and artistic visions. What they meant by saying this is that people will naturally read
multiple things from even the very same artwork that would not necessarily correspond to the
artists’ initial thoughts. After all, Allora and Calzadilla are artists not politicians, and their

\(^6\) Davis, Ben. “How Political Are Aesthetic Politics?” 9.5 Theses on Art and Class. Chicago: Haymarket Books,
2013. pp. 67-69
project will accordingly remain as another piece of art that does not necessarily work as an ultimate answer to political issues as much as it reflects the author’s implication of them.

After all, the arts about social and political issues do not have to convince people of any specific belief, for it is actually the viewer’s own personal interpretation that concludes the communication between arts/artists and people. In this context, the limited political aspects of *Sunday, May 18th 1980* enable viewers to look at the victims as they focus more on their personal impressions rather than on the political backgrounds.

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“I’m actually trying to make sense of the world,”

he said.

“There’s nothing cynical or absurd in what I do.”

from *An Artist’s Famous Smile: What Lies Behind It?* <The New York Times>
by Richard Bernstein

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It is a famous story that Yue Minjun, a Chinese painter best known as the representative figure of Cynical Realism, actually rejects to be called as such. Yue Minjun’s series of oil paintings feature himself in identical, exaggerated, almost supernatural smiles. The beauty of contradiction between the explicit smiles and the gravity of the scenes won him a worldwide renown as a “Cynical Realist.” However, according to a number of interviews he clarified his point of view, what he truly intended to do with his paintings was to express his personal feelings after the outbreak of Tiananmen Square Protest and the civilian massacre by a government action in the most accurate way possible: smiling on the

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outside, but something more on the inside. After all, the world-famous paintings of his started as a self-portrait, as a means of self-expression, and Yue Minjun’s aesthetic and political visions have not been changed much since then. However, it was shortly after people and art critiques read cynicism in his paintings when he reluctantly became a Cynical Realist painter.

*Execution* by Yue Minjun is one of the historical precedents that has influenced my art works not only because they share the similar subjects—students’ protests against government dictatorship—but also because they share some common aspects in that they are both self-expressive, personal implication of political issues. As Yue Minjun’s introspection on Tiananmen Square protest triggered his whole art-making process afterwards, my personal impressions on the mass of young deaths and my father’s crying over them
stimulated my painting the victims of a Korean political conflict. I wanted to approach the potentially political imageries from a personal perspective, and thereby preventing people’s death from being misguided as a tool to trigger another political disaster. I wanted to comfort my figures by telling them that people remember them and they did not die in vain after all.

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“What were your thoughts behind painting the victims of Gwangju Democratization Movement in Korea?”

“Is it your aesthetic way of protesting against the government authority and their atrocities executed upon civilians?” people asked.

“I just wanted others to see them.”

from Painting Semester Review with Emmy Thelander

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Since 2007, a young contemporary artist Sarah Honan has been working on her project called Blink, a portrait series of unidentified dead women in the United States from 1950 to 2016. Strength of the project comes from the clear signs of death on each woman—varying from beat-up injuries to hanging bruises—that imply great amount of violence that had suppressed them until death. However, the portraits are beautiful as much as they are hard to look at. Although the facial features of the women are often distorted and bruised with bloods, the looks on the figures convey a degree of serenity, and the women are dignified as they were never before. Bigger than life-size, the figures are “speaking” louder than they had ever had in their entire lives. Individual portraits bring nameless women out
from the shadow, giving each one of them a “voice” they never had in the unjust society. As a whole, a series of portraits is working as a memorial that allows people to commemorate the nameless figures and their existences in public, who would otherwise be easily forgotten.

My intention to paint the victims of Gwangju Democratization Movement aligns with that of Sarah Honan: I wanted people to be able to see them and remember them. I wanted others to acknowledge that Gwangju citizens had short but honorable lives, which will fundamentally soothe my father’s heart as well. Through my art project, I wanted people to stop for a moment and truly mourn for what has been lost instead of attacking back at what caused the loss from the beginning.
In the opening night of my BFA show at Des Lee gallery, I saw a lot of people standing still in front of my portraits and gazed at them for a while no matter how brutal they look. Here, “painting” is working as a filter between the viewers and the actual events. It allows people to take time to look at the figures, think about their very existence, and feel their pains through the expressive textures of oil paints that are reinforced through palette knives. Such interaction would have been too quickly dismissive if the portraits were in their original format of photos because the damages of the bodies make people hard to look at them for a while.

Granted, my paintings may arouse protesting souls from some people against irrational Korean government just as self-expressive smiles in Execution were read to many people as satire and cynicism. Some people might even argue that they are expressing their lamentation by attacking back what initially caused the loss. However, that argument is just as contradicting as it can be; they might take turns, but mourning and antagonism can never coexist at the very same moment. In my art works, I am more concerned about what we have lost than what we have to commit an outrage on. I provide “the Memorial” to the victims of Gwangju Democratization Movement.
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