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It Begins with You and Me

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Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art

It Begins with You and Me

by Sea A Joung

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Abstract

This thesis conceptualizes the conditions of the Korean division, including the realization of the political and cultural gap between North and South Korea, lack of education about the Korean division and the role of media. The Korean War, also known as the “Forgotten War,” is erased from the consciousness of contemporary societies. This thesis describes a history about how the artificial division created during the Korean War continuously affects the lives of modern Koreans. For more than sixty years, North and South Korea did not have any form of communication except through government negotiations and regulated media. As a result, the division of Korea has caused a deep cultural and political gap. This thesis also discusses how the current media and public education continue to construct and influence public awareness regarding the Korean division. Works of art provide a perspective that provokes you to revise your precedent understanding of an issue. Political art often leads in the discussion to encourage public participation — a critical stimulant for a change. Artworks created through collaborations between individuals or communities stimulate our cognitive resonances drawing parallels between our own lives and political actions.
Introduction

During the 60 years of the armistice between North and South Korea, the two Koreas have become disjointed from each other that the two do not recognize themselves any longer. As a young Korean, I challenged my unconscious sentiment toward the divided Korea and questioned how art could have a role in the division and surrounding issues. Art reshapes our cognitive and emotional response to the world, which can lead to public participation and political action.

Political art in the last few decades shows how the complexity of social problems can be researched through artistic means and how individuals and societies can respond constructively to the effects of these problems. When political artists extend their collaborative way of working with audience or a community, the process takes a form of an inclusive activity—public participation. The participation of public is a critical stimulant for a change, a strategy with the potential to activate both individuals and communities. The core value in political art is about raising awareness and public participation. This thesis seeks to motivate the contemporary societies to discuss the history, social conflicts and human rights issues revealed by works of art.

The first chapter, ‘It Begins with You and Me’, includes my personal narrative about being a spectator to the racial inequality. The narrative explains the process of moving from being a spectator to becoming an active participant and what it means to be involved with political art.

‘History of the Korean War’ focuses on the fate of Koreans who were forced to accept the artificial division of Korea. The division of Korea occurred as a result of Japan’s defeat in
World War II. Koreans suffered under the political domination of two contrary ideologies, democracy and communism, and created political conflicts, which caused the Korean War.

‘Shock as a Commodity’ discusses the role of the media in perpetuating shock as a stimulation to create for consumption. Artworks are the resources that shape people’s shared objectives and emotional resonances.

‘The Consciousness of Contemporary Koreans’ is about how young South Koreans understand the contemporary history of Korea. The cultural and political gap between North and South Koreas is getting deeper as time passes. The educational and social perception towards the Korean division lacks dimensionality and diversity for young generations to have a strong opinion on the Korean division.

‘The Medium’ talks about the integral relationship between the content and the materials I choose to create my artworks. My work discusses methodologies of viewers’ engagement through audience participation and also through the choice of medium. Audience participation within installations has been an important component in my works.

‘Yours Sincerely,’ invites audience to consider public participation by engaging with the work. In addition, discussing other examples of historical, social and political artworks, my thesis contextualizes how works of art have been confronting political and social conflicts.
It Begins with You and Me

For many years, I have deliberately ignored racial comments and discriminating behaviors towards me or towards others. Though I have received numerous abusive comments towards my identity as an Asian immigrant, I chose to be a victim as long as the racism and discrimination stayed verbal. Not minding being a victim was a form of defense mechanism, because racism and discriminations were usually expressed through irrational behaviors or ignorance, not in a form of a panel discussion. When someone exerts an irrational behavior upon one, s/he knows that the person is not expecting a rational response, thus s/he is left with either replying with irrationality or indifference. In my case, I decided that no response was the best response to the irrationality. Moreover, surrounding myself with respectful friends only, I dealt with racism with deliberate indifference. I also was not interested in making a difference, so I tossed my share of responsibility to people who were interested in political activism or sociopolitical issues. I was more comfortable being a spectator than a participant.

In the incident of Trayvon Martin’s death in 2012 in Florida, I remember having sympathy towards Martin’s family and the protesters, but it did not go any further than sympathy. Florida was far enough for me to spectate on the nation-wide protests in a third person’s perspective. Regardless of what my race and belief were, I hardly empathized or immersed with the protesters, because there was a definite division between the active participants and myself.

In the summer of 2014, an incident that shed light on the racial inequality happened in Ferguson, Missouri. The Ferguson incident physically immersed my city, school, and friends. This incident led me to take more interest and I decided that I was no longer a spectator to racism. My decision to accept the racial inequality issue as my personal matter seemed like a quick, one-
step process, but the difference between a spectator and a participant was a big difference. What it took me to take racism seriously was a coincident of living in St. Louis. Would I still feel the same if I had been living in a different city? It is hard to say. But one thing has come clearly: there is a transparent division between spectators and participants and the distance between spectator’s sympathy and participants’ empathy is a long away from each other.

For the last two years of making artwork about the Korean division and North Korean human rights issues, I have always asked myself, “Why and who am I to work for this cause?” I do not have any family, friends or even an acquaintance that has any relationship with North Korea. The moment from having a deliberate indifference towards the racial inequality to being an active supporter of the Ferguson protests helped me realize the reason I make artwork about Korea. I have become an active participant to North Korean human rights issues. My initial attitude towards the Korean division and North Korean regime had been passive and had a political stigma. But a few years ago, I learned about stories of women who defected from North Korea. Many young women who escaped from North Korea ended up being sold as a bride to a Chinese man, slave, or prostitute. As a young South Korean woman, it was hard not to relate myself to those women. If I had been born north of that line of division, I would have been her. The affinity between her and me felt so personal and I was no longer a spectator.

To be involved in social actions or political activities, one may think you need a heroic devotion with extraordinary stories. We segregate those who work for the betterment of the society as social workers, political activists, philanthropists or humanitarians. We live as if the society we are in and the society activists are trying to change are two different worlds. The winter of 2014, I had an opportunity to travel to South Korea and interview several people who work for North Korean human rights. They work as teachers at North Korean defector schools,
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coordinators at North Korean human rights NGOs, a filmmaker making a documentary, international politics students, volunteers etc. I asked them about their stories behind the decision to start working for this cause. All of them are in their 20-30s, none have experienced the Korean War. Strikingly, what most of them told me in common was that they had a moment when they decided to take this issue as their issue. Anna, a coordinator working at Liberty in North Korea shared,

“As I gained more experiences in this field of work, I built up more confidence to share what I do. Raising awareness and changing public consciousness should start from me as an individual, because there are not many people who have experience or interest as much as me. It’s not always easy, but I try to share a lot of what I do and learn from my work. I started with my sister. Just like me, my sister did not have any interest in North Korea at first, but after sharing the reality of North Korean situation, she became interested in the North Korean human rights and started to actively research on her own. Now she shares information and news about North and South Korean issue to her group of friends. I spread my story and information to my surrounding, and now my sister spreads her own story and information to her surrounding. I think a vibrancy starts small like this.”

The interviewees are ordinary people who work or have interest in the Korean division issue. The purpose of the interviews was to ask people who seem to be ordinary, but have decided to work for the cause. Their personal stories, motivations, attractions and reason show the listeners that the stories are not extraordinary, but it is personal. It reveals the efforts towards the North that are commonly shadowed and camouflaged into the contemporary South Korean
society. I focused on being ordinary as the highlight of the interview. We tend to think of political or social activist leaders’ jobs as their vocation, but when we witness a large number of ordinary people putting efforts and belief in a cause, we sense the importance of the cause and cease to be indifferent. To quote Adrian Piper:

"Racism is not an abstract, distanced issue out there that only affects all those unfortunate other people. Racism begins with you and me, here and now, and consists in our tendency to try to eradicate each other’s singularity through stereotyped conceptualization."³
History of the Korean War

On August 6th 1945, the U.S. government dropped the world’s first atomic bomb over Hiroshima and the second one over on Nagasaki on the 9th. Japan surrendered to the Allies on August 15th, 1945 and Korea unexpectedly attained their independence from Japan. The conception of the 38 parallel separation happened without much of consideration and reasoning. The first time Korea had caught the attention of the Allies was in 1943, two years before the independence. Roosevelt, Churchill, and Chiang Kai-shek discussed having Korea under trusteeship, then again at Yalta Conference with Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin in February 8th, 1945. Even though Korea had been a unified country with a complex civilization and culture for more than 500 years, the Allies were in agreement that Korea needed trusteeship until the country could stand on its own. Consequently, on August 15, 1945, two young colonels, Dean Rusk and Charles H. Bonesteel were ordered to find a place to slice Korea into two. Given thirty minutes to complete the order, two colonels chose the 38 parallel because it “would place the capital city in the American zone”. After the acceptance of proposal of the 38 parallel by two sides, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the U.S. armies immediately took over South Korean administration, and the Soviet Soldiers entered North Korea on August 28th, 1945.

The tension between the two newly formed countries undoubtedly culminated in a civil war in 1950. The Korean War broke out around three or four in the morning of June 25. Within three days, North Korea seized Seoul. Over the next few weeks, North Korea took over most of South Korean territory, sweeping South Korean and U.S. army into a southern city, Pusan. In Wan-Sô Park’s autobiographical novel “Who Ate Up All the Shingha?”, the author recollects the day North Korean army captured Seoul.
“The first thing the Korean People’s Army did after entering Seoul on the morning of June 28 was to release those who’d been jailed for ideological reasons. The prisoners must have then just boarded trucks in their uniforms- they couldn’t have had anything to change into, and even if they did, they wouldn’t have, for prison garb itself became a proud revolutionary marker. They crisscrossed the city, responding to the crowds’ applause and fanning their excitement in return.”

The world of South Korean flipped in three days of matter. Under North Korea’s occupation of the South, local people’s committee started forming all across southern Korea. The North Korean army, Korean People’s Army (KPA), left the administration of justice in the hands of local committee groups, many of whose members had just gotten out of prison. The released prisoners used their authority to retaliate on their former antagonists. Three months later, on September 15th, General MacArthur launched Operation Chromite, the landing of Inchon, a city 17 miles away from Seoul. By September 28th, South Korean and U.S. army had taken Seoul back from North Korea. Once again, the event flipped the administration authorities for the civilians. For those who had converted to Communist under the North Korean army’s victory were subjected to interrogations and many were executed without any trials. Another spin of the political domination resulted in reverse mass killing.

When conquering soldiers from either side march into a city, civilians were put to welcome the soldiers regardless of which ideology they supported. It did not matter whether the soldiers were from North or South, or which ideology the soldiers enforced on people. The
political ideology was only a safety protection to wear on and off at an appropriate timing. It was the faith that people kept with them that truly identified the people in that time of the war.

The retaliation and mass killing in Northern part of Korea out of ideological enforcement also resulted in numerous casualties. When the South Korean troop was about to dominate the entire North Korean territory, Chinese army decided to aid North Korea, pushing South Korean force back to near 38 parallel. The two sides negotiated on an armistice, but they continued to have numerous small conflicts around 38 parallel for the next two years. After three years of the war, the armistice between North and South was signed at Panmunjom July 27th, 1953. After experiencing the instability of the war and how the political ground shifts so fast, Koreans including many divided families, considered the armistice as yet another temporary state.  

Armistice is still holding the break between North and South Korea today. The war was slowly erased in Koreans’ memory as well as in the world’s history. The artificial division slowly coagulated and formed the two Koreas into two completely different countries. The history of the Korean War cannot be reminisced as the past. Rather, it must be brought back and integrated into the contemporary Korean society.
Shock As A Commodity

Perhaps the word bizarre is the most commonly used modifier for North Korea. Bizarre, dangerous, nuclear or isolated — these are the selling points for the media portraying Kim Jong-un and his regime. The stimulant effect has become a trend that it has culminated into a situation where majority of the general public recognize Kim’s bizarre leadership and nothing else. For example, Dennis Rodman’s visit to North Korea in 2013 has received a substantial attention from the international media, and in 2014, the movie *The Interview* — ostensibly, a satirical comedy about conspiring an assassination of the young North Korean dictator — cast the world’s attention again through the hacking incident of Sony Pictures Entertainment, threats of terrorism, and cancellation of the movie’s release and the distribution of the movie to small movie theaters. For all the notoriety and potential the movie could have raised awareness of the North Korean human right violations, *The Interview* instead provided a collection of sexual jokes and degenerated the topic of North Korea to a form of entertainment. Thor Halvorssen, president of Human Rights Foundation responds to today’s media,

"So many people in democratic countries relate to North Korea on the basis of thinking about their funny haircuts and a caricature of the dictator, who frequently appears on TV and in movies. The only other way to relate to them is on the basis of their nuclear weapons. Ignored in all of this are the 20 million people living under the regime and the 200,000 people in labour camps. He compares the situation to Kazakhstan. "People don't relate to it as a tyranny run by the same man from the Soviet era, or the massacre at Zhanaozen, people relate to it through Borat and they laugh."12
Under the shadow of the media, the reality of North Korea and the human rights violation is erased by the irrational ideology. To quote Hwang Sŏk-yŏng, the author of *Princess Bari*, “As always, I feel as if we look at a view from one side of the window and communicate with that direction only. We only see the outer layer of the world. What is more, we make ourselves adjust to the standard of it.”

Shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value in part of the normality of a culture. Nonstop imagery of news, films, and movies surround us. Today we can look up anywhere in the world through the smartphones in our hands. We have become spectators of calamities taking place all over the world. The images on our hands are difficult to empathize with, because they are so far away, but too easy to get access to. As our numbness towards shocking imageries increases, images with stronger stimulus are needed to grab our attention.

In Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag maintains that people are usually unable to take in the suffering of others. Wherever people feel safe and unaffected, they will be indifferent. It is normal for people to behave this way after nonstop reports about conflicts around the world. This indifference towards disasters around the world comes from lack of personal connection. For many years we have been supplied with images and moving pictures of wars, conflicts, poverty and famine in our living rooms. And many times we have changed the channels on the TV and have gone on with our lives. People are unwilling to engage with these images of injustice, because they are numbed and feel nothing can be done. Susan Sontag argues,

“Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feeling that have been arouse, the knowledge
that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing “we” can do—but who is that “we”?– and nothing “they” can do either—and who are “they”?–then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic.”

The images of the suffering inflicted on others suggest that the relationship between sufferers and the privileged spectators watching on a screen is simply tenuous and unattached. The passiveness dulls our feeling. Our states as moral or emotional dullness are the feelings that cover up our outrage and frustration. So far as we feel sympathy towards the sufferers, we feel we are not responsible for what caused the suffering. Our sympathy approves our innocence as well as our impotence.

Alfredo Jaar, Installation view of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 2012

Alfredo Jaar’s *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (Figure 1) takes us to look at the scenes of the Rwanda genocide through eyes of a survivor. Many of his works continuously question the way we look at social conflicts around the world. The viewers of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* experience a new approach to our attitude towards genocides — confronting the eyes of a
survivor of Ntamara Church massacre and Rwanda genocide duplicated into one million slides. His way of tackling the social and political issues of our rapidly changing time is influential and stimulates conversations focused on the impact of art. To quote Jaar, “I feel we are bombarded by too many images, we don’t see them anymore. The media gives us the impression of being present somewhere but when we turn off the TV or close our newspapers we are left with an incredible sentiment of absence.”

Sea A Joung, *Diluted Awareness*, Red lighted Installation, 2015

One of my artworks, *Diluted Awareness* (Figure 2) is an installation piece that criticizes how the current media is providing the information only about the outer layer of North Korea to the general public. The installation is placed in a space lit by red light. Printed on film sheets, in black color, we see texts displaying random words about Korea, such as ‘North Korean defector’, ‘Korean division’, ‘politics’, ‘defectors’, ‘human rights’ etc. The random words float in the constructed space. In the middle of the installation, a flashlight is hung in the middle of the space and when you shine the letters with the flashlight, it reveals the rest of the letters written in red, orange and yellow that was absorbed in the red light. The scripts written on the film sheets are personal stories of people who work for North Korean human rights. *Diluted Awareness* recreates the reality of filtered information about North and South Korea appearing in the media,
and through what people learn from the media, they recreate their own perception of the division. The audience are presented with personal stories of people who are working and advocating the North Korean human rights. However, the stories do not accentuate what kind of work they do. Rather, they reveal reasons they have decided to work for this matter. The names of the interviewees are the only information given. The interviewees’ identities as teachers, social workers, activists or members of human rights organizations are hidden to solely focus on their personal stories. The work challenges our level of awareness shaped by the media today.

Political events are typically reported or assumed from an observation. Then the events are reported to the general public to formulate people’s own perception. Artworks supply images that construct the worlds in which we act. Whether through media or works of art, observations given to us make meaning from memorable images that derive directly and indirectly from artistic influence rather than from objective observation. There can be no conception without some kind of shared objectives to symbolize it in the form of images or discourse. Art is an essential and fundamental element in the shaping of people’s cognitive and emotional responses leading to political action. Contemporary artists understand that it is artists’ role to construct pathways for viewers to acquire truth among mass media and public relations. In seeking for truth to subsist between art and politics, increasing numbers of contemporary artists refuse the separation of art and truth. As Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn puts it, they seek not to make “political art” but to “make art politically.”
The Consciousness of Contemporary Korean

When I was living in South Korea, I remember feeling an obligation to feel sad about the Korean division and to hope for the unification of Korea. Even though the idea of unification was an abstract concept for me, I didn’t feel a need to challenge my level of understanding of this matter. Korean public does not challenge their concept of the Korean division, even if it is in amorphous and abstract forms. They have been unconsciously suffering from insensitive broadcasting, news reports and propagandistic images that shape their perspective. Arts and literature, in forms of films, public posters, novels, art education and entertainment, have been used as a guidance to numb Korean public’s consciousness.

Since the armistice agreement between North and South Korea in 1953, many have accepted the divided state of two Koreas. Sixty-three years of gap between the Korean War and the present does not give people, especially the young generation of Korea, any stance to think about the separation of the nation. The definition of the war says it was a war that occurred in 1950 to 1953 and it is a forgotten historical event to many people. The division of Korea is considered a conditional annexation of its history. Not many question the fundamental reasons of the division of Korea, because the division has existed for many years. When political or social incidents happen, we accept, resist, understand, deny or analyze the incidents. But as the incidents become historical events, people ‘learn’ what happened without any question. In the same context, contemporary Koreans neutrally ‘learn’ the fact that North and South Korea are separate countries and expect the two to continue to stay separated without any form of questioning or resistance. A recent study from Institute for Peace and Unification at Seoul National University found 43.2% of the generation of age 20s in South Korea considers North
Korea as a hostile or cautionary country. The study found the percentage decreases for the older generations who have experienced the Korean War in their lifetime. The younger the generation gets, the more people are removed from the idea of the Korean unification. Ironically, they are the generation who will be responsible for the Korean unification in the future, not the older generation. The Korean War is not over. It exists and lives in a present form through the armistice and the unconsciousness of Korean culture.

Learning from a precedent, the unification of Germany has suffered from conflicts between East and West Germany when the fusion happened before the two cultures had an inner relationship: a chance to accept their differences and to build a relationship. The question of this inner unification is still discussed by the German public politically and culturally since the political unification in 1989. The Korean division, which has much longer division period and deeper cultural gap, will have to approach a new paradigm of interaction and cultural unification beyond the economical and political approach. The existing discussions about the Korean division and the possible unification have been centering on the systematical ideologies and the socio-structural context. Korea Institute for National Unification survey found 45% of Koreans support reunification for beneficial reasons such as economical boost and the prevention of war. The macroscopic comparison and assessment of the economical and political views are important, but can they satisfy the fundamental need for knowledge, understanding and empathy? What is the role of arts in Korean division and reunification? What does it mean to take an artistic approach? Can the artistic approach encompass cultural residues and sentiments of the Korean division and historical trauma? And what would be the artistic approach to the North and South Korean division that could help North and South Koreans to accept their cultural and sentimental differences?
From 1960 to 1980, South Korean media produced massive public campaigns educating South Koreans. Posters advertising the campaigns included statements such as “When you see a subversive leaflet propaganda (from North Korea), report immediately! To police stations, military stations or post office drop boxes.” (Figure 3) These government-initiated campaigns shaped the general public’s awareness that the perception of North Korea connects to alert status.

Since the start of the armistice of North and South Korea, the South Korean government has continuously put a great amount of effort into promoting anti-North Korea sentiment and raising-awareness of communism through various media such as government posters, TV shows and news reports. Generations who grew up imbedded with the anti-North Korea sentiment and the propaganda against communism have a cautious attitude toward anything related to North Korea.

“113 Investigation Headquarter” was a popular TV show about investigating North Korean spies. The show aired from 1973-1983. Along with the entertainment for adults, “Captain Dori” was a popular children’s cartoon series about fighting monstrously portrayed North Korean spies/soldiers. The show aired from early to late 70’s. Unfortunately, the portrayal
of the threats from the North Korean spies is not a groundless story. It is an actual national security matter to North and South Korea. It has been reported that from 2003-2013, 49 North Korean spies have been arrested in South Korea.\(^\text{25}\)

It has been 60 years since the armistice of two Koreas and the humane connection to North Korea is getting further as the year goes. To South Koreans, North Korean is a hostile and bizarre country that reminds a threat of war. Many North Korean human rights activists working in South Korea are misunderstood for supporting North Korean regime. Anna from Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) described people’s responses to her job as a coordinator of North Korean human rights organization. “I am lucky to have my parents who have an open mind in social issues. They are proud of me that I work for North Korean human rights. But I saw many of my colleagues’ family and friends who express comments with strong political stigma because they work for North Korean human rights. For example, one of my colleague’s parents advised them not to tell their relatives they work for North Korean related NGOs or to use their email addresses given by the North Korean human rights organizations.”\(^\text{26}\) Alongside the elder generations’ hostile sentiment towards North Korea, the young generations of South Korea lack the fundamental education about the Korean division and awareness of North Korean issues. The Institution for Peace and Unification Studies survey shows different age groups’ general knowledge of North Korean politics. The age group of 20 has the lowest average of interest in all of six selected categories on North Korean issues.\(^\text{27}\)
South Korean colleges, except for a few, do not require Korean history for college admission. One of the circumstances that show the lack of history education is an attempt of South Korean education to use art to raise awareness of the Korean division. The attempt lacks dimensionality in methods and fails at seeing what really needs to be taught to the future generations. For example, every June 25th (the Korean War memorial day), from elementary to high school, students are assigned to paint a poster or write an essay about the Korean unification. Teachers routinely summarize the origins of the Korean War and explain the need to unite: because we were one country before the war. Unfortunately, for all the intents to stimulate students’ imagination and awareness through art and writing, every year students produce indistinguishable posters and essays with same contents. Most of the posters contain a map of a divided Korea and idealistic and propagandistic sentences such as, “Our greatest wish is unification, let us erase the 38th parallel!” or “We are one nation. Unified Korea, two in one!”
(Figure 4). It is certainly not because young Koreans lack ability to think creatively. Repeatedly encouraging the students to pursue unification with generic ideas creates an environment where students can be content with an abstract concept of the unification. Anna stated in her interview that the actual North and South Korean sociopolitical relation came as a shock to her. Questioning her education and knowledge about North Korea she stated, “I questioned, ‘Why, as a Korean, was I ignorant of what was happening to the country right by us? And why are all the attentions focused on the one family (the Kim family) and why do people think of rest of the North Koreans as the same?’”

The common definition of history is a record of past events and time. But we forget that the past events often live to shape the course of our present. Without fully knowing the history, we cannot see the present as fully as we believe we do. Oscar Muñoz’s video *Project for a Memorial* (2005) discusses the history of Colombia and shows the artist’s hand painting portraits of disappeared people on a stretch of pavement. He uses water for the medium, which evaporates in the sun before each portrait is fully realized. Muñoz’s water paintings symbolize the disappeared people of his native country and the difficulties involved in keeping their memory alive.
I wanted to challenge our perception and attitude of reviewing our history. *Lethe* is a video installation on water, which reflects an image of a Korean family in refugee camp during the Korean War portraying a young father, mother and a sleeping baby. (Figure 5) An illustration lays out the course of the Korean War onto the sleeping baby’s body, using the body as the map of Korea. The illustration on the baby’s body progresses in red, symbolizing North Korea, and blue, symbolizing South Korea, with Franz Liszt’s *Dream of Love* playing as the background sound. The video loops, but it slowly fasts forwards and loses red and blue colors in the illustration. Ultimately, the video ends with a still image with no sound and no colors.

The choice of portraying time-based history of the Korean War reveals the abandoned segment of the war. In another words, we skip to see the deeper layer of the images of the war and only see flattened dimension. Because we easily encounter multi-dimensional information today, we perceive a black and white photograph as if it did not have any sound, color or depth in the first place. The video forces the viewer to see the skipped part of the image. The installation of the video on water is another representation of the forgotten history. The title *Lethe*, the stream of oblivion, is one of five rivers of underworld in Greek Mythology. Drink of the water caused forgetfulness of the past.

In the midst of lack of education and awareness of North Korean issues, the media continues to send mixed messages about North Korea by simultaneously invoking the military conflicts and the tension between the North and South Korean army. The conflicts between the two Koreas have been major topics in Korean politics and worldwide news. News media often compares the military strength of two Koreas and portray the tension between two armies and raises hostile attitudes toward the North Korean government. The media fails to remind Korean audiences to have a more flexible perspective on their own history and ability to read the patterns
of contemporary Korean society. Whether in an art form or not, the audiences need a stronger standing ground of knowledge and understanding to contemplate the Korean division and develop sensitivities to formulate an individual understanding.
The Medium

Audience participation has been repeatedly appearing in my art works. I have always considered audience participation as one of the core concepts of my work. By positioning the audience within a reenactment, the work leaves a strong impression on the audience and engages them in the work as participants.

When I was researching issues related to the North Korean human rights, I wanted to interview North Korean defectors. Listening to the first-person experience is a powerful method to leave a strong impression on the viewer, therefore North Korean defectors’ testimonies are often used as a method to portray the North Korean human right issues in documentaries, news articles and other forms of media. However, this puts the North Korean defectors on the stage and the rest of the people are remaining as spectators. What I wanted to do was to pull the audience on the stage where they themselves can become active participants.

When political artists extend their collaborative way of working with an audience or community, the process takes the form of a similarly inclusive activity—public participation. The participation of public is a critical stimulant for a change, a strategy with the potential to activate both individuals and communities. Political art projects often have close connection to individuals and organizations in a community that start from a personal stake in the issues addressed.
Three of my artworks, *Bow Down For*, *Diluted Awareness*, and *Yours Sincerely* have audience participation components. In *Bow Down* (Figure 6), the audience participation was needed for the artwork’s completion. The work was composed of a simple set composed of portrait pictures of the two deceased leaders of North Korea, monofilament, and a single page of script. The script is laid down on the floor and the font size of the script is too small to read in a standing position. The participant, without realizing their body is manipulated to get down in front of the pictures of North Korean leaders, bow down to read the script. The monofilament, which functions as a system that claims its nonexistence, also leads to a position where the body is bowing down. Without audience bowing down and the their realization of the manipulated scheme, the artwork would not be completely realized.

My thesis project *Yours Sincerely*, will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but I would like to mention the audience participatory contents of the piece. The work invites viewers to sit on a chair located in the center of the work and to put on headphones. Once the viewer sits on the chair and puts on headphones, s/he is symbolically flying over the division and into North Korea. By placing the headphones on one of the chair, I indicate that the installation is a participatory work. And because the viewer cannot listen to the audio without entering into the
installation, the viewers are forced to choose whether to get involved in the work or pass by without fully understanding the work’s entire content.

Including *Yours Sincerely* most of my artworks use transparency as a physical component. Monofilaments are used to describe the sociopolitical system and governmental media control. The lines exist, but I, as an artist, and the viewers can deny its existence. Portrayed in *Bow Down* as an invisible system of North Korea, *Diluted Awareness* also depicts monofilament as invisible system of the media. In *Smuggled Counter-indoctrination*, monofilaments are used as a medium that portrays invisible influence on North Koreans through black markets in North Korea.

Though the lines are supposed to be invisible, we still see them, feel them and move around the physical existence of the monofilaments. The work indicates our double standard towards the North Korean government, the media and our perception towards the Korean division. Therefore, we are given a choice to either consider the division as unseen or to be aware of its transparent existence.
Yto Barrada’s *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project* (1998-2004) is a photographic documentation that represents the division of North Africa and Europe (Figure 7). Barrada discusses the artificial separation between Tangier, a city located in the northern coast of Morocco, and Spain. In 1991, the Schengen Agreement of Spain stopped allowing Moroccan citizens to cross the Strait of Gibraltar and Ceuta, a city located on Moroccan territory. A construction of an artificial division in a place where active interactions had existed becomes “a multivalent site of both stagnation and potential.”

In case of Tangier and Spain, two sides continue to evolve around the development of the border. To quote Barrada, “The more there are strategies to close it (the border), the more
solutions that are invented. It just makes it more dangerous. That’s what the result of the closure of the border.”

Looking at the division of the Strait of Gibraltar, the Korean division is another artificial separation that created a multivalent history, trauma and cultural effect. The boundary between North and South Korea is completely blocked by DMZ (demilitarized zone), the most heavily militarized zone in the world.

Since 2003, various North Korean human rights organizations have been launching balloons to North Korea (Figure 8). Most of the activists who launch the balloons are North Korean defectors living in South Korea. Calculating the wind direction, the activists go up to the nearest point of the borderline between North and South Korea. What these hydrogen-filled balloons carry vary with the different kinds of organizations, but they mostly carry anti-North Korea leaflet messages, cash bills, daily necessities and DVDs or USBs containing outside information. The strong opposition from the North Korean government claims that the balloon activity deteriorates the political relations between two Koreas and threatens that the balloon launch would constitute as "a de facto declaration of a war" according to Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency. In October 2014, North and South Korea traded machine-gun fires after the launch of the balloons by few of the activists.
My thesis work *Yours Sincerely*, (Figure 9) is a reenactment of the balloon launch. The act of launching balloons does not apply to any law that can prohibit the act. Because it is launching balloons to the sky, it is considered as a freedom of expression; it does not cross any migratory regulations, national security regulations or aviation laws. Yet, the balloons successfully deliver messages to the most heavily isolated country in the world by a simple mechanism. There is a freedom in flying over the artificial boundary and governmental laws that have been restricting Koreans to communicate over the last half a century. To me, the act of launching balloons stands stronger as a freedom of expression than the measure of effectiveness of the balloons. Whether the balloons reach North Koreans or not, it will be a reminder to us that we have a freedom to oppose North Korean government and that we have actively tried to share the dignity of human rights to North Koreans living in the totalitarian state.
The work has a transparent chair attached to the balloon by monofilaments. The balloon has the same shape as the balloons used by the activists. However, what the balloon in the artwork carries differs from what the real balloons carry. The thesis project asks the question, ‘What would I, as an individual and an artist, send to North Korea?’ I decided to send the voices of people who work for North Korean human rights. Moreover, the chair suggests my wish to cross over to North Korea, overcoming the physical limitation of not being able to be in North Korea.

The audio can be heard through the headphones and when the audience members choose to sit on the chair to listen to the audio, they are physically, although symbolically, traveling to North Korea.

Kyungah Ham, Abstract Movement/Morris Louis ‘Theta’ North Korean embroidery, world news article, a broker, anxiety, inspection, wooden frame 2014
“Abstract Weave” (Figure 9) a long-term project by a South Korean artist Kyungah Ham provides a strange invitation to a mental travel from South Korea to North Korea. What she presents in the gallery space is a set of embroidery works. The artist does not get involved in the art making process, but borrows the hands of North Korean embroidery workers through a Chinese broker working as a middleman. Ham selects and sends images that are prohibited in North Korea through a Chinese broker who delivers the image to a North Korean embroidery worker in North Korea. The North Korean worker creates an embroidery work, which gets sent back to Ham in South Korea through many illegal crossings and border inspections. On the medium description, Ham lists ‘anxiety’ and ‘inspection’ as one of the mediums, implying what she is presenting as her artwork is not the main part of her artworks exhibited in the gallery space, rather the entire process revealed through the transportation of illegal images. The artist thus lures away the viewers to an imaginary round trip from South Korea, China, North Korea and back to South Korea.


“Grandpa named the baby Halia. I asked him, “What does Halia mean?” He answered, “It means freedom.” I murmured, “Jah-yoo (freedom)……” in Korean. I thought a word should pair with an object, so it does not get lost. I recollected the names of the flowers bloomed in riverside of Tuman river and the wild fields of Mt. Baekdu. Yellow, white and purple orchid, sweet orange, stellaria, viola mandshurica, lilly of the valley, milk-vetch, Pink, Hepatica, white rice flower. I recollected endless names of
flowers. Remembering running across the wild fields of flowers with my sisters, I looked at my peacefully sleeping baby.”

To Bari, freedom is the memories of her running across the flower field in North Korea during her childhood. That is what freedom meant for her. I thought about what freedom means to me regarding the Korean division.

As a South Korean, my right of freedom to go to North Korea has been restricted. If I could choose anything that I can send in the balloons to North Korea, I would send myself. In *Yours Sincerely* I chose to manifest my wish to travel to North Korea. My landing in North Korea does not have anything to do with the effectiveness or the consequence. The work invites the audience to sit on the chair that is attached to the balloon and listen to the voices of people who work for North Korean human rights. The action of sitting on the balloon chair invites the audience to imagine flying over to North Korea and delivering the stories. Just like Bari, when I think of freedom, I think of crossing over to North Korea and sharing my stories.
Conclusion

The Korean division, which concluded the Korean War in 1950, has been in an active process of begetting political conflicts, culture gaps, and human rights violations in North Korea. The Korean division has spread widely into modern society. A keen observation, analysis and knowledge of the Korean division are required in order to have a clear understanding of Korea’s history and present. Also, changing one’s observation and analysis into action is an important part of transforming the issue. The action does not have to be anything grand or heroic. Taking action does however ask everyone to consider the matter at a personal level.

The subject of my thesis project started from personal questions and challenges to the education and media sources that I received as a young South Korean and a Korean American. Because I am an artist, I questioned how my work could contribute to the Korean division. I have concluded my exploration through my work. In Yto Barrada’s work about the borderline conflict between North Africa and Europe, she transfigured the issue in her place as an artist. She states, “My role is to transfigure them through what I can do. That happens to be art. I have the perception, but the perception is nothing unless you do something with it.” In the same way, I developed my observation and analysis of the Korean division from an idea. Then I transfigure my ideas into works of art. It begins with you and me.
Alfredo Jaar, Installation view of The Eyes of Gutete Emerita, 2012
Figure 2

Sea A Joung, Diluted Awareness, Red lighted Installation, 2015
Public service advertisement in South Korea, 1970
Figure 4

Unification posters from Yangsoo Elementary School, 2005
Sea A Joung, Lethe, Video projection on water, 2014
Figure 6

Sea A Joung, Bow Down, Installation (monofilaments, found images, text) 2014
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Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS, 1945), vol.6.


3 Adrian Piper, *On Conceptual Art, Conceptual Art*, p.425
7 Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS, 1945), vol.6, p.1039.
24 The number 113 was a designated phone number for reporting North Korean spies until 1980 and the number changed to 111.
Out of 49 spies, 21 of the spies came to South Korea disguised as North Korean defectors. This has added an unfavorable sentiment to the existing hostile consciousness towards North Korean and to 2,5000 North Korean defectors settling in South Korea today.

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