

Exchanges in Contemporary Art: Today and Future of Cultural Exchanges in Asian Art

Sunjung Kim. Ex-director of Artsonje, Seoul. Curator of the Korean pavilion in the Venice Biennale 2005



In this talk, I would like to address the current practices of exchanges in contemporary art, especially centring on the region of Asia, and other various types of exchanges to be suggested in our future.

The international exchanges in contemporary art bear, by their nature, diverse, complex context from the onset. Therefore, it might be difficult to suggest concrete and practical guides to exchanges within such a limited time as this, but it is of great value to make an issue of Asia's current status in this conference and draw the attention of you honourable art professionals to this issue for numerous possibilities. For the discussion of this issue, I have closely observed the exchanges, particularly in

the region of Northeast Asia.

Exchanges in contemporary art are made between two partners with distinct social, political and economical backgrounds. To set an easy visual framework in approaching this topic, I would like to divide the current exchanges in Asia into three groups for pure convenience; those between Asia and non-Asian regions; the internal exchanges in south-eastern Asian regions; and the north-eastern Asian regions. My focus would be on the third, that is, those in north-eastern Asia, and I would like to eventually extend my interest to cover the exchanges of Korea with other countries in Asian region and the western world.

1. Current Asian Movements toward International Exchanges and its Problems

Cultural exchanges of today are closely related to political, economical and social situation, and it is impossible to view art and culture away from this consideration. We are, however, getting much more sensitive to this contextual understanding than ever, because, in setting out a relationship of exchange, it is crucial to build equivalent terms between partners involved. We cannot wait for another chance to ask this question to ourselves: what types of international exchanges can we suggest and what would be an ideal exchange?

Exchanges in Asia, still back in the early 90s, were one-way exchanges where one country introduces or exports its own culture to the other. From the mid 90s, however, other means of introducing domestic art and artists started to arise. Such changes gave positive influence to contemporary art in its moving toward more active international exchanges, but at the same time, we realized that we got into next phase of exchanges that exposed many problems and conflicts. In this context, I have examined the changes in Asia after the mid 90s and analysed various problems risen from the changes.

Firstly, there were the births of many new biennials in Asia.

Each country conceived its own biennial with awareness that the particular form of exhibition, with its strong historical and aesthetic credit, would play a pivotal role in promoting the domestic art abroad and introducing international art trends to the local art world. The newborn biennials in the 90s were the main channels to introduce art of the marginal areas of the world, just as the world's interest in Asian art has increased through the biennials. The biennials not only featured cutting-edge contemporary art scene, but also set a stage for art critical discourses among art professionals and the general public.

Biennials in Asia, however, gave us a precious opportunity to reconsider a range of problems. To name a few, in Korea alone, we have biennials in three different cities: Gwangju, Busan and Seoul, and this goes to include the

Shanghai Biennial (which has recently opened), Beijing Biennial, Gwangju Triennial in China. Across the ocean, there is Taipei Biennial, and Yokohama Triennial and Fukuoka Triennial (that declares itself as the one exclusively for Asian artists), finally another biennial that I heard to be ready for launching in Hochiminh City. In addition, there are many other small-sized biennials and triennials being open and closed at this moment.

Then, what is the reason for these so many new biennials? My explanation would be that perhaps the biennial is the best way to visually demonstrate such a sort of rapid economical growth of a certain region in a short period of time as we have seen in the 'miraculous' Asian economic growth in the last several decades. In the case of Korea, with its onset of municipal government system, almost every municipal government's endeavour to invent a unique local event and herein comes a problem that there is a serious lack of long-term vision for those events, in spite of their strong motivation and dire necessity. When travelling through Asia, we can witness a new cityscape totally different from the one of a few years ago. For example, once a building 2-3 years ago are changed into now a huge apartment complex, and the Cheonggyecheon highway, once the modernist symbol of the 70s, has been demolished. As such, all these gigantic endeavours are made without a set of long-term vision or goals.

Secondly, I would point a poor condition of infrastructure in Asian art world as another problem.

Such major elements as museums, galleries, collectors, critics and the media do not have solid conviction of their identity and role in the art world and the society. It is true that the entire art scene itself, by its short history, is not mature and stable enough to sustain their activities. National and the public museums find themselves struggling in frequent cutbacks in financial support and changes of cultural policies.

Thirdly, there is an absolute lack of information or networking.

While just sticking unto domestic art scene, we become unaware of recent trends and information of the rest of the world, and too isolated to be connected to global networking and information exchange. Korea has experienced that isolation until the mid-90s, as it was impossible to build a relationship with China by the political reasons, and Korea remain remote from Japan due to historical and sentimental reasons.

The last phenomenon I would like to note as a problem is an inclination to bind Asia as one.

There was virtually no country in Asia that could escape from the influences of the Sino-Japanese War, Russian-Japanese War, the World War II, and the Korean War for the last two centuries. With the collapse of the Soviet Communism, Chinese adoption of Capitalist system, the huge Asian gate began to open to let in the outside currents. The collapse of the Cold War era coupled with the development of Asian economy led each Asian country to attempt to build a direct relationship with neighbouring countries. Australia had its first Asia Pacific Triennial in early 90s and Japan followed it with introducing artists from North Eastern and South Eastern countries to the domestic scene.

In the early stage of exchanges in Asia, every country shared the same type of exchange in promoting its own distinct colour, but nowadays, they choose to make an image of Asia as one. *Under Construction*, the show organized by Japan Foundation, is a good example of this. *Under Construction* was a project that continued from 2000 to 2003 in Japan involving myself and two participants of this conference, Yasuko Furuichi and Pi Li. The project was initiated from a round table discussion of curators from seven countries. Starting from a broad question of "What is Asia?," we experimented on various methodologies such as researches on Asian artists, residence programs, workshops, exhibitions and curators' collaboration. The most fruitful from the whole project was meeting many artists, to develop deep and wide researches and, most importantly, to realize that each Asian country has broadly different cultural conditions and environments.

2. Strategies and Possibilities of Contemporary Art Exchanges in Asia

Culture can no longer be viewed away from politics and economies. Cultural strategies are also developed in the midst of their complex interrelationships with other fields of society. Various approaches and attempts to make solidarity with other countries gradually changed the way of cultural exchanges.

The case of Europe that reached one community comparatively in a smooth and natural way in a long period of time would be an ideal example of cultural exchange on a new level. Each European country, while keeping its main stance as an individual entity, would not deny sharing a very particular, common sense of building an invisible, but strong community with its neighbouring countries. In front of its own respective history, there has always been another line of history of entire continent on a more profound level. Culture was, no doubt, the medium to hold and bind different countries together in one community. Back in the 80s, however, countries in Europe were still not excluded from international trends where each country promoted their national identities and distinctive culture. But coming into the 90s, cultural exchanges in Europe are made by autonomous circle or group of artists who gather around a similar concern and interest.

Though geographically close each other, Asian countries, in comparison to their European counterparts, are aloof from one another, only chasing the western model after the wake of modernization. We have just started to have interest in other neighbouring countries and Asia began to realize the importance of building a joint collaborative system. This way of involving other countries to one community, however, should not be used as an excuse to rule over other regions of Asia. This community would be rightly described as an entity with a flexible border, which allows difference of individual country, but sustains its nature as a bloc.

In order to reach this state, the ways of exchanges should be so subtle and refined that the two parties let in the flow of foreign culture gladly and naturally. Collaborative projects would be efficient for Asian countries to achieve mutual understanding and better communication. This indicates that the former types of cultural exchanges, which presented culture as a representing item of a certain nation, should be replaced by new type of cultural exchange that steep into and get absorbed in each other's culture.

The concrete practices of realizing such exchanges are already being tried in many ways. The first would be to make a research of the current status through studies on modern and contemporary art history and there follow other various ways including artist exchanges, establishment of networking, collaborative curating and active involvement of Asian cultural centers and biennials.

The countries in north-eastern Asia are giving one another an increasing degree of pressure to open politically, economically and culturally. The recent changes in north-eastern Asia- exemplified by the economic flourish in China, foreign currency crisis in the 90s and the alleviation of tension in the Korean Peninsula- demand active cooperation among the countries in the region, but China and Japan still attempt to win the status of a center in Asia. To reiterate a strategy of new cultural exchange, the regional collaboration is strongly suggested.

2.1 Principles of Cultural Exchange in North East Asia

Despite the awareness of cooperative community, the continent lacks strategies or principles to gain the community-based commitment. This is because we still tend to use culture for commercial purpose as something that gives a stimulus to local business and industry, strictly in a local framework. It is especially problematic since such cultural events, being organized without any systematic approach and aesthetic concern, are temporary events that cannot have a wide and lasting influence to society in general. These local projects are planned and put into action without thorough consideration and evaluation, only wasting a huge scaled budget and labour. The number of admission and media coverage is major factors of evaluation standard. This type of preparation and planning neither does not care about the quality of such cultural events nor long-term visions and we cannot invent any future programs from such poor resources. From now on, cultural events should be planned with putting our supreme priority on the quality and vision of the show.

The cultural exchange is undeniably about representing the best image of a country. Therefore, regardless of the type of exchange, we should not emphasize the superiority of its own indigenous culture. The image of a country with rich cultural resources should be naturally cultivated in the course of diverse cultural exchanges. The exchanges of culture can create a ground for conversation and understanding which is necessary to resolve conflicts in racial, regional and historical dimension, otherwise would not be solved through diplomatic and political channels.

2.2 Methods for Activating Exchanges in North-Eastern Asia

1) Study of Modern, Contemporary Art History Centring on Korea, China and Japan

It is necessary for Korea, China and Japan, the three countries in north-eastern Asia, to pursue a collaborative research on the formation of Modern periods in each country. Even though the three countries share many similarities in terms of their geography and history, there has been an obvious severance during the modern period. The exchange between Korea and Japan was revived after the WW II, but China remained closed from the other two neighbours by difference in ideology and politics. Especially academic researches made by joint efforts of Korea and Japan were born in these exchanges, but China again could not develop such scholarly collaboration.

As a basic premise of cooperative study and partnership, we should know more deeply about ourselves, even to the differences and similarities lying in tradition, people, tribe, religion, and language. Such differences should be embraced and compared for better development of the cultural environment. By reinterpreting the west-oriented art history, we should write modern art history of Asia, particularly that of north-eastern Asia. To take an example of Japan, art historians and modern art curators have led a collaborative study under the auspices of Japan Foundation about Picasso's influence on Asian modern artists. As a long-term project lasting for three or four years, its whole process and outcome would amount to be an interesting exhibition open to the public, and

furthermore, would be counted as one of the good efforts to build and add our own modern art history to the western canon.

This type of project will not only add information about the local art history, but also provide a logical base for exhibition and various art exchanges as well. This consistent brainwashing will eventually educate and illuminate our mind with a vision for long-term policies and exchange programs.

2) Networking

Networking is made, expanded and solidified by such diverse means as co-curating, residence programs, joint-programs, information exchange, and the collectives of public institutions and alternative art spaces. Networking is of immense value in Asia where institutional assistance or social infrastructure is poor. Good networking, thorough researches and information sharing of today will bring forth numerous exchanges in the future.

a) Co-curating

Under Construction, the project mentioned above, was the three-year project supported by Japan Foundation for establishing Asia networking. Eight curators from seven Asian countries discussed and selected one subject, and collaborated on plan for one show on the common subject. Each curator, interpreted and analysed art with diverse viewpoints, and conversed and negotiated with people from different cultures. As such, the collaborators endured the whole process of understanding and misunderstanding for the sole purpose of having one exhibition.

After going through these processes, they found themselves tied together forming a strong solidarity. It was easy to set a plan in theory, but was extremely hard to put that into a reality, a task that requires abundant imagination, concentration, and conversation. The co-curating system can be weak in manifesting one strong theme or subject that embraces the entire exhibition, but, I would say, is the best way to get aware of artists and colleagues.

Manifesta of Europe has a co-curating system where it selects two or three curators in every two years and who travel throughout European cities to find emerging artists. In Japan, the Fukuoka Asian Museum of Art also practices co-curating system through its Asian Art Triennial. Co-curating in Northeast Asia would be an excellent way of setting a network between curators, artists and critics.

b) Residence Program

The artist residence program, which runs from three months to one year, provides artists with a studio for production of artwork and/or research. In Korea, some of the major residence programs are Ssamzie Residence Program, and Changdong and Goyang Studio Program. Ssamzie Residence Program is sponsored by a private local company, Ssamzie Co., and Changdong and Goyang Studio Programs are government-sponsored programs by Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Korean National Museum of Contemporary Art to support artists in their 30s to 40s. Ssamzie Space supports younger generation artists by providing long (1 year) and short-term (a few months) residence programs. Since 2001, it has been operating a short-term program for overseas Korean and foreign artists. If the current Korean residence programs could expand the scope of benefit to the artists in other regions of Asia, these would work as a main hub of long-term north-eastern culture exchange programs.

Japan has various programs to give initiatives to collaboration between domestic and foreign artists and local residents. Arcus Project, CCA Kitakushu Program, Art Exchange Program at Fukuoka are major initiatives. Arcus Project is 3~5 month residence program for young artists in their 20s and 30s, and also provides them with airfare, living expense, and production costs. CCA Kitakushu Program is unique as it supports researchers and exhibition organizers, as well as artists. Coordinating the entire course of collaboration between selected artists and the local residents, it also supports researching and producing contemporary art. The Research Program invites internationally acclaimed artists for about one month to give lectures, seminars and special talks to the program participants. Information Dissemination Activities not only collect books and materials on contemporary art, but also build an in-depth archive on the contemporary art of the region. Korean artist, Sooja Kim (1999) and Junga Ku (2002) have participated as professors of the research program.

The Art Exchange Program of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum offers Asian artists, curators and researchers a chance to produce art or research for approximately three months. Living expenses, airfare, and production costs are provided and final results are exhibited at the end of the program. In addition, it provides workshops, lectures, and talks with the artists and seminars on an exhibition for its local residents, generating a vital role for better cultural environment of the region.

China's BizArt (Shanghai) runs a contemporary art residence program called Artist Link that British Council sponsors as a way to encourage two-way exchange programs between two countries. The current program, launched in 2002 to be continued through 2006, has provided about twenty British artists with studios and workshops. This program is in collaboration with various institutions in China and is connected even to London and Manchester. Cultural institutions in Korea need to develop such mutual exchange programs like the ones in Shanghai and Beijing.

Although it is necessary to invite foreign artists to Korea, sending Korean artists to the institutions abroad is another method of exchange. The Korea Culture and Arts Foundation has supported domestic artists' advance to New York's PS 1 program, and since 2004, has moved onto supporting Korean artists for their participation at international exchange program by Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. Korea would operate a residence program in Japan and/or China. In case of China, it would be practical to create a residence program in Beijing, since Beijing has such merits as a group of good local artists and a superb educational system in its art schools. Furthermore, it is Beijing where many Chinese artists who already achieved international acclaim are residing. In Japan's case, if a residence program in or near Tokyo managed by a Korean institution would be valuable. The existing programs have been operated with the emphasis on artists; however, such programs would embrace more of curators and critics in the future, it will be instrumental for their research and co-curating planning. One practical difficulty involving this type of system would be a problem with visas. In order for artists and curators to visit China, visa must be issued each time they travel. It would be much more practical and timesaving if one could travel without the visa problem between Japan, Korea, and China.

c) Joint Project with Public Institution

Japan and Korea have often collaborated on joint exhibitions in which curators from each country select artists from their own countries for exchange shows. However, a method of co-curating or a method of selecting the other country's artists by a curator will enable the curator to better understand the other country's culture as well as the penchant of the audience. An exhibition with such fundamental understanding would generate more effective exchanges of information than just selecting artists of one's own country. As for China, where public art museum systems have not yet completed, exhibition programs utilizing an alternative space would be significant. Networking through alternative spaces is another important channel of exchange, for they have closer and more direct contact with art scenes than museums do.

d) Exchange of Information

In many regions in Asia, there are many small-sized artists groups and/or alternative activities needless to discrepancies in each country's economical status. Such activities are set up via internet networking, and it is important to support these artists' activities. For example, in Korea, it is imperative to promote and support networking systems of such alternative spaces as *Loop* and *Pool* through symposium and seminars. Not only collecting data on other countries' artists and exhibitions is essential, but also very important to set up an information center that keeps the collected record of artists and exhibits.

v) Public fund and Major Institutions

Earlier, I have mentioned facilitating the residence programs of other Asian regions. An alternative method would be setting up an exchange program managed by a joint fund invested by adjacent countries. Nordic countries have showed a great example where Norway, Denmark, and Finland, among others, have established NIFA (Nordic Institute for Art). This institute creates a link for art programs between other countries art museums and institutions, on top of having the funding system used for such activities.

Similar to NIFA, North Eastern Asian countries should have a joint institution that focuses on exchanges in Far Eastern areas, thereby supporting academic research as well as arts and performance. Due to relatively undeveloped systems and infrastructures, it is extremely important that the three countries (Korea, Japan, and China) should set common principles and directions on establishing a kind institution for continuous support and management.

3. Conclusion

Although exchanges between Korea and other North Eastern countries have been not tremendously active, there is great potential in the cultural aspect. Even with an array of great artists, it is true that Asia could not develop such rich resources. This was partly caused by lack of experiences and opportunities to expose itself to the international art world in its short history of international exchange. The institutions of Asia, therefore, are expected to take double efforts to catch up with international standard. If Korea, Japan and China take more aggressive steps toward learning about one another, it would create a different outlook of formulating a culture bloc in the Far Eastern Areas. To achieve this goal, there are systematic requirements. First there should be a mutual understanding between professionals. After realizing the necessity for cultural exchange, then there comes the second step of general

approaches. This step involves educational programs and residence programs. In addition, it aims to attract many audiences through a means of exhibition. Based on such exchanges, Korea, Japan, and China will form a tie, which will then act as a foundation for unity (block) in terms of economics and politics. As I have mentioned earlier, I would like to re-emphasize the most important point in the cultural exchange is in educating personnel who can actively promote the establishment of joint-funding system and active cultural exchanges among countries.

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