

Over the Border

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Two Koreas

The lower part of the Korean peninsula is virtually an island. The upper part of it is also an island since it is the world's most isolated country in this age of information.

The place named Panmunjom referring to the Joint Security Area (JSA) locates the boundary between these two islands. The JSA used to be the only place without a clearly marked military demarcation line in the DMZ of Korean peninsula — the most heavily armed Demilitarized Zone. It is known as the national border between two Koreas. Tourists escorted by military personnel are permitted to take photos of the line which is nothing but cement slabs on the ground. At the Military Armistice Commission, even border crossing is allowed in a meeting room. This honourable behaviour is certainly one of the most popular attractions in DMZ but it is not a technically national border. The war is not over yet.

Either from south or north, a non-Korean can visit the JSA for sightseeing whereas a South Korean needs to apply and wait for 60 days to get access to the JSA, just 30 miles away from Seoul. Still, this is a better situation compared to a North Korean, who may have to wait for almost 60 years.

On June 16th 1998, Ju-Yung Chung, the founder of Hyundai Group stepped across the border in the JSA to visit North Korea with 500 cattle as his gift to his homeland. It was the first historic event that a civilian crossed the military demarcation line without military personnel since 1953 and CNN exclusively broadcasted this to the world.

The official results were the beginning of tours to the Mountain Keumgang and peace bloomed in the Korean Peninsula. Now, a South Korean does not have to struggle to access the national border as there are other easier ways to cross the border without passing the

JSA. One may get a job in Kaesong Industrial District and commute to North Korea, or, one can join tours to Mountain Keumgang, although the tours are strictly limited and regulated by mountains of rules.

Two borders

Everything is so symbolic. On one hand, the tension in the JSA symbolizes the tragedy of divided country, evoking fear for the possible resumption of war. Yet, people tend to overlook the symbolic status of the JSA as the national border, a well-made stage of political dramas. On the other hand, there are increasing comings and goings of people and goods in a hopeful mood created by political and economical interests. The mass media celebrates this myth of peace and boosts political romanticism, hiding all dickers behind. This is progress in propaganda serving different political ideologies rather than actual circumstances, as seen from the case of New York Philharmonic's recent visit to Pyongyang.

These systems transmit absurd notions of the national border between two Koreas, resulting in the coexistence of a visible border and an invisible border. Though wires around the DMZ may gradually wear out, the physical border is a visible symbol of the Cold War that will not collapse without a peace treaty. Meanwhile, there is the other border in the minds of the people, consisting of prejudices. This will grow more and more ambiguous and harder to break up, as far as people remain ill-informed and indifferent to reality. Eyes should be kept on this border. The world witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example. It began from the changes in people caused by gradual inflow of western culture. North Korea's regime knows that isolating their county is the best way to preserve their system. This is the reason why North Korea strictly prohibits its visitors from bringing personal media like cell phones or laptop computers in addition to foreign materials written about North Korea and publications within South Korea.

Art on borders

As seen above, one is hardly able to access the North and there is scarce chance to face people in the North. Besides, any individual behaviour challenging the actual border means risking one's own life. Even if one tries to get North Korea involved, the project is apt to be frustrated. For example, a media art workshop for children in North Korea is desirable but is unlikely to be realized even if it serves purely educational and artistic purpose. Most of all, inflow of new media and access to information other than government propaganda are completely blocked in North Korea. Unfortunately, like a dormant volcano, any artistic gesture seems to be practically impossible in Korean peninsula.

Considering the symbolic nature of the borders, however, one can realize what should be the main concern of art, particularly in case of two Koreas. It is not whether the physical border line is crossed over by someone who has enough money or power to do so. Rather, the way people perceive the circumstances is crucial. It might be a consolation that all these limits and obstacles highlight the fundamental role of art — artistic expressions have always affected on human experience and thoughts. Therefore, art should ponder and engage in how to incapacitate the invisible borders.

In this context, Masaki Fujihata's Field-Works Collaborations, especially the [Field-Work@Alsace]

in 2002 and [Landing Home in Geneva] in 2005 is a good example. He walked around the national border between France and Germany in Alsace, interviewing local people. In the final image, the artist's GPS data is juxtaposed with floating memories of encounters at each spot. By raising questions of political or geographical borders we know, he draws more meaningful lines from everyday life and experience. In Geneva, he explored the invisible borders of languages and culture by interviewing interpreters and human borders who are supposed to be invisible. Typically, he shot his and his interviewees' experience with panoramic lens which breaks down the distinction between a cameraman and the pictured.

Although it is not feasible for the artist armed with a video camera equipped with GPS to take a walk in the inter-Korean land charged with numerous land mines, his works give valuable inspiration to this theme of border transmission. As artworks manipulating technology, they challenge the conventional understanding of the border and undermine the invisible border in our mind which needs to be dismantled.

In the past decades, interactivity has been one of the key words in the field of art. One thing is hardly deniable — the oldest and most fundamental interaction created by artworks is their influence on the visitors' perception of their world. This paper with a naïve title finds its argument on this simple fact.