Mediacity Seoul 2014
: The Collaboration among Ghosts, Spies, Grandmothers, and Artists

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The title of the 8th Mediacity Seoul 2014 at the Seoul Museum of Art is “Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers.” Running from September 2 to November 23, SeMA’s main exhibition hall presents the work of forty-two artists. The Korean Film Archive is concurrently hosting screenings of forty-two films along with the two art installations by Rho Jae Oon and Ho Sin Tung.

The current edition of Mediacity Seoul places a considerable emphasis on the affinities between the exhibition theme and the artworks, unlike the previous editions that had prioritized the new media technology. Of course, it is rather challenging to name a catchall term that would represent the themes of many different individual works. Doing so runs the risk of severely simplifying some works, as well as reading other works in a contrived manner. Organizing theme-based exhibitions does involve such risks, but then again, the risks are not necessarily something to be afraid of. A theme is simply a curator’s proposal. Given the challenge in applying a theme to comprehensively encompass an exhibition, artists, curator, and the audience should all share such a challenge as a presupposition. A theme is neither a criterion to judge a work of art nor a ‘net’ to filter it, but closer to a stain that is found on it. It is more akin to certain patterns that suddenly emerge in the mind of an audience at certain point in time after having experienced the artworks.

The words of the exhibition title, “Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers,” work in a similar manner. Ghosts make direct appearances in the work of Kim Soo-nam,

1 The images of and the text about the artworks mentioned in this essay can be found in the first volume of the exhibition catalogue, SeMA Biennale Mediacity Seoul 2014 volume 1, as well as on www.mediacityseoul.kr
the photographs of Naito Masatoshi, and in the videos of Kim In-whoe. In the imagined theater of Ho Sin Tung, there are neither actors nor an audience, but only peculiar movements of the audience seats. In the apocalyptic images of Basim Magdy, the ‘ghosts’ remain in the background or constitute the mood of the work.

Regarding the exhibition from a distance, most of the exhibited works may appear to maintain certain kinds of relationships with gwisin,\(^2\) or ghosts, in some aspects. This is even more the case if we consider ghosts in a wider sense of their implications, such as the return of tragic history. Jesse Jones and Tamura Yuichiro associate ghosts with the return of historical ideologies and peculiar events or their contemporaneous reconstructions. While this exhibition presents ghosts in terms of the culture of the traditional religions in Asia, it also invites its reading in terms of the memories of repetitive return of overwhelming pains and failures. The exhibition conjures up the failures of utopian aspirations and the project of modernity of the twentieth century, and the artists interpret such failures in terms of ambiguous values.

In the work of Jesse Jones and Lina Selander, socialism is remembered not only through the forlorn play of The Internationale or the emphasis on the calamity of Chernobyl, but also must be contrasted in relation to the current state of affairs in which radical attempts for new social communities are contained and revolutionary resistance has all but been lost. This resonates in Sean Snyder’s work Exhibition. Re-editing the pedagogical film of a contemporary Mexican art exhibition held in a Ukrainian village, Snyder empties out the excessive message of the political fervor of Soviet propaganda, effectively nullifying it as a void gesture. However, the direct merging of art and the everyday life of the common people of the time offers a jolting contrast to many of today’s contemporary art exhibitions’ lack of communication, vitality, and value of enlightenment. The ‘ghost-images’ conjured by the artists discreetly reveal not only the failure of the project of modernization but also its constant companion of dreams and passion, as if they were a pair of hidden cards.

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\(^2\) *Gвисин* is a Korean term for dead persons’ spirits that hover around living people. It is based on a commonly shared belief in the dichotomy of the body and spirit. However, unlike many different forms of spirits in world religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism, *Gвисин* is an independent but isolated entity that is not associated with any organized religion. *Gвисин* is typically depicted as legless, very light, and dressed in white garment. — translator’s note
Jesse Jones, *The Spectre and the Sphere*, 2008

Sean Snyder, *Exhibition*, 2008
Ghost, or gwisin, is to be considered in relation to traditional Asian religious culture.

Asia is the birthplace of Buddhism, Confucianism, shamanism, Taoism, and Hinduism, where these religious influences are still deeply felt in the everyday. While there may be discrepancy throughout the regions, the incorporation of traditional religious culture in Asian contemporary art has manifested mostly in terms of formalism, Orientalism, and nationalism. This explains the relative straggling of the development of artistic languages that establish correspondence between age-old anthropological manifestations—such as ritual, mythology, cosmology, and folklore—and various discursive issues that contemporary society faces today. The critique of Orientalism has affected ‘internalized Orientalism’ within Asia as well, leading to cynical attitudes despite its intended meanings. For instance, it was not without reason that the repeated commercial and institutional successes of cultural exoticism were met with concerned voices.

For these reasons Mediacity Seoul 2014 attempted to resurrect the interests in local traditions that have been abandoned in contemporary Asian art. Such resurrection requires a certain audacity, and this exhibition reveals such daring itself as a cultural ambition. In other words, through the biennial, I intend to refer not only to ‘post-Orientalism’ but also to emancipation from the mirrored room of East and West, as it were. Demythologizing Orientalism or sociological critique of ‘tradition’ are important and urgently needed, but these can also end up as a barrier to numerous preparatory stages of studying ‘the traditional,’ and to certain puerility, mistakes, and limitations that are practically inevitable and even necessary in the process of moving beyond Orientalism. Rather than giving inspiration for various forms of de-colonial practice against Western-centric, imperial cultures, one can be mired in yet another outsider’s perspective, wherein one regards just about every tradition through the lens of Orientalism. Equally lamentable as the internalized Orientalism in Asian cultures is the ensuing cynical stance regarding the use of tradition—such as upholding, resurrecting, and re-making it—as well as retreating into yet another myth called ‘contemporary art.’ Surely, the issue is not the critique of Orientalism per se, but rather the misunderstanding and supplanting of its lessons. However, one can understand the words of the poet Kim Soo-young, “all tradition is a good thing no matter how filthy it is,” if one can accurately assess the degree and intensity of how severely the traditional, or the old, has been destroyed in Asia, especially in East Asia, that has oscillated between extreme ‘hot’ wars and the Cold War.
This well-known verse of Kim Soo-young’s poem implies that tradition has already become thoroughly contaminated and even dirty. Tradition has become an easy prey for the ideology of nation-state, and the word tradition itself signifies discrimination against the past by the present. In this regard, ‘traditional ghost’ is a subject that has been killed multiple times. But, to say that even a filthy tradition is a good thing means that one desperately needs it. In Korea, where one’s own traditional culture appears to be a kind of taxidermy or even a foreign culture, it becomes necessary ‘to turn the poison into a medicine,’ as the old saying goes.

We witness an artist such as Jawshing Arthur Liou who boldly represents his experience of Buddhism and reanimates the Buddhist worldview in his work. When siren eun young jung newly interprets Chunhyangjeon through the lens of the gender politics and Haejun JO & KyeongSoo LEE awaken the dokkaebi that are long forgotten in Korean culture, I feel that, following their leads, rich but forgotten heritages seem to be untangled and reemerge again. Many Asian artists participating in this exhibition share ambivalences and uncertainties in regard to traditional culture and religious themes. While they express sense of alienation brought about by the schism of the traditional and the contemporary, they also utilize paradoxical freedom and possibilities stemming from the condition in which traditional culture has been thoroughly destroyed. The works of SU Yu-Hsien and Rho Jae Oon especially fit the bill. Made of thousands of bells, Haegue Yang’s work is a confident step forward, appropriate for the scale of her imagination of ancient times. The films by Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL

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3 Chunhyangjeon, or, “The Story of Chunhyang,” is arguably one of the most renowned Korean romance folk tales, and perhaps the most significant work of fiction from Joseon dynasty. Like most ancient tales, the exact time period and the author of the story remain unknown. The story is believed to have originated from between the seventeenth and nineteenth century Joseon dynasty. The main plot evolves around the romance between a man of aristocratic class and gisaeng (state-sanctioned entertainer of the time) Chunhyang, who is renowned for her chaste. The tale has evolved into a Pansori version, which is a mixture of music and literature in which a single narrator sings her story in accordance to the beat of a drummer. — translator’s note

4 Dokkaebi is an imagined creature that often appears in traditional Korean tales. Although there are different accounts of their appearances, commonly it is dressed in traditional Korean outfit, hanbok. It is said to originate from spirits that penetrate into and dwell in inanimate organisms or old objects. Dokkaebi is thought to be involved in mischievous acts. While different from Gwisin, Dokkaebi also bestows mean tricks or wealth and blessings upon people. — translator’s note
NINA FISCHER & MAROAN EL SANI, SPELLING DYSTOPIA, 2008-2009

YAO JUI-CHUNG, LONG LIVE, 2011

NINA FISCHER & MAROAN EL SANI, SPELLING DYSTOPIA, 2008-2009
and Jakrawal NILTHAMRONG’s are splendid *samramansang*, a term that refers to every possible thing and phenomenon in the universe, depicted in the manner of Asian ‘gothic.’ Having been subject to banishment by science and technology, ghosts relentlessly attempt to recuperate their own visages and voices in the media works of ‘artists-as-medium,’ that is, ‘medium’ in the sense of surrogates or spokespersons for the ghosts.

If we use the term ‘ghost’ in the sense of the spirits that have been excluded in official history, and in order to attentively listen to their words of unfulfilled wishes and angst, then the entirety of this exhibition may be called the Ghost Exhibition. Hence, there appear mountains, islands, and forests in many of the works. In Korean shamanism, ghosts supposedly occupy mountains and islands. The *Manmulsang* of Diamond Mountain depicted in Min Joung-Ki’s paintings is a mountain of animism; the mountain in Choi Min-hwa’s painting is desolate and phantasmagorical one of graves where *Wongui*, or the ghosts of unfulfilled wishes, reside. For Bae Young-whan, Inwang Mountain is the site of struggle among religious devotees, political forces, and trekkers, all the while remaining a sacred place despite their occupation.

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5 *Samramansang* is an all-encompassing term that refers to every possible thing and phenomenon in the universe. — translator’s note

6 *Manmulsang* literally translates as images of ten thousand things or images of everything under the sun. In this context *Manmulsang* is the central and most spectacular part of the Diamond Mountain, or Geumgang Mountain, located in North Korea. It is a valley of countless unusually shaped rocks and peaks that offer awe-inspiring views, and represents a microcosm of the universe. — translator’s note

7 *Wongui* refers to ghosts of people who died of unnatural causes or in abrupt ways. They are known to wander between the realm of the living and the dead. *Wongui* are believed to be able to be liberated from their angst and rest in peace by means of shamanistic ritual. — translator’s note

8 Inwang Mountain is a major mountain centrally located across Jongno-gu and Seodaemun-gu in Seoul. Hence, it is easily visible from across the city. Many of its large granite peaks are its distinct features. The mountain is the subject of the renowned painting, *Inwang jesaekdo*, which is a national treasure, by Jeong Seon of the Joseon dynasty. — translator’s note
We may easily assume that ghosts populate mountains and islands because these places are ‘exterior’ to civilization, outside of urban areas. However, the exact opposite is true; mountains and islands are the quintessential inside, the places that have suffered intense violence since the dawn of modern era in Asia. Such a historico-geographical landscape has been most clearly revealed in the Taiwanese writer Li Ang’s novel *The Visible Ghost*. Li portrays in great details the female ghosts’ acrimonious memories of violence during their former lives in Taiwan. The novel thoroughly discloses Taiwan’s sufferings inflicted by the colonial aggression of the Netherlands, China, and Japan.

Through their deaths, the female ghosts in the novel not only overcome fear, but also attain freedom to transcend time and space. Just as in movies, the experience of the ghosts becomes another version of the Benjaminian ‘angel of history’ that collects fragments of different times and spaces. Although female ghosts are not messiahs, at least, one by one, they reassemble the fragments of civilization destroyed in the process of the coming of the messiah.

In the way it is portrayed in the novel, Taiwan immediately recalls the history of the islands that were subject to colonialism and the atrocities of the Cold War, such as Jeju Island, Okinawa, and many of the Indonesian islands. While he was making his work on the female divers of Jeju Island, Mikhail Karikis has pursued his inquiry about the origin of the peculiar sound of *sumbisori* made by the divers. According to a scholar he met, divers may have devised *sumbisori* as a way to overcome not only the fear of the sea but also the fear of the 4.3 massacre that took place between the liberation from Japanese occupation and the Korean War.

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9 *Sumbisori* is both the age-old breathing technique practiced by female sea divers in the southern islands region of South Korea, as well as its peculiar, whistle-like sound when exhaling. The sea divers in Jeju Island pass on the technique from one generation to the next. Young girls begin to learn diving around the age of eight, and when they reach the age of about fifteen they become fully capable of diving in search of pearls and seafood, contributing to their family livelihood. The sea divers produce the whistle-like sound as they exhale immediately after emerging from the water. It is said that the sound helps them exhale completely from deep inside their chest and also inhale oxygen as a way to recharge for the next dive. Today the practice of sea diving, hence *sumbisori*, is nearing extinction. — translator’s note

10 Jeju 4.3 refers to the massacre of April 3rd 1948 when the South Korean government, in light of the growing tension with North Korea, falsely accused Jeju islanders as communists and committed indiscriminate killings. — translator’s note
While islands have always been excluded in our customary historico-geographical thoughts, at last they reclaim their rightful place through YAO Jui-chung’s Green Island, like Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani’s Hashima Island. These islands reveal the final state of Asian dystopia that not even ghosts can inhabit. In the film screening section, the depiction of the massacre in the forest in Joshua Oppenheimer’s film *The Act of Killing* resonates with Apitchapong WEERASETHAKUL’s forest where ghosts reveal themselves and disappear. In the demilitarized zones and around the borders, one mostly finds high mountains, rivers, and forests where ghosts reside, old folks toil away, and spies conduct their secret activities.

‘Spies’ as a motif allows us to pay attention to the peculiar circumstances of East Asia’s passage through the era of violence, colonialism, and the Cold War in the twentieth century: namely, the wars, massacres, and victims of ideology, autocracy and surveillance. As the anthropologist Heonik Kwon stated, the Cold War is both a space and era full of countless local political and cultural convolutions that are not detectable in the loopholes of the hegemonic struggles and power balance between the US and the former Soviet Union. In the periods of colonialism and the Cold War, the subject of authority and the process of ideological formation had been intricately interwoven. The North Korean regime could not have been born without the Japanese occupation; the anti-Japanese guerilla struggles are considered its bedrock of national identity to this day.

Colonialism and the Cold War are deeply interconnected not only in the same era but also in spatial terms. The Japanese economy achieved prosperity via the Korean War; likewise, the South Korean economy has taken a great stride forward by participating in the Vietnam War. Neruda, and even Sun Yat-sen, had been enthused by Japan’s victory over Russia; the spirit of pan-Asia resulting from Bandung Conference virtually perished in the Cold War order. As seen in the work of CHE Onejoon, North Korean artists have constructed

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11 Sūn Wén, or Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), was a Chinese revolutionary, the first president and founding father of the Republic of China and medical practitioner. He was the co-founder of Kuomintang, a political party in the Republic of China. As a unique political figure in uniting post-imperial China, he is widely revered among Chinese people in both the mainland China and Taiwan. — translator’s note
Eric Baudelaire, *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years without Images*, 2011

Pilar Mata Dupont, *The Embrace*, 2013
monuments of gargantuan scale throughout Africa, which are supposedly very difficult to remove.

The mutually influential relationship between regions transcending specific eras and nation-states is the core theme in the work of Dihn Q. Lê. Lê looks back at the relationship between the Algerian liberation movement and the anti-colonial struggle of Vietnam. He stacked French-Vietnamese colonial furniture high in between an Algerian rapper and the audience. Blocking the space in between the singer—substituted by a microphone—and the audience, the Asiatic French furniture—Barricade—critiques the political and cultural situation of today in which the international solidarity that has once existed between Vietnam and Algeria has now become an object of scorn. However, the barricade simultaneously assumes the dual function of being a physical barrier against the enemy as much as the role of media that amplifies the enemy’s music. According to the artist’s proposal, a place of rupture is also a medium of communication.

Considering the Cold War in the plural, the Cold Wars are not simply over due to the destruction of the Berlin Wall or the dominance of global capitalism. Rather, the Cold War exists in diverse and multifarious guises in the Korean peninsula and across Asia. As the Propeller Group depicts, the Cold War is increasingly removed from ideological conflicts and have transformed into a kind of ‘theater of the Cold War.’

Pilar Mata Dupont subverts the male-oriented master discourse of ‘national division and reunification’ by means of a sophisticated psychological drama of women. The crux of The Embrace is not so much a subversion of a sign by merely replacing a male couple by a female couple. Rather, it occurs at the moment in which the embrace, symbolizing reunification, is transformed and caught in an awkward and unsettling facial expression, devoid of affect. Here, the ‘theater of the Cold War’ does not rely on deep feelings such as revulsion or love; it suddenly becomes severed from its historical origins due to the light-hearted enjoyments and the indices of calculation.

12 Taking place from April 18 to 24, 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, Bandung Conference was the first significant international conference of Asia and Africa, in which twenty-five countries gathered to discuss matters pertaining to their continents and the world. Most of the participating countries were newly independent, and they shared their resistance against the exclusionary policies of the world superpowers in determining the domestic affairs of the former. As such, their shared goal was to promote political independence, Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation, and to oppose colonialism or neocolonialism by any nation. — translator’s note
of losses and gains. Although it was once a site of the Vietcong guerilla operations, the Cu Chi Tunnels, now a tourist attraction, above which the gun sound of Western tourists’ shootings are heard is precisely the index of such chasm.

Consider Yoneda Tomoko’s deliberate investigation of the Russian spy Richard Sorge, Sangdon Kim’s photographs of the cemetery of the camp town female workers who catered to the US military personnel, and James T. Hong’s investigation of Japanese chemical warfare; these are not merely some events of the past. Out of the increasingly blurred memory of the past, the artists utilize various kinds of ‘incantation-inscription’ and at other times offer cold facts and archival documents, ultimately reawakening the implications of postcolonial and post-Cold War in the present tense. Restoration in this regard means simultaneous utilization of both rewinding and fast-forwarding. While all types of restoration entail imagining the original while in truth belong to the real time in which it takes place, the restorations undertaken by these artists are rather closer to that of the past while imagining the future.

The theme of ‘spies’ also pertains to the radicalism and revolutionary aspirations of the twentieth century, that is, the unconditional passion, sacrifice, and risk-taking toward building a society that is free and equal for all. Eric Baudelaire has paid attention to the Japanese Red Army participating in the Palestinian liberation movement; Kato Yoshihiro of Zero Jigen (Zero Dimension) has synthesized the

13 Richard Sorge (1895-1944) is arguably one of the world’s best-known spies whose secret activity during his years in Japan made a history-altering contribution to the defense of the Soviet Union from the invasion of Nazi Germany and the victory of the allies. During his career as a Soviet intelligence agent, he had assumed the positions of journalists of several newspapers, including correspondent journalist in Japan for Frankfurter Zeitung. During the escalated tension of the WWII, he was arrested and executed in Japan. — translator’s note

14 Sangdon Kim has recorded the Sangpaedong cemetery in Dongducheon, a major site of the US military camps, located 47 km north of Seoul, and near the Demilitarized Zone. Hundreds of women who had been club workers in Dongducheon were buried in the cemetery, but without proper gravestones. In fact, many tombs simply bear numbers only, with no names. For further information on the artists’ work in Dongducheon, see curator Heejin Kim’s Museum as Hub: A Walk to Remember A Walk to Envision, which culminated in two exhibitions at Insa Art Space, Seoul, and New Museum, New York in 2008. — translator’s note
http://www.museumashub.org/neighborhood/insa-art-space
Buddhist ‘ritual’ and avant-garde movement in the street; Joanna Lombard has reenacted the memories of radical community movements in Europe.

To ‘individuals’ mired in a competitive society that perpetuates totalizing commodification of even the internal psyche, these artworks allow us to gain a glimpse at the moment of the resurgence of community, or at least compel the contemporary audience to confront their own timidity. I would like to add that the legacy of such hardcore politico-artistic movements speak the uncomfortable truth, thereby challenging the pervasive presence of ‘soft avant-garde’ in contemporary art, especially contemporary Asian art. Insofar as Asian Orientalism mostly assumes the outward appearance of avant-garde, it may be a typical rearguard that merely claims the ‘forward movement.’ In the black images of Eric Baudelaire, I could literally discover the exact opposite values of Orientalism as though looking at negatives. Only through shifting the angle of the vision can one gain very brief glimpses of certain Japanese hard truth inscribed in the black silkscreens, perhaps of terrorism, or perhaps of revolutionary action.

Spies in films may be attractive, but actual spies can be scary. Spirits are to be upheld, but ghosts are to be kept at bay. At least within Confucian society, seniors are rightly to be respected. But in reality, grandmothers are effectively banished from the society of pervasive worship of youth. If somewhat exaggerated, they are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Spies embody secrets, ghosts are hear-says, and grandmothers possess pasts that cannot be fully told. At times they can be spotted, but mostly they are not easily visible. Or, society does not want to see them, or is forbidden to meet them. Grandmothers are transcribers of silence, owners of highly classified information. They carry on the existence of the borderline, of the liminal space, so that it is difficult to ascertain which side they belong to. Hence, they are ‘mythic’ figures that are to be interpreted and reassessed from diverse perspectives.

Grandmothers appear in many different ways in the exhibition and screenings. The film Legend of Miryang features grandmothers who stake their own lives in the struggle to prevent the construction of transmission towers in their village. KIM In-whoe’s nineteen-eighties documentaries of shamanistic rituals show grandmothers’ communal plays. Mikhail Karikis documents female divers’ labor and their everyday life. The producer Sang-il Choi collaborates with Jiyeon Kim to feature the sounds of grandmothers residing in a remote mountain.

If a grandmother can be considered an occasion to contemplate ‘women and time,’
Mahardika Yudha, *Sunrise Jive*, 2005

she is a witness who has endured the era of ghosts and spies, hence a reservoir full of memories of amazing stories. When grandmothers throw their own ‘excluded’ bodies against the official suppression, they become peculiar subjects of politico-aesthetics that make police rather awkward and unsure of how to respond. Giant grandmothers like the legendary Magohalmi,¹⁶ or Suhwangmo (西王母)¹⁷ in Sanhaegyung¹⁸ and Yo-ji-yeon-do¹⁹ (Immortals’ Feast on Yoji Pond) possess supernatural power, and if they will, they can swiftly move across islands and the land in a matter of a footstep. This is the realm from which Rho Jae Oon’s wands originate.

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15 The Legend of Miryang I is a 2013 documentary film directed by Park Bae-il, chronicling the eight-year struggle of grandmothers who staged demonstrations against the planned construction of sixty-four transmission towers that will send electricity from the southeastern part of the Korean peninsula to its urban centers. — translator’s note

16 Magohalmi is a giant goddess of mountains or goddess of creation in Korean mythology. In large mountains in Korea, there are many legends of the genesis that are associated with Magohalmi. Although Magohalmi is now merely one of many goddesses today, she had once enjoyed the position of creation god when the status of women was higher than or equal to that of men. The dwindling of shamanism and the ascendancy of patriarchy explain the decline of her status. While the word ‘halmi’ usually signifies grandmother figure, some interpret that it refers to a ‘large mother,’ or a powerful fertility figure. Some relate tales of the demise of Magohalmi during her attempt to test her ability or in the process of creation of the universe. This has also been interpreted in relation to the rise of male god figure, or patriarchy. — translator’s note

17 Also known as Xi Wangmu, or Suhwangmo, literally meaning “Queen Mother of the West,” Si Wang Mu is an ancient Chinese goddess whose origin traces back to oracle bone inscriptions of the fifteenth century BC. She is regarded as the goddess who imparts prosperity, longevity, and eternal life to humans. The West of her name refers to the Western part of China, rather than the West as commonly associated with today. — translator’s note

18 Sanhaegyung, the Korean name for Shan Hai Jing, or formerly known as Shan-hai-Ching, is a Chinese classic text of mythic geography and myth. The English version of the text is the Classic of Mountains and Seas. It is believed to be a work of many scholars’ contributions from the Warring States to the early Han dynasty. The text consists of a total of eighteen volumes, and is divided into four categories: Classic of the Mountains, Classic of the Seas, Classic of the Great Wilderness, and Classic of Regions Within the Seas. It records some 550 mountains and 300 rivers, up to 277 different animals, and other geographical and cultural accounts. — translator’s note

19 Yo-ji-yeon-do, or Immortals’ Feast on Yoji Pond, is a painting depicting a banquet for various gods and immortals, held by the goddess Si Wang Mu in the imagined Kunlun Mountain in ancient Chinese myth. — translator’s note
In Korea, “old grandmother” retains some vague image of the early riser who prays for the wellbeing of her descendants to the spirits of the heaven and earth, with an offering of fresh and pure water. While the passivity and transcendentalism of prayer has been subject to major critiques by materialists, there are still many who pray in the deep mountains of Korea. Most of them are women, *ajumma*, and grandmothers. The grandmother may be the most powerless being in relation to state authorities, and yet perseverance and empathy symbolized by the old grandmother may also be reconsidered in terms of proactive value that transcends the state authority on ethical grounds. Choi Sunghun + Park Sunmin locate the paradoxical power belying such inertness in the subtle, vulnerable trembles in plastic bags. In Otty Widasari’s video, the waterfall where the Muslim woman arrives by walking across a peaceful park is also a source of the power.

Among the selected films for screening at the Korean Film Archive, many portray the powerless as the sole subject who monopolize the ‘truth,’ as it were. Based on Yun Heung-gil’s classic novel *The Rainy Spell* (1973), Yu Hyun-mok’s film *The Rainy Season* is set in the context of the Korean War and deals with the relationship between ghosts, spies, and grandmothers. The village becomes split into two factions of left and right wings, grandsons are killed in action, and the grandmother’s prophecy is ignored. In the end, just as the grandmother has predicted, her grandson reincarnates into a snake and returns to the village. In the film, it is only the grandmother who retains the physical sensibility to detect a long duration of time and the ability to foretell the future. Although the grandmother may appear to be merely sitting in the room and sighing all day, the ability to detect a change of the climate and to sense for living beings resides only in her body and her soliloquies. Her lamentations are thus simplicity of love that makes other characters (and the audience) busy loathing and rather uncomfortable. Her inactivity is not merely a passive crouching posture, but rather embodies a position of someone who is determined to guard until the end the realm which no enmity can infiltrate.

Of course this exhibition cannot be reduced only to ghosts, spies, and grandmothers. Seen from another perspective, the exhibition provides an occasion

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20 The word *ajumma* is a Korean word literally meaning “aunt.” Generally, however, it is used to refer to any middle-aged or senior women. — translator’s note
to look back at modernity itself in Asia and reconsider the rigid worldview based on nation-states as well as certain naïve expectations of liberalistic ‘mobility.’ Instead, the exhibition proposes an emphasis on regarding the world and Asia by bursting open the confining framework of the ‘ethnic-state.’ In Asia, there is an abundance of unexpected, unique relationships among different localities that move beyond Asia.

Similar to the oft-quoted method of ‘bricolage’ à la Lévi-Strauss, Asia embodies the very process of transformation through reconstitution in relation to the changes of times and perspectives. Asia is neither the opposite concept of the West nor an object that can be concisely defined. The renowned Chinese scholar Wang Hui, in reviving Takeuchi Yoshimi’s notion of ‘rewinding the West,’ argues that Asia should pursue the positive values of Western modernity such as democracy and equality. Wang refers to this in a paradoxical term, “modernity countering modernity.” When transcending the frame of modernity, Asia legitimately gains the magnificent complexities with excessive, “peculiar modernities.”

The paradox and the margins of modernity represented in the work of Mahardika Yudha, CHUNG Seoyoung, Truong Cong Tung, and especially that of Basim Magdy, reveal that the process of modernization that we experience does not always take place like it is supposed to, and that it is thwarted at various points. Through such never ending slippages we can discern a lead into imagining a new modernity that is respectful of laziness (Mahardika Yudha), that enables us to feel our way through the universe (Jawshing Arthur Liou, Haegue Yang; Basim Magdy), that reconciles with tradition (Bae Young-whan, SU Yu-Hsien, Kim Soo-nam), that recuperates eco-friendliness (Otty Widasari, Truong Cong Tung, Min Joung-Ki). Most important of all, such slippages will enable us to conceive of an idiosyncratic modernity. Situated at the one end of the orbit that Haegue Yang constructed on the floor, Hon-cheon-jeon-do, or The Complete Map of the Celestial Sphere is a map of the universe painted according to the East Asian pictorial system but represents Western knowledge. I like to think that this map is truer to the appearance of the universe than pictures produced by means of ruler, compass, and computer. The orbit is also positioned toward a small painting by Joo Jae-Hwan. Even though the

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21 Hon-cheon-jeon-do, or the Complete Map of the Celestial Sphere, is a revised version of a traditional oriental planisphere affected by and combined with Western astronomical knowledge imported to the Joseon dynasty around the 18th century in Korea. — translator’s note
inscription states that the moonlight is fading, the moon in Joo’s painting is still rendered bright. It appears that Yang’s glistening moon and the celestial orbit imply constellations born of such endless expansion and movement.

Fukushima, a remote corner of the universe, has experienced the great earthquake in 2011, and the sinking of the Sewol ferry this year has also resulted in countless young souls that are unable to rest in peace. The list of the sufferings is endless, and no one knows when it will come to a closure. When the Sewol tragedy took place in the Korean sea, many people claimed ‘we will never forget.’ But it is also imperative to remember that the basic human condition is that we are bound to be oblivious. “Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers” are precisely the kinds of beings that we need in this context. Mediacity Seoul 2014 does not simply sing a song in praise of them. For one thing, the ‘media artists’ in this exhibition invite ghosts, spies, and grandmothers to listen to and publicly share the stories that only they know, whose details have been suppressed, distorted, and have not yet been given form. The exhibition is a site of publicly sharing the details of uncomfortable secrets through ‘media.’

A ‘media artist’ Lina Selander’s pursuit of the origin of the photography is related to radioactivity. Considering the depletion of meaning in Sean Snyder’s anti-spectacular, de-dramatized, hence ‘flattened’ television, artists still persistently resituate ‘media art’ so as to compete with mass media over values. The ‘real value’ of media is dramatically revealed in Nilbar Güreş’s portrayal of Open Phone Booth. The value of mobile phones that hardly ring on a mountaintop in a Kurdish village compels us to reconsider what ‘media’ truly means—those us who easily get impatient with the slightest drop of sound quality or with a brief dormancy of the receiver. In this context media means less ringing or connecting but more of a kind of waiting. Indeed, such deep thoughts about media ought to ring about in a media art biennial. But frankly, over her video work, I prefer Güreş’s Open Phone Booth 2, a work of painstaking labor of embroidery. The more you engage this work there emerge not only certain stages of truths but also certain things that do not want to become so clear. There are some things that must not become clear. Although I have tried to explain the artworks in my own way by contextualizing them, the truths will still remain in the incantation, codes, and dialects that the artists use.

Translation by Young Min Moon