

## A Science Fiction Styled Re-reading of “The Gradual Changes of Korean Art”

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The following is a response to the introductory article entitled “The Gradual Changes of Korean Art” which appeared in the preliminary issue of *forum a* in March, 1998(The part in bold is newly added responses).

### Introduction of *forum a*

Every Sunday at Insa-dong, Young-nam Cho’s song in praise of Insa-dong is heard from speakers attached to the cheap postmodern style streetlights. In this “street of art and traditional culture” which is privileged as a car-free zone once a week, *yut*(traditional Korean candy) sellers, a third-rate fortune-teller, money-grubbing hippies, young people tired of Daehak-roh, drunken “artists,” hobo monks, and tourists who came all the way to enjoy the exotic East are mixed together. On Wednesdays, all the bars become crowded with artists and art people. They do chat on all sorts of subjects, except for art.

This area on other times has the same look as other parts of the city- dense with show-windows, small shops and offices- only with some particular exceptions like Sarubia Tearoom, Kwanhoon Restaurant, and Yong-goong-jang. These three places deserve to be exceptional in that area for their kindness and blunt financial sensibility we hardly see in commercial galleries. Would it be hard to tell artists from ordinary people, just as hard as to identify the group of customers of Sarubia Tearoom? Sure it is hard, because artists are just like ordinary customers of team room in who think that the tearoom gets bored due to someone else, not themselves.

Then what makes them artists? What are the things that took artists’ interest anyway? Doing art as a job is a tough job in its own way, so artists who do art as their profession also experience the same kind of distress as average workers of the society. This is not necessarily bad. Bad thing is that, ironically, art in Korea can be in good terms with the society only when it is not art, and art comes to be isolated right from the moment of being “art” again. In this society, anything identified as “art”, “fine art”, even “serious art” is isolated and pushed into the margin.

**Not long after this article was written, the Sarubia Tearoom has changed its name to “Project Space Sarubia Tearoom,” and Insa-dong has rapidly changed into a *mukja* street(a street full of restaurants and eateries). The singer Young-nam Cho was invited to Gwangju Biennale, and the Korean art world has thus chosen to create an “arty” entertainer for its own good. While art was trying to lean on the society by being a not-art rather than totally forgotten by being art, art has found itself become really not-art. In hindsight, art and artworks, because of that very choice, have become peripheral to the art world, and the art world has become more peripheral to the world. Things got complicated. We have much more things to do in a sophisticated way.**

### What does *forum a* do?

In the field of art and culture in this country, we have an undeniable preconception that to discuss success and value of a certain artwork is “careless” and too “premature”. Fine art teachers fill in their storages with new pieces while emptying out their heads. Those teachers bring up art students who are only busy with hands, with their mouths shut. When such students take over teaching post, this time they deliver students who we would thank them for keeping their mouths shut.

Art cannot be an exception from the economic formula of low-cost plus high-efficiency. For this, it is vital to reduce the number of artists and increase that of words and languages. In other words, the number of galleries should be reduced, but the duration of exhibitions should be extended; the number of art colleges reduced by half, but the number of studios should be doubled. On the contrary, what we see here is, as the number of artists grows, the duration of exhibitions is shortened; if more studios would keep coming down to basement like this, art might fall into a private little fashion show for the bourgeoisie or a bombastic show-offs of second-rate wrestlers. Mere gestures and sinister gossips take the place of a serious critique, discussion and debate. The gestures and gossips are nourished by cheap show business and show-offs.

Instead, *forum a* seeks to bring in more words through seminars, forums, symposia, round-tables, catalogues in the art world of Korea, and wants these events to stand independently as an artistic practice rather than being merely supporting events of an exhibition. This is not just to guard art criticism from those critics who only have power and authority without any political, philosophical nor aesthetic stance. Rather, this resolution comes from the awareness of urgency in this field that criticism should be cultivated and brought back into our everyday activities. Art criticism, only when it becomes a part of natural everyday

activities far from a self-conscious act of judgment, can be a healthy base and a crucial forming element of the culture. If the foundation gets weakened, then there comes the strong allure and domination of 'trendy word plays and jargons'. Art, as it was degraded and declined, has worn thick make-up with lavish words. *forum a* would close its door to those artists and critics who don't understand this point that words never serve image-making.

**Now the era of silence is over, and that of garrulousness has arrived. Gossip has become truth, and truth has become gossip. Nowadays there are more writers than readers. The amount of printed words exceeds the importance of the content. The same old aircraft, the noise maker still fly up in the air shooting aimless rifles to the down below. We should wisely control the amount of spoken words and keep the quality and value of the words. I wouldn't say that we are appreciating an ultimate freedom of expression, and we don't need to bother ourselves to reach that ultimate degree of freedom. Just let us get nourished by the "good" nutrients of freedom we have achieved so far.**

In other words, this means that artists shouldn't let their art and artworks be mistreated in the muddy battle of rumors and assumptions. Artists should take a thorough care of their works and take the strong responsibility on them. As it began to be easily transferred as a text format or a digital data, art of this times is becoming more available as a piece of information on magazines and internet. Artists need to question themselves whether they, although they dislike to be the object of the consumption of art as a pretty sign, still enjoy the masochistic game and are even anxious to be its winner. Do all these blames should go to art consumers, with partly sharing it with weak art producers, or mostly to those producers with partly to consumers? Can artists argue that they have stood against the system that has deformed, deleted and disregarded their messages? Let alone reforming the systems, have they ever tried 'standing up against the issue' in this phenomenon?

The contemporary art history in Korea has been the example of the hypothesis that what would happen if we are confused of appreciating the ambiguity of art and taking an advantage of the ambiguity of art. Artists have justified themselves with the same old story that, though not perfectly knowing what they are doing, they at least are concerned with all the problems in the world. This chronic negligence spawned a culture without any specific pursuits of whatsoever direction. Of course, *forum a* also learns from this history too. As opposed to the superficial words of the 70's Korean modernism, *forum a* seeks to respect correct grammar. Unlike the high-pitched utterances of the 80's Korean Minjung Art (People's Art), *forum a* wouldn't fall into the victim of doctrinal dilemma. Nor would it be succumbed to the Postmodern pitfall that only mouth is busy while head empty.

**Y2K has passed without any problems. As we entered the 21st century, Korean society as a whole dropped a bomb on language. As language is bombed and tattered, its mode of positive and friendly expression has become blunt and dull. The situation has come that, rather than applying the tool of such devastated language to art, it would be even better to save the language from that state by the help of art. In order for art not to be bound by the limit of language, as an American woman artist rightly described, it would be wise to take simple, direct, fast-flowing, and straight forward forms whose physical presence itself manifest its meaning... Directness is the key of good films to release viewers from the impetus of interpretation....Our role is not to take the most out of an artwork. We shouldn't squeeze more than it says from the artwork....What we are supposed to do as viewers is to trim out the thick content and see the real thing.... Instead of analytics, what we need is an erotics of art."**

### **Who makes *forum a*?**

*forum a* is not run only by those who despair about the Korean art field. It is not an exclusive representation of either of modernists with 'critical' standpoint, realist photographers, art critics with certain positions, serious curators, Minjung artists, conceptual artists, or painters. *forum a*'s acting members are rather mixed in their combination in terms of their perspectives. We don't set a strict line between the progressive/conservative, cultural affluence/weakness. There lies much more complicated relationship between ideological stance as the progressive/conservative and the apparent cultural affluence/weakness. Taking one more step from defying a simple dichotomy of the progress/conservative, *forum a* believes that, depending on the context, 'conservative affluence' can sometimes be more progressive than 'progressive

weakness’.

Those who are involved in *forum a* are, either in their appearance and mind, sure to be serious in their art-related activities. However, there are people who are exempted from this group, such as art historians who waste time on plagiarism issues, artists who do not hate Korean TV programs, and critics who do “flirting reviews” of bad shows for their job. However, we won’t block any dialogue before it happens. But certainly there are people we have no choice but to hate: people who try to stamp *forum a* as a particular interest group advocating a narrow line of ideology and aiming for having power in the Korean art world.

The most important pre-requirement for members of *forum a* is a mutual acknowledgement of very qualified art and art criticism. That is the *raison d’être* of a meaningful artists’ organization, and actually the only standard, which unfortunately is very vague in a way. It IS vague because this is no other than a pure reflection of multiple mutual relationships based on subjective evaluations of each members. Nevertheless, our sincere inquiries on exhibitions and discussions in *forum a*, specially thinking of its potential development into an agenda, should never be shadowed by pointless argument on the vague standard of “qualified” art and criticism.

We are sure that there are much more people who agree with the goal of *forum a* than current regular members. Therefore, we don’t necessarily work for popularity or expansion of *forum a*. In other words, we question what on earth means being member/non-members anyway once they agree to what we think. *forum a* is merely a forum or organization of very different people who share the same purpose. Not only do we care about characteristics lying among the members, but we also take into account of the differences between members/potential members outside. *forum a* is a kind of metaphorical organization where the part implies the whole. In that sense, we emphasize the psychological and intellectual solidarity of internal and external aspect of each member.

There are three kinds of *forum a* members; first, members who agree to the mission of *forum a* and want to participate in its activities; second, non-members who act like members even though their names are not on the membership list; finally, members who pay a membership fee but do not want to participate in any of its activities. If only they also don’t care that much about registration as a member/non-member, all these three kinds of members can be ideal forms of membership. What is ultimately important is whether they agree with the mission of *forum a* and participate its programs. The logic goes when they participate in the activities of *forum a*, they are members; and when they don’t, they aren’t. If they read regularly our newsletter, they are members; if they don’t, they are not. *forum a* is first, not an office, second, nor a membership list.

The real substance of *forum a* is a latitude connecting the members’ brains and hearts, which is a protocol normally connected by fax machines, telephones, letters, or emails; in special occasions, connected by round table discussions, seminars, symposia, and workshops. Today, communication is much more important than solidarity, so setting an email address and a fax machine without an office is much more efficient and reliable than occupying an empty office hanging out a huge signboard.

**As the fuel tank of a starship empties, the crew is at an individual crossroad. Should they invent a new fuel? Is life that long? The opinion of waiting to see what the 5th generation will do has gained its persuasiveness, but the decision was made too early or simply we’ve been waiting too long. There are no special or definite changes that come about, and the starship begins to orbit like a ghost. Down on the earth, a starship junk-processing plant and its specialists are waiting for its fall.**

### **Why does *forum a* publish a newsletter?**

The “Street Journal” that *forum a* publishes every other month is the voice of this gathering. It is planning to deal with current issues in contemporary art. The editors of *forum a* agree on two issues: first, at least as for the issues related to the systems in art, the range of criticism should be drawn from prior to/outside contemporary art; second, the supreme priority in art should be placed on actual artworks. The former issue should be dealt on the level of active engagement, and the latter should be realized as a concrete criticism.

### 1) Criticism of Art System and Art Institution

We are well aware of the limit of media in its dealing with such issues as art education, art journalism, art museums, public art, art systems, art sales, art organizations and the politics in art. We also understand the reasons behind this. Therefore, it is clear what *forum a* has to do as an independent journal. We are also aware that it is easy for our criticisms to sound like weak self-assertions of arrogant losers, as we can see

from the case that art system criticism couldn't even make any change in a commercial gallery's conventional weekly renting system. Therefore, it seems that criticism of the art system has only strengthened its strictness rather than coming up with new ways of critical articulation. As much as the system is stubborn, its criticism has to become intransigent as well.

Simply put, the art systems have not changed, nor is its criticism. Instead of the tedious stubbornness of criticism, we need to come up with ways to 'defamiliarize the system', by which we can view old issues anew. In this situation where the system criticism itself is fixed as another system, we need to take away a system from its supporting structure and examine it. This would be a genuine kind "alternative" approach that we can think of as restored of its intrinsic boldness. If our criticism is not furnished with enough intensity, concreteness, new ways of approach and strategies, appropriate styles and rhetoric, then perhaps we should at least hope to access the systems from a fresh perspective.

Even in this weak structure of Korean art, *forum a* has no choice but to have a tense relationship with the entire system and institution in general. If possible, however, it can negotiate and compromise with the system and receive support from it. We do not need to deny that *forum a* is also a small system itself. Actually, we reject a system only when it has something that is valuable within it, no matter how minimal that is. In that sense, the key is not rejection but 'negation.' If we give up arguing for any possible change or improvement of the system, it would be a simple hypocrisy or a burst of anger actually rooted in hot envy of the Western avant-garde. In that sense, we need to look at how much of the minimum amount of a positive system exists in Korean art that deserves to be rejected.

The key strategy is to impede the "systematization" of culture, and at the same time, to encourage "culturalization" of system. Towards this, while we hold in contempt the immature cynicism and the clumsy conspiracies of freedom fighters, we should also strictly detach ourselves from "Korean manner of politeness" which keeps calm moderation even to a system's pretentious smiles.

Purpose-driven strategies and the complicated arrangement clash with the "erotics of art" which is based on intuition. The question is how far--with a totality of senses rather than by strategy--should we fight against the institutionalization of culture, and to what degree can we turn the institution into culture? This is not a disgraceful calculation based on a line of compromise. It is rather, a movement towards eroticizing the system.

## 2) Criticism of Artworks

While criticism of systems requires simplification and invention of problem solutions, criticism of artworks aims for an enrichment and complexity of information and intellectual content. We sincerely hope that criticism's longing for diversity and differences is not understood as same as a simple taste for different preferences. We also hope that the pursuit of singularity and individual style is not taken as a cynicism towards critical categories or positions. In the same context, we do not place simple objectivity on top of deep subjectivity, or place shallow subjectivity on top of sincere empirical research.

*forum a* counts specificity as the most important, that is, a sort of higher categorical virtue of criticism. The chronic problem in the field of Korean art criticism is that interpretation of artworks heavily depends on countless outside references. Instead of examining the motivation or the creative condition of the work in reality, critics tend to apply the vocabulary of the western art history or the western ideologies to the artwork in a narrow sense. Although the ideas of the West can broaden the interpretation of art, there are some cases to produce opposite results. There can be many different analyses about this symptom, but *forum a* would count the lack of specificity of interest, specificity of language, and specificity of realistic goals as the major reason. The loss of specificity turns the language, and eventually, the way of thinking in criticism into a pretext for something, by which criticism is degraded into a means to make a living or one's name in the world.

Writing with specificity means indicating why such and such exhibition is important and what piece makes the exhibition important. In *forum a* newspaper, therefore, unimportant pieces, though they are made by very important artists, cannot become a subject of criticism, whereas important artworks of not-so-important artists grab our critical attention. Also, we do not deal with the connections between artists unless they are referring to any aesthetic connection between artworks. We reform the value and topography of art into that centering exclusively on exhibitions and artworks, and this might result in clashing or eroding the conventional and vulnerable structure of the Korean art world.

In this contemporary Korean art world where art theories and art criticism are seriously contaminated by systems and ideologies, we are encouraged to find even the slightest and partial agreements from disagreements. Though we might even come across a deep-rooted breaches beneath the micro agreements, this, *forum a* is sure to believe, would help us accomplish a specificity of criticism.

**Before an artwork is about something, it is something. When we talk about art, we still have that chronic disease starting from a “background information” of an artwork to using cliché expressions in a textbook. A critic’s vague language baffles an interpreter. The starship failed to cut through this invincible self-protection wall. Yeon-am Park Jee, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century realist philosopher described on specificity in a mother tongue Korean. “Ah! there is no darker black than the feathers of the crow. Then all of a sudden, it illuminates in opaque gold and then it shines in emerald green. When the sun shines, it turns into violet. It flickers in my eyes, then is turned into a jade color. So I can call it a blue crow or a red crow. It does not have one set of colors but that which I decide with my eyes. There is one color, but its illumination can have many hues. Although its form is one, its poses can be multiple. Critics, thou should know that thy specific words and texts describe such multiple illuminations and poses.”**

### To make *forum a* successful

In order to achieve what *forum a* wants to, there are a few conditions to be fulfilled.

First, we at *forum a* want others--except for those who have already decided to look down on us--to see our “modest” wish as it is. The “modest” wish of *forum a* is to set out an ambiguous, complicated, and long-term task of reforming the value of art. Positioning itself at the counterpoint of today’s art system which tends to operate like an entertainer management system, *forum a* wants to start its activities by holding small yet substantial meetings, instead of organizing spectacular but empty events. In a long term, these small activities will contribute to laying the foundation of art and culture in Korea.

Secondly, for *forum a* to continue to publish its newsletters and hold discussions, people with better conditions are asked to make unconditional donations to us. Actually, there are only four motives behind those rich people’s investment in culture. 1) interest as a culture business or a tryout of cultural investment for income share, 2) tax-exemption, 3) promotion of a corporate image or an advertisement effect, 4) philanthropy. Whatever the motive is, *forum a* wouldn’t refuse it as long as they don’t interfere with our creative work. And the last motivation, philanthropy, is most ideal to be sure. While fulfilling the requirement of all the necessary paperworks and documentations, *forum a* will squarely make our demands that “you-whether it be the government, a foundation, or individuals have to pay us.” Are we artists supposed to be bold enough in that regard anyways? *forum a* is looking forward to sponsors from diverse sources.

Thirdly, which would be the most important point, *forum a* is a kind of social club or a platform for exchange, communication and preparation; where actual art-related activities happen with sharing their information each other, and work for fresh concepts and methods to be germinated. By constantly producing cultural issues and debates in the art world, *forum a* aims to initiate a serious art movement that can be realized and experienced in everyday life, going beyond being a self-sufficient study group. This is something that people who openly or potentially agree to *forum a* should seriously recognize before approaching us. If we can’t find artists or art movements that would lead us into a new era of art, what is all this for anyway, other than making endless complaints, getting angry or ashamed at each other about Korean art?

*forum a*, just as we know how to distinguish between real despair and habitual despair in the reality of art, we can also distinguish between the despair at the reality and the possibilities of art. We should say that we are optimistic on the future of art. Compared to any other sectors of contemporary society, art is still a creative activity grounded on freedom. Once a German artist declared that capital and art are same, by which he ultimately meant to save art from the social systems. Thus by even using hostile acting measures, artists have defended art in all the ways they could think of. We shouldn’t forget this.

Editorial Board

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**Amid the flood of information, the use of irony is not so effective anymore. It is more difficult to positively affirm art than to be hostile towards it. Exaggeration is better to cope with than malice. Art is not capital, and it should not despair at the reality either. The gestures of fatigue, excess of irony, thinking for thinking, art for art that does not support art, the materialized mind, the loss of naivety and erotic..these are what still lingers in today’s Korean art scene as tenacious problems.**

**A phantom in the starship *forum a* still orbiting, 2006.**

