



Yeondoo Jung, *Evergreen Tower*, 2001, C-type print, 30 x 45cm

Locality & Mobility: Australia & South Korea tandem-style

NATALIE KING & ALEXIE GLASS-KANTOR WITH EMILY CORMACK

In May 2012, a group of key thinkers in arts from Australia and South Korea gathered together at the invitation of Arts Victoria and the Department of Business and Innovation to discuss the future of creative cross-cultural collaboration between the two countries. This closed colloquium was recorded with a view to creating a tangible document that could act as both a summation of activity to date, as well as envisioning future pathways for collaboration between South Korea and Australia.

Chaired by Alexie Glass-Kantor, Director, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, and Natalie King, Director, Utopia@Asialink, the discussion included artists, curators, cultural workers and museum directors from both countries. The conversation maintained a breadth of perspectives as well as being grounded in real experiences, which gave the group concrete examples to discuss and measure against.

Over the past decade, there has been substantial increase in cultural traffic between Australia and South Korea culminating in the 2011 Australia-South Korea Year of Friendship, which generated a number of exhibitions and initiatives between the two countries. As such, this workshop came at a crucial time when Australia-Korea relations had gained momentum, allowing for critical reflection on projects from the past, and providing opportunities for robust discussion about new strategies for ongoing engagement.

CULTURAL CROSSOVER & CONVERGENCE

The bedrock of the discussion revolved around key

questions: Why should these two countries work together? What are the points of crossover and convergence and how might their resonance be deepened to ensure longevity? The workshop highlighted a number of points of intersection apparent through shared projects and discussions, proving that in order to understand one another's cultures and to uncover such moments of cultural confluence, it was important to actually collaborate.

Whilst today's cultural environment is typified by ideas of deterritorialisation and mobility, Australia and South Korea are countries very much defined by their borders. Australia is an island continent and South Korea borders water on three sides with its contentious North Korean border on the fourth. With borders acting as buffer zones that mediate traffic in and out of a country, South Korea and Australia share an isolationist's independence. This independence has led to the development of strong cultural languages, that have been fostered through thriving institutional and independent art scenes in both countries that reflect, as Alexie Glass-Kantor stated within the discussion, 'a degree of initiation, a degree of the kind of instinct to move forward even when you don't know exactly where you're going'.

This idea has been captured by the establishment of Utopia@Asialink, an itinerant platform for engagement in a pan-Asian network of cities that converse and collaborate. As Director of Utopia@Asialink, Natalie King explained: 'The word utopia comes from Greek origins and it refers to no place, no fixed address. It's this idea of borderlessness that is of great interest to utopia; a kind of paradise, somewhere that's in the imagination, which is of course central to the work that we all do.'



(clockwise from top left):
1/ Participants at the Locality and Mobility colloquium, Artsonje Center, Seoul, 10 May 2012; image Artsonje Center © Samuso; see endnote for participant details

2/ Royce Ng, *The Ballad of Zebadiah Arrington*, 2012, single channel HD animation, 7min: 49sec; image courtesy the artist

3/ Andrew McQualter, *Untitled, A Partial Index*, acrylic paint on wall, bookshelf, dimensions variable; installed as part of *City Within the City* at Artsonje Center, Seoul, 12 November 2011 to 1 January 2012; image Artsonje Center © Samuso

For South Korea, the issue is more to do with its position within the rest of Asia where, as Jin-Sang Yoo, Art Director of Seoul Media City Biennial 2012, explains:

We are borrowing from the West to describe ourselves and our artistic practice. Since change is happening so fast in this country and we are very familiar with it, Asian changes at this point of time are very significant. We don't know what will be coming – we don't know if China will become an important factor. These things are great risks, but at the same time a big chance. Not only in politics and economics, but also for culture.

This sense of agitation was a common sentiment. As artist Patricia Piccinini pointed out: 'I think we're similar in that we both look to the centres. We both look to New York and Germany and London and they ignore us. They don't know anything about us.'

Each country has a strong culture in itself; both feel some kind of cultural agitation where they are looking elsewhere for validation, and acclaim. Both South Korea and Australia also share an emphasis on their own territory and borders at odds with the current trends towards mobile and globalised approaches to contemporary art, but which ensures a balanced, empathetic collaborative relationship.

BILATERAL ACTIVITY & NETWORKS

Last year's Australia and South Korea Year of Friendship events built on and consolidated previous activities ensuring that these relationships were cemented and new ones extended. It also allowed for some critical reflection on the mature relationship between South Korea and Australia to date.

The 2011 Australia and South Korea Year of Friendship gave rise to a number of projects including *Tell*

Me, Tell Me, a collaborative exhibition between the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney and the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul. Asialink toured *Face to Face: Portraiture in the Digital Age* at the Seoul Museum of Art, and *Selectively Revealed* at Aram Art Gallery in Goyang. There were also reciprocal residencies, including Artspace in Sydney and Changdong Art Centre – run through Asialink, Gertrude Contemporary and Geumcheon Arts Centre. More recently, Glass-Kantor and Sunjung Kim developed an expanded curatorium for the project *City Within a City* at Artsonje, Seoul and Gertrude Contemporary.

Prior to the Year of Friendship there had been several important projects, that it became clear through the course of the discussion, had been defining moments in the careers of many artists and curators. For Piccinini, for example, it was in Korea that her work first gained international recognition: 'In 1999 I met Kim Hong-Hee in Melbourne, because she came to Melbourne and she saw my work. I was in the *Gwangju Biennale* in 2000. This was a very important exhibition for me and in fact I think it marks the beginning of my international practice. Interestingly, I then exhibited the same work at the *Berlin Biennale* and it wasn't seen in Australia, it was seen here in Korea.'

At the heart of many of the earlier cross-cultural projects was funding and support from Asialink. One pivotal early (2004-05) exhibition, curated by Sarah Tutton and Glass-Kantor, entitled *I Thought I Knew But I Was Wrong –New Video Art From Australia*, was the first time many now internationally recognised Australian artists were seen outside Australia including Piccinini and Shaun Gladwell.

Kim Hong-Hee, Director, Seoul Museum of Art, explained her relationship with Asialink:

I build up another layer of relationship with Asialink. We worked together on reciprocal production between

our two country's artistic activities. I think Asialink and Korean alternative spaces contributed to promote the Korean art scene from the mid-'90s and the effect of the collaboration and the alternative activities changed the typography of the Korean art scene since the new generation artists replaced the position of the mid-career or the master artist, who represent Korean art in the museum and galleries.

Central to Asialink's activities to date has been a series of residencies in Korea, in which many participants in the discussion had some involvement. The direct and repeated contact initiated through residencies was seen as extremely beneficial to establishing enduring relationships. This idea was shared by Kim Bo Young, Cultural Relations Manager, Australian Embassy, Korea, who explained:

I think it takes time and it's a long-term support for ongoing conversations ... It's more a sustainable long-term thing, how we learn from each other. It's more that cultural relations are based on people-to-people relationships, cultural exchanges. We try to look – as a person who supports this scene behind, I watched how we can support the second level of collaboration towards a sustainable and deeper level.

Whilst many larger institutions are not able to be as responsive as smaller contemporary art spaces, it was acknowledged that sometimes it is from within these larger national institutions that frameworks for collaboration and ongoing commitments to cross-cultural dialogue are cemented.

Sarah Tutton, Curator, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, who worked on an exchange exhibition (*Living Together is Easy*, 2004) with Japan through Asialink and the National Gallery of Victoria, referred to this model as one with potential for Korea: 'It did acknowledge how slow it was to get institutions of that size to make something happen without there being an outcome such as an exhibition. Those big organisations are probably the only way to get something done ...'

For Frances Lindsay, Deputy Director, National Gallery of Victoria, the connections and crossovers between the two countries are more strategic exhibition exchanges and collection based:

In 1999 with Sunjung as curator, working in collaboration with a curator from the NGV, Jason Smith, we did an exhibition that looked at contemporary Korean art called *Slowness of Speed*. When we opened our European gallery, in its refurbished forms, we re-opened the new building with an exhibition called *World Rush* featuring the work of Lee Bul ... But some of the other noted Korean artists [in our collection] are Nam June Paik, with two works, but we also have this very impressive and quite amazing installation by Lee Bul, which we acquired from the exhibition *World Rush* in 2003. We have more recently acquired some Korean photography. We look forward to engaging more directly with both increasing our collection of Korean art, particularly in the area of contemporary art and, of course, to do exhibitions and other exchanges.

Major international exhibitions in Korea, such as the *Busan Biennale* and the *Gwangju Biennale* have a regional focus, whereby the curators make a concerted effort to feature Australian and New Zealand artists. 'In terms of the *Busan Biennale*, which I have been doing for

more than seven or eight years, I had a kind of regional focus which was mainly New Zealand and Australia. That's why I invited eight Australian artists for that event', affirmed Park Man-Woo, Director, Nam-June Paik Art Center, Seoul.

Sunjung Kim, Director Samuso and co-Artistic Director of the 2012 *Gwangju Biennale*, has invited Ben Armstrong and Craig Walsh to participate in Gwangju as well as Royce Ng who has been living there for two years. Reflecting on her relationship to institutional frameworks, Kim explained: 'I started at Artsonje in 2004 then I became commissioner for the Korean pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* 2005. Afterwards, I founded SAMUSO, which means 'office', as I wanted to work independently from institutions and connect with other museums and projects.'

The sheer number of projects, residencies, co-publications and collaborations between Australia and South Korea, including those outside the scope of this article-discussion, is testament to a willingness to work together.

STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES OF AUSTRALIAN & SOUTH KOREAN PARTNERSHIPS

The discussion brought to light many strengths as well as revealing complexities in the relationship between South Korea and Australia. It was commonly acknowledged that there has been a tremendous amount of goodwill that has accumulated over time through ongoing connections.

Key challenges that became apparent throughout the discussion were in relation to securing adequate funding but there was also a digression about philosophical approaches to cross-cultural collaborations: whether influence should come from within a country or from outside? What ethical issues arise when we 'embed' ourselves in another's culture, and through creating work in response to an immediate environment?; a position reflected in artist Royce Ng's statement:

The alternate strategy, and it's the one I generally adopt, is to work site-specifically, which isn't particularly innovative, so many artists do that. But I really like the idea of [being] like an anthropologist, it's like fieldwork. You embed yourself in the place where you're working, try and learn as much as you can and make a work which reflects the environment.

This approach was countered by Piccinini:

I can see why you do what you do and I can see the value of it. But I would never imagine that I could do that. I am an artist, so what I do will always be rooted in my own experience. I don't imagine I could learn enough in two months or even two years to really understand any culture, let alone one as complex and different as Korean culture. I feel that to presume that I could tell Koreans about Korea is somewhat patronising. What I can do is reflect on how it appears to an outsider, which may or may not be interesting to them.

There was consensus that government work to establish bilateral agreements take into account the value of relationships evolving over time, and to allow for artists like Piccinini, who work at a fairly ambitious scale, as well as for artists like Royce whose work is more intimate. Reciprocity was also at the forefront of the discussion. Artist and curators alike found it difficult to maintain a

relationship when there was only funding for one aspect of the project, which leads inevitably to an inequality in the way the project evolves, and which doesn't encourage true collaborative exchange.

FUTURE PATHWAYS

Key to these discussions has been an emphasis on the establishment and support of a framework that allows for mobility and flexibility, whilst still focusing on ideas of locality particularly in relation to funding structures.

Most significant among these were some ideas introduced by Hong-Hee Kim, particularly her notion of a 'post-museum':

The post-museum implies a post-conventional and post-institutional art museum. SeMA is developing an ambivalent operating program, which gives importance to multiplicity and complicity over unitarity, and to convergence and interdisciplinary over solitariness. The new outlook covers the spectrum of locality and globality, popularity and expertise, classicality and modernity and authenticity and automativeness. SeMA also promotes the participatory community project to expand the cultural base, and expands the museum's role as social communicator and cultural educator. We have to go global and local.

Likewise, Sunjung established SAMUSO – a roving, borderless curatorial office, which has the ability to work on all aspects of a creative project, and is not necessarily tied by national priorities. Sunjung explains:

SAMUSO became a curatorial program and we facilitated education programs for Artsonje and other institutions. We work closely with foundations on programming and develop collaborative projects with other institutions in Europe and America. We are working inside of Korea and also outside of Korea. My concern is how to reflect the local aspect into the program. We try to mix different kinds of platforms so everybody can join and collaborate.

Another potential framework is that employed by Gertrude Contemporary's cross-cultural and collaborative *The Independence Project* whereby every year, Gertrude collaborates with a partner institution in the Asia Pacific region to produce a reciprocal exchange exhibition, where all the artists travel to participate in the exhibition and undertake residencies, participate in forums, workshops and discussions. Glass-Kantor explains: 'With these projects, we try to seek something that's a shared critical concern, outside of [national] identity.'

Asialink's new initiative, Utopia, also offers a platform that is open enough, yet sufficiently institutionally affiliated so that it can manage the complex demands of a cross-cultural collaboration that is both mobile, and yet grounded in the local. As Natalie King outlines:

Utopia is an itinerant platform for engagement, a pan-Asian network of cities who converse and collaborate. At this point, there are five cities who are working together: Melbourne, Tokyo, Singapore, Seoul and New Delhi. It's a conversation, across borders, between collaborators, across cities and time zones. Our collaborators are Mr Imamura from Tokyo Wonder Site, Tan Boon Hui from the Singapore Art Museum, Deeksha Nath from New Delhi, and Sunjung. Utopia is an incubator for cross-cultural thinking, ideas and working methodologies. We think about projects that have mobility embedded in them, and at this point, we are developing affiliations and convergences with art fairs, conferences and biennales. We're finding ways to infiltrate the existing systems to induce a non-hierarchical, flat model.

Another mode that seems to have currency in this debate is the idea of the publication, which as King explains:

It's very expensive to produce books in Australia. But maybe there are cross-cultural publishing initiatives that we could work on together, whether it's critical writing, interviews – a publication has an afterlife and it can be circulated quite widely. Staff exchanges are another potential area for investigation whereby arts managers can accrue knowledge and experience by working in counterpart institutions.

Whilst the discussion is not without its points of friction, the overwhelming sense from the colloquium was that the nodes of convergence, and the crossovers in culture are furthered in a meaningful way: 'I think cultural exchange can be complex, but it doesn't have to be a burden', enthuses Glass-Kantor.

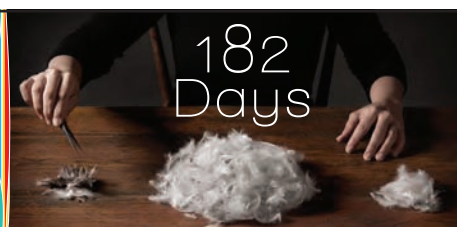
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 Locality and Mobility | Discussing the future for collaboration between Australia and South Korea was presented by Utopia@Asialink, Gertrude Contemporary, National Gallery of Victoria with Artsonje Centre and Samuso, on 20 May 2012 at Artsonje Centre in Seoul. Participants: KIM Sunjung, Director, Samuso; Kim Hong-Hee, Director, Seoul Museum of Art; Park Man-Wo, Director, Nam-June Paik Art Center; Yoo Jin-Sang, Art Director, Seoul Media City Biennial 2012; Kim Inhye, Curator, National Museum of Contemporary Art Korea; Jung Yeondoo, Artist; Kim Bo-Young, Cultural Relations Manager, Australian Embassy, Korea; Alexie Glass-Kantor, Director & Senior Curator, Gertrude Contemporary; Natalie King, Director, Utopia@Asialink, University of Melbourne; Frances Lindsay, Deputy Director, National Gallery of Victoria; Royce Ng, Australian artist based in Seoul; Patricia Piccinini, Artist; Sarah Tutton, Curator, Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI); Observers: Claire Fitchett, Manager, Trade Engagement – North Asia, Department of Business and Innovation, State Government of Victoria; Clem Newton-Brown MP, Member for Prahran

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 This article was compiled and edited by **Natalie King** and **Alexie Glass-Kantor** with Emily Cormack.



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