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## The DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) Movement as Cultural Performance

Presently we live in an era of high technology. We could watch, sitting in our living rooms, the G7 summit conference on our TV sets. We've come to feel that this is an era, literally, of a "global village." The purpose of this paper is to examine the questions of what is the desirable function of art and what is the artist's role in our current cultural and social contexts. I would like to inquire into the relationship between art, artists, and society specifically in relation to the DMZ movement that is quickly developing in Korea.

In ancient society, art was not separate from life. To put it simply, art was life and life was art. This phenomenon was common across cultures, East or West. This is evident in the Greek word "dromenon," literally translated as "a thing done," from which is derived the genre of art that we now call drama. When we relate the broad meaning of this word to rituals common in performance, we can discern the historical attempt to recover the whole of life by employing art.

The art history of the West has been a history of differentiation. For two thousand years since the ancient Greek civilization, art, religion and science have been institutionalized into their own autonomous domains. This process of differentiation, intensified after the birth of modernity, rendered the whole prospect of human life opaque in the end. Today we wonder, to where has all the art evaporated? Is art serving its social function as a ritual purgation, as assumed in ancient society? Here lies a problematic situation which confronts today's art. We need to keep an eye on the series of flows of art that appear as careful attempts to address this problematic situation. Performance is one of these attempts.

We cannot discuss performance without talking about the concept of presence. Performance opposes the kinds of representation most other artistic fields accepts without question. It resists the secure frames of discourse that every genre of art has advanced in original forms as well as in diversified media. Performance stands, so to speak, directly in front of the spectators. And the work unfolds as a process in specific time and space. In a performance, what the artist wants to show the audience is not a product, but the process itself. Let us look into the question of what forms this process has taken in modern society.

Any attempt to define performance is bound to result in failure despite endless efforts by scholars, critics and art theorists. Performance itself rejects definition, because it is always in the process of transformation. Various classifications and definitions proposed by art theorists of the past have failed to consider performance wholly. Performance, we could say, will never reveal its

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nude. In this respect my previous statement that "performance stands in front of the spectators" should be altered: in the extended performances that we see today, it is difficult for the receiver (or the audience) to discern the appearance of the addresser (or the performer).

Found drama attempted by Testamorbida, a Russian producer and actor, is a good precedent of the efforts to narrow the gap between art and reality. Tired of the existing methods of abolishing the boundary between life and art, Testamorbida attempted to free himself from the false artificiality of drama, by taking as the subject matter of his work mundane occurrences during a given evening in a certain home in Astoria that was chosen by shooting an arrow at a map of the village. It was a perfect performance without any artificiality or trained acting. The actors were ordinary citizens, and the content of the drama was filled with the everyday lives of such people.

What is conspicuous here is the absence of so-called spectators. Such a phenomenon proposes an interesting question regarding performance. Where do today's spectators exist? They are in homes, offices, workshops, airports and bus terminals. What makes them receivers (spectators)? It is mass media made possible by technology: cable and satellite television, video, the Internet, as well as more traditional modes of transmission like newspapers and magazines. Artists in today's society of consumption and mass media achieve their artistic vision through these very same media. These artistic strategies could be called behavioristic arts in that they permeate reality, and expand through education, publication, public relations, broadcasting, demonstration and various kinds of planning activities. Let us review several examples of such activities.

"Carnival Knowledge," for instance, carries out collective work composed of continuous street bazaars, exhibitions and other public events whose themes are feminism and gender inequality.

Through a graffiti work called *The Enormous Wall of Los Angeles*, Judy Baca is painting a history of Third-World immigrants living in California and is teaching the youths of the area its history. In addition, it continues to do social work to address the problems of youths living in poverty-stricken slums.

Performance groups participating in Women's House of Los Angeles, such as "Waitress," "Mother Art," and "SOS (Sisters of Survival)," deal with specific problems of the relationship between capital and labor, nuclear disarmament, and sexual discrimination.

In Korea, similar activities of cultural and artistic creation, for example, the operation of art schools for laborers in industrial complex areas, are being



developed as a means of reforming society through continuous self-reflection and renewal. However, one thing hindering the effectiveness of such programs is the lack of power to reach a wider segment of society, to permeate a larger cultural field. In other words, the methods of expansion and dissemination must develop to match our current era of technology and mass media.

Most of the "proposal pieces," which appeared in America in the '70s could achieve a part of their goals by utilizing the TV broadcast system. Activities of the "SLA (Symbionese Liberation Army)," known as Guerrilla Political Group, must be the most famous among them. The proposal pieces of this group, whose major projects were serving food to the poor, could be completed by active spectators, among them the police bureau of San Francisco, the millionaire family Hearst, several charity groups, wholesale food dealers, the poor themselves and the press. Thus, with its well organized project, the group managed to attract the focus of the media.

The phenomenon of such behavioristic performances unfolding in various ways is a product of society. In other words, it could be said that the inner and outer situation of a society yields diverse forms like these. Artists resist and challenge the problems and contradictions of society, by mobilizing diverse media as well as their own acute imagination.

These movements, closely related to the concept of cultural democracy, asserts their right to get in contact with, and participate freely in, the expression of their will. And an aesthetic foundation of these activities is rooted in the view of art as an activity of communication. This attitude of seeing art as communication was well expressed in the late Joseph Beuys' project "FIU (Free International University)" practiced at Documenta in Kassel. The project essentially established an educational system through which anyone could work more actively and creatively in society, free of the rigid uniformity of educational systems devised by nations anxious to create only "specialists." Beuys' thoughts on this issue was clearly shown in a paragraph of his report submitted to the EEC (European Economic Community).

Creativity is not confined only to those who practice one of the traditional forms of arts. And for artists also, creativity is not confined only to artistic training. Every one of us possesses potential energy of creation hidden by the competitive spirit and the oppressed pursuit for success. To recognize, to explore and to develop this potential energy are the role of this school.

Beuys revealed a risky situation of discourse which could appear in a



technological society intent on increasing specialization. He tried to address this situation, including political, economic, educational, moral and environmental aspects of modern society, by gathering the experiences and lively knowledge of people from diverse fields working in various jobs. And he believed that these projects could acquire a force of practice through discussions.

"Proposal project," "practical attitude (taking an active hand in life)," and "discussion project" surveyed above could be regarded as continuing efforts to strip the established arts of their false skin and image, and to narrow the gap between art and life.

DMZ Movement as cultural performance is a proposal project. At first, this cultural movement, initiated by artists in 1991, when Korean society had not completely escaped the shadow of military culture, was regarded as a naive effort. But even in the early '80s, even before it took on a concrete form, the movement had generated a far-reaching consensus among Korean intellectuals about using DMZ as a means of focusing attention on the issue of national reunification. With the 1988 Seoul Olympics providing momentum, ways of utilizing DMZ as a "national park" or a "natural park" were proposed in round-table talks and studies in arts magazines like *Space* (Seoul) and in the columns of the major daily newspapers. Such discussions moved into the political arena, and in 1988 Kim Dae-Jung, the president of the Commoners' Party, proposed the construction of a natural park and "Unification Stadium." Following suit, then Korean president Roh Tae-Woo, in his speech to a general assembly of the UN, made a similar proposal for the construction of "The City of Peace." In 1989, the National Unification Board (a government organ devoted to national reunification research) issued a report of its survey and research on the ecology of DMZ, and the movement took on a political dimension.

DMZ is a vast strip of land, 248 km long and 4 km wide — the "waist" of the Korean peninsula — partitioned off as a result of the Korean War (1950-53). Its more direct cause, however, was World War II. By the Moscow Agreement made in December 1945, the Korean peninsula was divided into South and North at 38-degrees north latitude. DMZ, a product of the Cold War between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union, is, according to Lee Bann, a central figure in the DMZ Movement, "a land of pain, a history of disgrace, a space of silence," and symbolizes irrevocable loss to the Korean people. To this day, the families of ten million scattered during the Korean War are living on opposite sides of this political wall, ignorant of one another's life and death.



The cultural movement of DMZ has as its essential concern, the altering of the symbolic meaning of DMZ. This movement, arising after the end of the Cold War, is resonating throughout the society of Korean intellectuals. According to Professor Lee Si-Jae, it is in the process of changing into "a symbol of life, peace, creation and hope, from the land of pain, disgrace and silence." In a study for the DMZ exhibition, he wrote as follows:

DMZ is a product of the Cold War for "armed peace." And this land of about one thousand square kilometers signifies that all other lands, along with it, are also armed areas. DMZ makes us aware that we are spending our everyday lives in a space of militarization, armament and fortification. The peace of the Korean peninsula that DMZ hoped to support was a peace sustained by armed forces, and was like a "Pax Romana" in which each seizes his own, establishing his own law and order. A fortified Korean peninsula was sustained by the expansion of armament to suppress war, economic development for competitive survival, the integration of politics and society to maintain a wartime state, and thus DMZ has been in a state of war for "peace."

As mentioned earlier, it was around the early '80s when Korean society opened its eye to the symbolic meaning retained by DMZ. Gaining momentum with the campaign begun by *Space* magazine, which suggested that DMZ be made a memorial park and its natural ecological world preserved, interest in DMZ spread to cultural and artistic circles. Professor Lee Bann's performance entitled *The reunification of water and earth of Halla and Paekdu Mountains*, which took place on top of Halla Mountain (at Baekrokdam, a lake atop the mountain formed by volcanic crater) in the southernmost Korean island of Chejudo, served as a symbolic enactment of the Korean people's collective desire for a peaceful reunification. In this performance, Professor Lee symbolized the day of reunification when Koreans in both the North and the South would meet again, by pouring water taken from Chonjlyeon (a lake divided by the Chinese-North Korean border) of Paekdusan into Baekrokdam of Halla Mountain, thus allowing the spirit of our nation to permeate throughout the entire peninsula. Reunification also became one of the important themes of the "Minjung (People's)" art that swept the Korean art world in the '80s. Various scenes depicting the nation's desire for reunification were commonly depicted in wood block prints and murals produced by individuals as well as by collective efforts. It was in the exhibition of the DMZ Movement that works of Minjung, modernism and post-modernism could be gathered, regardless of aesthetic sect or ideology, under the larger common theme of reunification.



The exhibition of the DMZ Movement, first held in 1991 at the Seoul Arts Center, is now entering its third year. The first was a simple event, but with the establishment of the "Council of DMZ Movement of Art and Culture," it began to widen its scope and scale. Symposiums accompanying the exhibitions formed the basis for interdisciplinary research integrating the philosophy, sociology, cultural anthropology, ecology, environmental studies, architecture and politics of DMZ.

DMZ is a natural treasury. Ironically, though it is a product of the Cold War and the result of humanity's egoism, DMZ has become a unique area of undisturbed nature. For over forty years since the end of the Korean War, this area has been untouched by civilian footsteps, and consequently, it has become home to countless species of rare animals and plants. According to a survey done by biologist Yoon Mu-Bu, 179 kinds of birds, almost half of the 370 kinds found on the Korean peninsula, including a number of endangered species, currently inhabit the armistice area. And the rich virgin forest, well-preserved for forty years in a state of isolation, serves as a good specimen for ecological studies.

From the perspective of performance, DMZ Movement is not only a proposal project but a liminal moment, to borrow the term used by Victor Turner. In furthering the task of creating a new future, free of all the damage and crimes today's humanity inflicts, this movement is in "a state full of potentiality and possibility." When this state leads to the reunification of Korea in the near future, it would be a moment of recovering spontaneity and of departing from the reductionist vision and the anti-natural anthropocentric viewpoint that have thus far rendered nature "an object of development and manipulation."

According to Plato, art is, regrettably enough, separate from reality. He accuses artists of making false images that are three stages away from truth. Moreover, he despises artists for dazzling the minds of art lovers with their work, the shadows of shadows. So, in his Republic, they would be forever banished.

Performance, perhaps, is a unique artistic form that can refute this "imitative" theory of art so powerfully proposed by Plato. Performance endlessly approaches the realities of life, in real space and in specific time. Such aspects of performance directly counters the assertion that "art is a kind of depravity and substitute, and eventually a distorted activity of compensation of those who don't have the ability to realize as they imitate." If nothing else, the basic strategy and methods of performers seek a way to bridge the gap between the image and the realities of life.

DMZ Cultural Movement embodies the Korean desire for reunification. Its

hope is that all the intellectuals of the world, regardless of race, gender or ideology, will pay attention to the Korean peninsula, a small corner of this vast global village. This movement, though begun by few concerned artists in a corner of Seoul, is now an enormous cultural performance. It is broadening its scope of sympathy, expanding its body, and is permeating the realities of life. In the future, the DMZ Movement will continue to expand its breadth of communication and sympathy, demonstrating that art is not merely an ideal, but an organism moving endlessly to realize such an ideal.

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