CLIP/CETL Pedagogic Research Project

SITUATING KOREAN FINE ART PRACTICE IN A WESTERN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

In my role as Post Graduate Theory Coordinator at Chelsea I am responsible for supervising the MA Fine Art Critical Research Papers, the PG Dip Fine Art Critical Essays and for writing and delivering lectures to all the postgraduate students in the shared General Theory Forum. Over the last few years there has been a marked increase in the number of Asian (and particularly Korean) students studying for a postgraduate qualification in Fine Art. My initial academic guidance with regard to accommodating the very different levels of theoretical and art historical knowledge possessed by such a diverse international cohort was to maintain a high-level of academic lecture content based on my own expertise and experience. It has however become increasingly evident that this expertise and experience - despite on ongoing critical engagement with the themes of Globalization and Postmodernism - has been shaped explicitly by Occidental art historical, philosophical and theoretical paradigms that inform the dominant discourses of modern European art school and university education.

As I have grown in experience and knowledge about the different cultural contexts within which our students have developed as artists this situation has become increasingly untenable. I have come to realise how little personal knowledge I have of the historical and cultural backgrounds of our Asian students and the different aesthetic, philosophical and historical models informing their art education. It is an inadequacy that seems to be shared by many of my colleagues in the institution and one with no ready solution at hand.

In 2007 I completed a PG certificate in Art and Design education. It was in response to a debate about learning outcomes on that course that the problem informing this project was brought into sharp focus. Both the MA and PG Dip Fine Art essays share a principle learning outcome:

> 'Articulate a systematic knowledge and understanding of the contemporary and historical context for their practice and related research'.

This outcome raises a stubborn problem regarding the institutional assumptions that underpin it. Which contemporary and historical context do we expect an Asian student to articulate a systematic knowledge and understanding of? Due to an inadequate knowledge of the diverse cultures of Asia and their distinct art histories and contemporary arts and culture the default answer has tended to be 'in a Western context'.

How are we as educators to understand and assess the academic achievements of art students in a contemporary global situation in which the assumed universality of Western art history encounters the very different art histories that have shaped Asian cultures? In the face of an absence of an established discourse of 'Global Art History' must we assume that Western Art history and the socio-cultural milieus in which it evolved are the appropriate contexts in which Asian students should situate their practice? Or is it not we – as educators shaped by the institutional discourses of Western Modernity/Modernism - who should acknowledge that our received modes of thinking must change in response to an increasingly global cultural situation? Is Art History itself not a fundamentally Western invention? Is there an equivalent or alternative Asian model of art history? And to what extent will global art contribute to the disintegration of conventional art history as conceived in the West? Such questions inform the background for this research project.

Central Theoretical Issues

The first theoretical issue concerns the question 'whose history?' It is a question that goes to the heart of received Eurocentric assumptions about art history and how art's historical development is understood in the West. If an Asian student chooses to contextualise their practice in terms of this history then we will expect them to have an extensive and systematic understanding of it, something that a student would not be able to achieve in 35 or 45 weeks (the duration of the Postgraduate Diploma and Masters programs) if they do not have it already. On the other hand if an Asian student chooses to contextualise their practice in relation to an Asian art history then a different art historical knowledge and understanding is required. In this case, being the sole person responsible for supervising the theses, I would not be properly qualified to assess the student's 'systematic knowledge

and understanding' of that history and context. My practical response to this situation has been to establish some kind of compromise position between the different histories. But this is inevitably a compromise that errs on the side of my own experience and expertise which are paradigmatically (though critically) Western. One of the principle questions I hope to address to colleagues in Korea is how this particular issue is understood by artists and educators there? Our shared understandings of the general art historical themes of Modernity/Modernism and Postmodernity/Postmodernism will be of central importance in this regard.

In very basic terms it seems that for Korean students 'Modernism' is understood differently than by European and American students. In the latter case the philosophy of Modernism is understood to be a deeply historical world-view informed by political and philosophical ideals of progressive social transformation which emerged during the Enlightenment. From this perspective Modernism is understood to be the appropriate and necessary responses in the realm of culture to the technological, political and socio-economic changes brought about in European nations and colonies between 1500 and 1900. As Hans Belting notes 'Art history as it was developed for the European model is not a neutral and general tale that could easily be applied to other cultures that lack such a narrative' (Belting, p.64).

The general idea of Art History in the West is explicitly modern in this regard, supported by the idea of progressive social transformation and a universalist and teleological philosophy of history, such as that expounded by Hegel who famously announced the ultimate 'end of History' in the final phase of the Zeitgeist (time spirit), a spirit assumed to be guiding European civilization (and by extension, the world) towards it's ultimate goal.

In very general terms Art History in the West is fundamentally informed by this progressive, developmental and evolutionary story of art which sees one style or movement necessarily giving way to the next more advanced phase and which parallel the stages of societal development. What is important to emphasize here is that it was generally assumed by 'Modern' artists in Europe and its colonies that changes in society as a whole pre-figured changes in art (i.e. artists could only be modern to the extent that their societies were). The myth of the Romantic genius retrospectively served to support this modern story by

suggesting that great artists were 'visionaries' capable of aesthetically pre-empting these changes.

The situation in East Asia has been quite different. Asian societies and cultures did not collectively develop a progressive, evolutionary and utopian theory of art linked directly to societal and technological development. If there is an East Asian art history then it must be thought very differently to a Western one. Yongna Kim's book *20th Century Korean Art* explains how Modernism arrived in Korea via the academies of Japan primarily as a 'Western-style' of painting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a stylistic import Modern Art was geographically, culturally and socially detached for the revolutionary history of social transformation in the West and its teleological theory of history. It is this 'detachment' from a broader and universal theory of historical and social transformation that makes modernism a very different idea in Asian countries than it does in European ones and their colonies. In short in Korea Modernism seems to have been detached from its grounding in Modernity.

One of the most important consequences of this 'disjuncture' (Appadurai) is that Korean students working in a Western-style have a different understanding of the historical continuum that precedes and informs their practices. This understanding has much to do with the deeply complex nature of Korean society and its own history.

In this regard one of the most interesting theoretical issues to come out of my discussions with students is precisely how we are to understand a national history when that history has been subject to so many violent and disruptive over-codings by different ethnic, political and ideological forces. Where and how, in material fact, is the history of Korea and Korean art 'inscribed'? Moreover how are we to understand the particularities of local and/or national histories in relation to the 'grand narrative' of Art History and History in general?

Outline of the Research Project

In order to address the above questions I developed a research project which had two principle components. The first involved liaising with Korean MA Fine Art students who were currently studying at Chelsea. In a number of meetings we discussed how they understood the aforementioned learning outcome and how they had been taught to think about such issues in Korea. This phase of research culminated in a video document of five students discussing their own work in relation to the problem. The second part of the project involved a visit to Seoul to meet with artists, curators and educators to discuss how they understood and approached the problems on which the research project is based. Before leaving for Korea I set up a web-log to report on the findings of my research there and to open the discussion to public online debate
(see http://koreapedagogicalresearchproject.blogspot.com/).

PART ONE
Research Findings

Eight students were involved in the initial stage of the research. Three meetings were arranged to discuss the research topics and to develop the Korean part of the research project. At the meetings it was decided to conduct a series of group tutorials - contextualised by the research questions and taking place at the time of their final show - with five individual students. The tutorials and discussion would be filmed and then edited into a short video forming the basis for discussions with educators, artists and students in Seoul.

The first student interviewed – Luca Sanjun Kim – began discussing his series of abstract paintings (based on the theme of the four seasons) from the perspective of his early childhood experiences while growing up in the natural environment of South Korea. He explained that these early sensual memories of texture and colour gave a 'spontaneous' Korean quality to his paintings despite the formally Western mode of representation. I asked Sanjun if there was anything about his technical approach to painting that might be understood as grounded in a specifically Korean cultural context? He replied that in Korean traditional painting there is a strong emphasis on brush strokes which are executed in 'one stroke' and into which 'strong energy' is channelled. This energy, he believed,

comes from 'the elements'. While discussing an abstract circular diptych Sanjun explained how many people see the symbol of the sun and moon as a strongly Korean motif as it is the central component of the South Korean national flag[1]. He continued to explain that he did not intend to refer to these meanings in his paintings but that they had emerged spontaneously and only later had he recognised their cultural significance. I asked him if he had trained in traditional painting techniques and he said that 'somehow' he had. I then opened the conversation up to the other students.

In an earlier tutorial the student Hyewon Park had explained to me one of the first principles of traditional Korean painting; *'hoe sa hu so'*[2]. Sanjun explained it as a kind of meditation that is used to clear the mind before the painter commits their stroke to the painting surface. I asked him if he proceeded in this way and he said that in fact he did. He explained how in his painting there is a lot of tension between himself and the surface of the canvas because the process requires him to paint one layer of paint in one gesture after which he must wait a whole day for the layer to dry before adding the next. He has to know before he commits to the stroke that it is going to be right.

Finally I asked Sanjun how he thinks about his practice in terms of the learning outcome at the basis of the research project. He explained that despite the evident Korean cultural references in his work that have been pointed out by others he personally doesn't see it as having any significant relation to Korean painting. Rather he sees himself as a contemporary international artist working in a specifically Western tradition of painting.

The second student Young Mi Kim makes sculptural installation and video work. She explains that her work is about her feelings of loss of confidence and identity, feelings amplified by being in a foreign culture. Looking back at her past she can now see how it was shaped by a violent period of rapid economic and social development, a period in

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[1] The formal term for the symbol at the centre of the Korean flag is *taegeuk*, a blue and red, yin/yang, earth/heaven symbol of Taoist origin often associated with Korean nationalism.

[2] The term *Hoe sa hu so* is derived from the writings of Confucius and means " Think deeply of what the truth is and what you are, before you draw on paper ! " Confucius(552~479 B.C.). This was said to teach his pupils how important it is to accomplish the perfect personality in life. In the ancient Chinese way of thinking, the perfection of life paralleled the perfection of personality, especially based on manners and etiquette. In this sense could be considered as a way of meditation (Young Mi Kim, personal correspondence)

which there was a lot of protests against the government. Memories of this time form the basis for her current work. I suggested that the Korean-ness of these memories is somewhat circumstantial to the extent that had she grown up in another part of the world that had seen similar social changes she might still be making work of this kind. She agreed. I then asked her how she understood the 'contextualization' learning outcome. She explained that she sees herself working between contexts and traditions and that despite the evident political nature of her work she does not want it to be seen as specifically Korean. Although she recalls the smell of tear-gas that was used to break up protests she had no understanding of what the protests were about at that time. More important for her, she explained, is the Buddhist doctrine of re-incarnation that informs the narrative structures and thematic content of her work.

Hyewon Park's degree show involved the installation of a series of sculptural and small video works. She explained how in her previous year at Chelsea she had explored the different methodologies of Western and Asian art and had come to the conclusion that there is too much for one person to know on such big subjects. Moreover she felt that these reflections on methodology had led her work to become boring. She explained how she had tried to work with a traditional Korean calligraphic technique in the college context but found that no one really understood what she was trying to do. They could see that the work was beautiful but that was all that they could see. She had therefore decided to stop working in a traditional manner and had begun to make small-scale sculptures and models of animals and beings encountered in dreams. These works, she said, expressed more personal and intimate issues and brought her closer to herself.

The work was guided by the idea that shaman are like multi-media artists who work in drawing, dance, performance, song etc. One particular work was made up of a large number of paper dolls hanging from the ceiling and seemingly floating up from a box on the floor. She explained how the dolls began as long calligraphic works made in a therapeutic manner when her grandmother was very ill. She had originally intended to burn the works after her grandmother passed away but had been unable to do so for various strange reasons. She put the drawings in a box and forgot about them until two days before her private view when she decided to make the drawings into dolls to

represent the presence of her grandmother's spirit in the space. Other works represented the indivisibility of all things through the figure of co-joined twins. Hyewon explained that she is now unable to separate the world of dreams from the world of reality and how strange this has made her feel.

The next artist interviewed was Jin Kim, a painter working in oil on canvas. The central theme of these paintings was the idea of the 'Marginal Man'. Jin Kim explains marginal man as a person who exists in two different cultures and whose identity is changed in the passage from one to the other. When he first arrived in London he was very confused by the new environment and its cultural patterns and had attempted to express his feelings in a series of paintings where a single figure (a self-portrait) sits uncomfortably in an interior environment. He goes on to explain how the concept of Marginal Man also has a political meaning according to which a person does not fit within either of two conflicting and dominant political power systems and as a consequence looses his identity[3]. Jin explained that while he was researching the idea of the Marginal Man he had encountered an essay by a Korean professor in a German university who was unable to return to South Korea because the authorities there believed that he has worked for North Korea. This led to a brief discussion about how students felt about the current political situation of a divided Korea[4]. One student said that she would be very happy to see North and South Korea united but that many people are very surprised to hear her saying it.

The final student interviewed was Junghee Roh, a painter who could not initially see anything specifically Korean in her work. Given that her painting was currently inspired by the work of Gerhard Richter and Gary Hume and that it was made of stretched canvas and oils, she felt it to be primarily 'Western'. I asked if from a Korean perspective oil on canvas was seen as a fundamentally Western medium and she said it was. Hyewon interjected that she considered this correlation of materials with Western or Asian art histories was far too simplistic and that what should really be looked at are the concepts and epistemology informing the work rather than the methods employed. She then told an anecdote about

[3] The concept of the marginal man was originally developed by Robert E. Park in 1928. "The marginal man...is one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic cultures....his mind is the crucible in which two different and refractory cultures may be said to melt and, either wholly or in part, fuse." [Robert E. Park, 1937] – Wikipedia entry on Robert E. Park [accessed 21/08/08].

[4] In general the students were very reluctant to engage in discussion about the political situation in Korea and were particularly anxious that they should not be filmed discussing such issues.

having to mix rabbit glue with pigment while she was training in traditional Korean painting. This process would take many hours and often, by the time she was finished preparing the pigment, she was too tired to paint and had to go home. These days, she claimed, no one wanted to take all this time in order to prepare the materials. Junghee responded that there was a different philosophy of practice underpinning traditional Asian art. The process of mixing the paint was another mode of meditative preparation for the act of painting, one that was part of an over-all philosophy of practice. When 'old people'[5] do calligraphy, she said, they have to concentrate very hard because they must make the work in very few brushstrokes. The circular pigment-mixing part of the process helps them to concentrate on themselves and to put a 'gi'[6] into the brush they will use. Hyewon responded that even traditional painters no longer spend this time making the pigment but instead use acrylics and as a consequence their work has become purely about a painting technique.

When discussing her own work Junghee explained that although she sees herself as working in a Western style and medium certain aspects of her practice are very close to Korean traditional painting. The 'drawn' layer of the paintings must be done very quickly and be perfect otherwise they will have to be over-painted and done again. She went on to discuss the work of a colleague at Chelsea whose work expresses the traditional Asian aesthetic of 'the Beauty of Emptiness' which, for her, is represented by untouched spaces on the surface of the paper or canvas. The other students agreed that this was a fundamental difference between Western and Eastern image making, one that is intimately related to the other principles we had discussed already (one-stop brush strokes, Chi energy, meditation etc.). I then asked if the students thought that their experience at Chelsea would be improved if staff and tutors knew much more about the fundamentals of traditional Asian art and aesthetics. Hyewon responded by saying how helpful it had been that a younger tutor could not understand anything that she tried to explain about such concepts because it made her realise how 'dead' they were for her. Junghee agreed adding:

[5] In Korea calligraphy is a very popular traditional hobby practiced by many people. It is often associated with an older generation by younger artists.
[6] 'Chi' or 'Gi' energy is a traditional concept in Chinese influenced cultures referring to the active force (life energy) of any living thing.

"We are now in the contemporary society and there is no compulsory stuff that we have to know and we are very free to choose the material to express our idea or to make the object. So I don't think there is any need to be [aware of these traditional concepts]".

PART TWO
Research Findings

The second phase of research took place in Seoul between the 18th and 31st October 2007 and involved meetings, interviews and discussions with artists, educators, students, curators and arts publishers there. Two of these interviews were filmed[7].

My guide in Seoul was a former PG Diploma student at Chelsea called Ki Chang Choi (KC). It was primarily with KC that I discussed the development of the project while in Korea. We began to discuss it in broad general terms noting the issue of distance and proximity one has to one's own national culture, about how often it requires a person to leave their home in order to start thinking about what makes it what it is; its history, politics and the 'identity' of its peoples etc. When you are simply living in a place there's no immediate reason to reflect on its history. This partly explains why many Korean students who study in London begin to think about their identity in ways they never did while at home[8]. We also talked about how different students have very different motivations for wanting to study for a postgraduate qualification in London and about how hard it is to generalise about the levels of historical and critical-theoretical knowledge they themselves think is important to have as an artist[9]. Isn't it obvious that one can be a very successful artist without thinking about the historical and theoretical context for one's practice, KC suggested? I agreed and asked why it might be important for any one to reflect on the history of their society and culture at all? And why, in particular, was it considered especially necessary for artists to do so? Regardless of our speculation on this issue what is clear from the learning outcomes for the critical writing at Chelsea is that here we have a

[7] DVD documents of these interviews will be made available from the library at Chelsea.

[8] This is a general characteristic of students studying over-seas for the first time.

[9] On the web-log there was a very interesting discussion about the different motivations for Korean students choosing to study in London and the difficulties they experience while here.

particular evaluative philosophy of the kind of art and artists we have an intention to facilitate, artists who ARE aware of and are critically reflective upon the historical and contemporary cultural contexts in which they work.

Meeting with Sunjung Kim and students from
The Korean National University of Arts

The following day KC introduced me to Sunjung Kim, professor at The Korean National University of Arts and a curator and educator working primarily in Seoul but also in an international capacity. Formerly chief curator at the Art Sonje centre she had recently curated a show of international contemporary art called 'Tomorrow' (part of the Platform Seoul 2008 arts festival). My first meeting with Sunjung was at the Art Sonje centre where I presented the basic outline of the research project to her. She immediately understood the essential problem informing the project and responded that she deals with similar issues on the MA courses she teaches. After discussing the background of the project in more depth and showing a brief clip of the video document, Sunjung suggested that I should meet with her MA Fine Art and Art Theory students the following day to discuss the project.

During this discussion Sunjung suggested that we asked KC and his two colleagues why they had chosen to study overseas. Their reasons were all slightly different. But they agreed that there are generally two poles of motivation for any course of study. One is pragmatic (i.e. improving money and employment prospects) and the other is experiential (i.e. to learn for its own sake or to experience a different culture). Both types of motivation, to some degree, had informed their choices.

The following day I visited The Korea National University of Arts to discuss the project with Sunjung's students. There were about 20 students in total who listened attentively as I presented the project sentence by sentence while Sunjung translated for me. After showing the interview with Sangjun Kim the students began to ask questions and make comments and our discussion quickly hit upon the fundamental issues informing the project. Technical problems meant that we were unable to see the rest of the video so it was decided that I should conduct a number of short interviews/tutorials with individual

students in their studios. With the help of an experienced English speaking student who had studied Art History in the UK I asked each student what they felt about the necessity of art historical and socio-cultural knowledge for a practicing artist.

There were three general responses to the question. One group of students struggled to understand the question at all. This I believe is primarily a language-based problem and something I encounter far too regularly in my work at Chelsea. If an overseas student does not have an adequate level of language proficiency it is very difficult to ascertain whether their lack of comprehension of the learning outcomes is primarily of a linguistic, cognitive or knowledge-based kind. In such instances the entire tutorial allocation can be spent trying to gauge why a student is unable to comprehend the learning outcomes and in attempting to explain them.

A second group of students understood the question but considered it generally irrelevant. One particularly eloquent student explained that he considered the art historical and socio-cultural contextualization of an artist's work to be the job of the critic and the curator. This position - one that I also encounter in both overseas and home-EU students at Chelsea - raises a fundamental issue regarding the institutional philosophy under-pinning the 'contextualization' learning outcome at Chelsea. In short it reveals the kind of artistic sensibility were are trying to cultivate amongst Fine Art students here, one that encourages them to take critical responsibility for the theoretical interpretation and the historical/cultural analysis of their work rather than delegate this work to other parties[10]. In contemporary pedagogical terms we are trying to facilitate reflective international practitioners.

The final group of students considered it essential to have an understanding and knowledge of the art historical and socio-cultural contexts for their practices. As Korean students they were aware of the complex cultural histories shaping art making there but were, understandably, less well informed about the histories and theories informing

[10] The student in question had already achieved some degree of commercial success and his paintings at that time were selling before he had painted them. It is understandable that a young painter such as this might question the value of having to think and write about his work in historical or theoretical terms and his position raises broader questions - as relevant at Chelsea as they are in Seoul - about the function of criticism and theory in relation to commercial success in the art market.

modern and contemporary art outside their country. One particular student, Jeun Ji In, for instance, was making as series of short video works about the former inhabitants of building in which The Korean National University of Art is now housed: the former South Korean Secret Police Headquarters. Generally speaking it is students of this kind that we should be encouraging to study at PG and MA level at Chelsea.

Meeting with Minjoo Lee and students from Kyung Hee University

The following day I met with Minjoo Lee, a Korean artist and teacher at Kyung Hee University in Seoul. Over tea we had a very interesting conversation about the research project, my findings so far and Minjoo's own work and experience as an artist and teacher in Seoul. Our conversation gravitated around the issue of 'critical value' in Asian and Western art[11]; the down-playing of spirituality in certain sectors of the contemporary art world; how those different sectors can be distinguished; and about 'Western' artists who have incorporated 'Asian' techniques and aesthetics into their practice[12]. The following day was the BA Fine Art degree show at her university and Minjoo suggested that I should visit the show and speak to some of the students there about my project.

[11] In my first conversation with Minjoo Lee we arrived at a notion of 'Critical Value' as a way to describe the particular value added to the over-all significance of a work of art in the market and gallery system. In many ways the function of criticism in this context is to give the work a higher value (both economically and culturally) than a work which has no critical discourses engaging it. In this sense some commercially successful artists might still lack that 'critical value' that makes their work of interest to museums and not just collectors. This seems to be a particular problem for traditional painting, which may be valued highly for it's beauty and aesthetic qualities but rarely attracts the kind of value-adding 'critical' attention discussed here (and which is in some ways synonymous with the notion of 'contemporary art' as it is generally understood by artists in Seoul). On reflection I think this issue has roots in the general idea and changing function of criticality in the Western tradition. Without going in to too much depth here, I'd suggest that criticality emerges as a philosophical and political characteristic of Western art after Romanticism (simplifying greatly) and that I have yet to hear of anything similar in Asian art history. In Korea art becomes 'critical' only after the incorporation of modern painting styles in the 1920's, and then in a very different manner. There is not this tradition of art questioning the philosophical foundations of itself and challenging the normative socio-cultural assumptions implicit in its own modes of practice. But gradually the criticality was incorporated into the mainstream canon in such a way as to assume something of the universal Kantian conception of beauty in Art, something that is essential to 'true' art. In short criticality is absorbed into the Idealist conception of Art it had, in part, set out to challenge, and the art-world system continues to function smoothly in its universalist historical mode (a universalism, I should add, which now embraces 'multi-culturalism' and 'difference' as 'critical values').

[12] Minjoo told me a very interesting anecdotal story about a Korean artist who won an important national painting prize but was later stripped of the award when it was judged that he had 'copied' the work of Antoni Tapiés.

On arrival I was introduced to a number of Minjoo's colleagues with whom I briefly discussed the project. I was then introduced to one of the graduating students, Ji Hoon Lee, who offered to show me around the show. He began by showing me his own work. Ji Hoon explained how the school of art is separated into three departments: Sculpture, Painting and Korean Painting. Ji Hoon was in the Korean Painting department. My immediate reaction on seeing his first work was to ask what distinguished Korean painting from 'regular' painting. This set the tone for a discussion that was to continue well into the evening.

I will try to summarise the debate here. Ji Hoon's work involved mixed-media painting and drawing on un-stretched but primed canvas. The first piece was a complex, expressive work which represented, Ji Hoon explained, his attempt to escape from the shackles of technical and formal aesthetic convention and to express his deeper fears, obsessions and anxieties. For me there was nothing about the work that suggested a Korean tradition of painting. I asked him how this was a 'Korean' painting? He found it hard to explain why but insisted that it was.

The second work he showed me was much more typical. It was a representation of a fantasy landscape in an 'Oriental'[13] style. The landscape was fashioned in such a way as to manifest the 'Beauty of Emptiness' concept that had been discussed with the project group in Chelsea. My developed understanding of this traditional aesthetic principle is that the air, water, and clouds of a landscape are constituted representationally by the absence of marks on the surface of the paper or canvas. As already mentioned this concept is technically related to the traditional calligraphic brush-techniques of East Asian painting in which mastery is determined by the fact that the painter cannot correct any mistakes they make. So every stroke and gesture has to be perfect. These two principles appear to be a shared characteristic of the traditional painting styles of Korea, Japan and China. Ji Hoon's work however was a subtle pencil drawing on a stretched and primed white canvas. Once again I asked Ji Hoon what made this work 'Korean', pointing out that pencil drawing on primed canvas was not a traditional technique or medium. Once again, though he couldn't quite explain, he insisted that it was.

[13] I'm using the term here as it has been used by people I have met in Korea where it is synonymous with 'East Asian'

I then asked him about several other works in the show. "Korean or Modern" I asked[14]. From the works he chose I found it difficult to see the difference. It could not be reduced to any shared formal, material or technical characteristics. I could easily see what the distinctive characteristics were (ink, paper, brush, traditional figures, motifs and decorative forms) but few of the painters seemed to be confined by them. So what was the meaning and purpose of the distinction?

I put the question to Minjoo and her colleague Ligyung when I returned. It was a good question they said and one which they too grappled with regularly. Minjoo explained that the art education pattern was similar throughout East Asia. There was 'modern' painting - which seemed to blur into what we would see in Britain as Fine Art in a general sense (i.e. 'eventually' including photography, video, performance, conceptual art, etc.) - and traditional painting (which restricted itself to traditional materials and techniques). In Japan, Minjoo explained, they call the latter 'National Painting'.

The conversation was continued over dinner with a number of graduating students and three of the Kyung Hee faculty who explained my project to the students. They all seemed confident that they could easily explain the difference between Korean and Modern painting. So I took out the catalogue of their exhibition and asked them to point out to me the differences. For each example of a Korean painting they showed me I would point to a Modern painting and ask what the difference was?

What was surprising about these conversations was the strength of conviction in some of the most engaged students' that there was an essential 'sensibility' to Traditional Korean painting that was perceivable by them but impossible to explain to those without the necessary cultural sensibility to see it[15].

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[14] The terms 'Modern', 'Contemporary' and 'Western' seem interchangeable in this context. This is something that has, in my experience, also shaped the perceptions and expectations of Korean painters at Chelsea. Here too the three terms are often used synonymously. This is something that obviously touches on the heart of the problems informing this project.

[15] I have to confess that I was not convinced by this argument. I am however willing to entertain the possibility that I may well lack the particular aesthetic sensibility to perceive the difference. But from the perspective of someone who has spent a great deal of time critically unpacking the myths of a special, refined aesthetic sensibility in the Western art historical tradition, I had a strong and

This discussion points to one of the causes of the problem informing this project. The institutional distinction between Traditional and Modern painting in Korea seems to be founded on a political-ideological necessity to distinguish Asian from Western artistic traditions (and accompanying theories). Moreover it is at the locus of this institutional difference that language difference takes on it's most pronounced significance. It has often been suggested to me that the philosophical concepts underpinning the theory of Asian art are very difficult to translate into Western terms. Yet when I asked the students at Chelsea whether their learning experience would benefit from their tutors knowing more about the philosophical ideas underpinning the Asian traditions they unanimously said not.

So Korean students seeking to move away from the Asian traditions take on Western painting and art as a kind of emancipation from the constraints of convention, tradition, local culture and therefore historical issues in a general sense. The logical trajectory of such a student may be to come to London to study contemporary art in a Western context. As Junghee concluded in the first half of the research project, Fine Art students like herself –who are graduates from the 'modern' departments of painting in Korea - feel that in 'contemporary society' they are 'free to choose' the medium and mode in which to work in order to best represent their ideas[16]. In short, for some students the 'Modern', 'Contemporary' or 'Western' path is one that seems to offer them the freedom to make art without having to think about the cultural history of the practices and representational modes in which they are engaged.

Meeting with Kim Young Sik and presentation at Gallery Ho in Seoul

My next meeting was with artist and educator Kim Young Sik in his home outside Seoul. I showed Young Sik the video document of the Chelsea students which he watched attentively. His first response was to say that the students did not seem to know the core

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contentious impression that what was at work here was a distinctly institutional ideology (i.e. one according to which the necessity of a distinction between the two traditions must be maintained for reasons beyond formal aesthetic matters).

[16] This 'freedom of choice' has very specific ideological connotations in the context of Korean society and it's history, connotations that are of fundamental importance to the theoretical issues at the heart of this project but are currently beyond its scope to address in any depth.

meaning of 'ki' energy. They knew only the outward appearance, not the 'experience' of it. He went on to explain how in Korea people generally don't ask questions about their culture because they all share it. The students who come to the West to study - as his own daughter had done - were already 90% Westernised he said.

While studying in New York in 70's Young Sik had met many painters working in an abstract expressionist style. What surprised him in their approach to painting was that – although there were surface similarities to Asian traditional painting techniques – there was no long meditative preparation and no methodical discipline in their practice. They made paintings purely for expressive pleasure and their work did not seem to be informed by any recognisable philosophical principles. This for him marked a fundamental difference between Asian and Western approaches to painting despite the similarity of surface appearances.

At the same time in Seoul some contemporary painters had tried to create a specifically Korean style of Contemporary painting. They took visual elements from traditional Korean architecture and decorative arts creating a palate of motifs, colours, shapes and forms. He did not think this was the right thing to do. The solution, he felt, must exist somewhere between these positions[17].

The following week I presented the video and the debate to an audience of approximately 30 people at Gallery Ho in Seoul on the invitation of Minjoo Lee. After my presentation I was asked how important nationality was for my research. I replied that it depended on the situation and context. At Chelsea it certainly was. I explained that there was a significant difference between being from a European or Asian nation due to the fundamental aesthetic paradigms underpinning the different traditions of art making and art history in these regions. I explained that students from European and Anglo-American cultural backgrounds tend to be more familiar with the critical and theoretical discourses associated with Western art history and contemporary art. The person continued to say that

[17] The conversation between Kim Young Sik, Nam SinKwak (artist and professor at Korean national University of Arts), and KC continued well in to the evening. Unfortunately it was conducted primarily in Korean and the video documentation of the debate is yet to be translated.

she was very surprised that the work in the video was so old-fashioned[18]. I responded that, as Kim Young Sik had said, the Chelsea students seemed somewhat naïve regarding traditional Korean painting. But they also tended to be equally, if not more, unfamiliar with contemporary western art and the historical development of its techniques and forms. As such they find themselves caught between two traditions and two histories, neither of which they know much about. I reiterated the observations made earlier in the report about the 'freedom of choice' issue and the importance of criticality in the western tradition of modernism. I used the example of Martha Rosler as a contemporary artist (recently exhibited by Sun-jung Kim in the 'Tomorrow' exhibition) whose work should not be seen as simply floating free from any attachment to geo-political or art historical contingencies, as an artist whose work one might 'choose' to emulate on the level of style alone.

This led me on to discuss the assumed neutrality of the Classical Western aesthetic paradigm which has been fundamentally challenged by critical theory, post-colonial studies, feminism, etc. I explained that often international students expect their work to be approached neutrally, that any pre-supposition on the part of the tutor about their culture, history, nationality, background, etc. should not be taken in to consideration in the critical engagement with their work. I explained that I don't do this because I expect the students to think critically about why they make the work they make. As soon as they do this they necessarily encounter issues of gender, politics, identity, culture, etc. We can't suspend the question of identity in an international art school and I believe it would be wrong to do so, I said. Moreover to assume the neutrality of aesthetic judgement in an international context would be to impose a particular kind of Western (broadly Kantian) aesthetic orthodoxy on the work, one which assumes the existence of universal criteria of beauty and taste regardless of cultural difference.

The same person from the audience went on to make the important point that the entry exams for post-graduate study in Fine Art in Korea are very difficult. Students wishing to study at this level have two options: either to work very hard in their studies, or, if they have money, to study in England or America where the entry requirements are much less

[18] She did not say if she meant old-fashioned in terms of Western or Asian art.

stringent and less competitive academically. Students who choose to stay in Korea do not have to struggle so much with issues of cultural difference and identity but at the same time they are likely to have a more extensive knowledge and understanding of both Asian and Western art history. These latter comments have important implications regarding the kind of Korean students we are accepting at Postgraduate level at Chelsea and the nature of our assessment of their academic abilities and art historical knowledge at the interview stage.

Meeting with Jinsuk Suh

Two days later I met with Jinsuk Suh, director of Loop gallery in Seoul. Our conversation, which was documented on video, covered many areas related to the research project. I will give only a brief summary here of the most important points. Jinsuk began by explaining that Loop gallery was an alternative art space founded in 1999 as a platform for Asian and Western Contemporary art and as a place to explore the question 'What is Asian Contemporary Art?'. This was done through collaboration with other Asian arts organizations. After the 80's and Globalization, he explained, the social and economic 'hegemony' of the Western discourse shifted to the east and there was something of a cultural boom in Asia in which the art market figured significantly. Several years ago he organised a conference - AAF (Asian Art Forum) - for non-profit independent spaces in Asia in order to begin generating a discourse about the question of Contemporary Asian Art. He explained that the dominant discourse of Contemporary art in East Asian countries is generally understood from a Western perspective and that it was the intention of the AAF to generate their own specifically Asian version of it. This discourse, he said, is still developing.

In 2006 the AAF developed a project called 'Oriental Metaphor' which attempted to 'turn around'[19] Western Orientalist versions of Asian art. The first step was for Asian people to get to know each other and ask what is Asia and then what is Asian contemporary art. I

[19] Although Jinsuk didn't use the term I understood his meaning to be close to the notion of *detournement*. 'In détournement, an artist reuses elements of well-known media to create a new work with a different message, often one opposed to the original. The term "détournement", borrowed from the French, originated with the Situationist International; a similar term more familiar to English speakers would be "turnabout" or "derailment", although these terms are not used in academia and the arts world as they are inherently 'anti-art,' often involving the blatant theft and sabotage of existing elements'. Wikipedia, 28/08/08

explained to Jinsuk that one of the difficulties we face at Chelsea is that we do not have any academic resources with which to approach this kind of issue. He replied that he encountered the same problem while working on the 'Oriental Metaphor' project. There is discourse about Asian culture before the 20th century but after the 1920's there is no longer any discourse about Asian culture generated by themselves. What there is has generally been written by Western people. This is partly due to the fact that Asian cultures tended to be 'modernised' by Western nations, he explained.

One of the biggest problems they face is translation, not only between English and Korean texts, but between Chinese, Korean and Japanese ones. He explained that they are just making the first steps and that it will be a long time before they have much more than questions on these issues.

Jinsuk explained how the speed of change in Korea was more rapid than in other countries in East Asia in the 20th century. Seoul is therefore a very extreme city. There are two sides to it that exist in the same time and same space; one side is very analogue the other digital, one Asian the other Western and one traditional the other contemporary. This creates a very hybrid culture and the production of a very particular type of art. Young Korean artists influenced by this dual culture make very diverse kinds of work. For Jinsuk the important thing is for Koreans to make a link between the traditional and Contemporary cultures. He went on to say that there is no longer any clear line separating these forms of art but once again there is no discourse accounting for this transition. Jinsuk himself had studied Modern and Contemporary art and therefore knew little about traditional art until recently. However the 'Oriental Metaphor' project was in part intended to bring traditional art into the debate. Contemporary art for Jinsuk is all about finding the balance between the local issues of tradition and modernity and the issues associated with globalization.

China is also now going through great changes, he continued, particularly in the transition from a 'closed' period of Communism to an 'open' period in which it is embracing global capitalism. Contemporary Chinese art is influenced by both Socialist Realism and Traditional Chinese painting but there still needs to be more discussion and discourse about that. In previous times Western society dominated the contemporary art scene but

today the Asian contemporary scene has expanded greatly and has a different structure. Contemporary Asian artists are not under any pressure to show their work in a Western context because there is a large enough Asian scene for them to work within. Jinsuk said he was now particularly interested in how markets are shaping the development of these different scenes.

I asked Jinsuk if there was anyone writing in Asia about such issues, an Asian equivalent of Frederick Jameson, for instance. He said that if there was he did not know about them. In any case, he continued, the 'impression mechanism' created by the language systems in Asia is very different from the Western one. When he sees Chinese, Korean and Japanese art he can 'see' and 'feel' the differences but there is no discourse about this. Other Asian artists and curators can see and feel the differences in Asian contemporary art too but there is as yet nothing concrete that can be said about it.

'Kanji' is the deep language system informing the dominant East Asian cultures he explained. This is the basis of the impression mechanism at work when people from East Asian cultures speak with each other. In order to explain one word Asian people must understand it in many distinctly different contexts. This is very hard to explain to Westerners. I responded enthusiastically that this concept of 'impression mechanism' could be very important for this research project because it might help us to understand cognitive structures as the deep effect of language systems and how this effects our appreciation and understanding of art works. Jinsuk agreed and explained that the 'Oriental Metaphor' publication included essays which touched upon these topics. One writer, for example, illustrated the difference between the Western and Asian 'impression mechanisms' by comparing Leonardo's anatomical drawings with those made in China at the same time. This comparison illustrates the different systems of understanding the functions of the body. Leonardo understood the body in purely visual terms – only what can be seen has meaning and significance - while in China anatomists-artists were using not only the eye but were also feeling the pulse and heartbeat through which they could 'perceive' the body's (Chi) 'energy-movement' structure. This basic principle of Chi energy, Jinsuk explained, is immediately understandable to Asian people but very difficult to explain to Westerners.

I responded that, in order to understand the regional and cultural differences in Contemporary Art from a global perspective, one should not only be thinking about art 'in-itself' but must address the deeper culture; the language, the medicine, the belief structures, etc. For this reason I believe that cultural theory is more valuable for understanding the differences than if we restrict our analyses to a 'purely artistic' level, that we must get much deeper into the wider culture - into history, the body, into science, philosophy, etc. - in order to properly understand the surface phenomena of a work of art.

I asked Jinsuk if he could foresee in advance what theoretical notions and concepts about art that have emerged from a Western perspective will be valuable and useful in the formation of a contemporary Asian art theory? He replied that contemporary Korean artists are influenced by many things - the YBA's, the Chinese avant-garde painting movement, Postmodernism, etc. - but now the main issue is 'financialization'. Also many Korean artists often refer Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard when speaking about their work. I suggested that these writers came out of a tradition of critical cultural engagement with modes of power, with the relationship between power and aesthetics, and with ideology, theoretical ideas which have their roots in Marxism.

Jinsuk explained how the Minjung[20] artists of the 1980's also utilised Marxist ideas to support their work. Another key idea in Korea, he said, is 'archi-technologies', closely associated with Media City (the Seoul International Media Arts Biennale).

I made a proposition: that all contemporary painting could be described as postmodern painting regardless of where it is made. Did he agree? He explained that given the financialization of art in a global 'post-capitalist' context it is going to be investability which will most influence the kind of work that is made and funded in Korea. But this will effect only the form. The matter, meaning and concept in Korean painting is very diverse, he said, but the current fashion is for realistic or super-realistic painting (also influenced by financialization). I asked him what he meant precisely by this term. He said that it meant that everything in society – including art - has to be treated as an investment product. In

[20] Minjung is a Korean word derived from Chinese meaning 'the mass of the people'. The Wikipedia entry on Minjung defines it as 'those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, marginalised sociologically, despised culturally, and condemned religiously'. The term came to be associated with the struggle for democracy in South Korea and with artists and a style of artwork associated with that movement.

the 90's there were not so many painters in Korea and contemporary artists tended to be involved in media arts. Today tangible arts like painting and drawing have replaced intangible arts as a response to the process of financialization in Korea and other East Asian countries.

Meeting with Kim Bog-gi

My final documented meeting was with Kim Bog-gi, the editorial director of *Art in Asia* magazine. Our conversation was translated by Kim Bog-gi's editorial assistant Sammy Kim. I introduced the project and explained to him what I had learned so far. I asked him how he understood the distinction between Modern and Contemporary art in Korea and how this was related to Globalization/Westernization. He began by explaining that the Westernization of Asian culture began in the 16th century with the arrival of Christian missionaries. He went on to explain how the notion of Modern art developed in Korea in the 1920's and was used primarily to describe painting under the influence of Western styles. It was not until the 1970's that the notion of Contemporary art came into common usage. It was hard to define precisely what caused this shift in terminology. I recounted my difficulties in distinguishing between Modern and Traditional styles at Kyung Hee university. He responded that students in the traditional style are now trying to find a balance between traditional and contemporary modes.

I asked Bog-gi if he knew of anything like a contemporary art scene in North Korea. Since I had been in Seoul almost no one had mentioned the division. When I raised the issue people seemed generally reluctant to discuss it. He said that he did not know a great deal about art in North Korea but added that in the West there is something of a pre-occupation with the division. In the 70's and 80's there were radical political movements in Korea that tried to confront the issue directly and some artists were involved in these movements. But today in Korea people generally have become tired of the seriousness and tension around the issue. It has now been a very long time since the country was divided and the solution is likely to take a long time to find. In the meantime South Korean people prefer to get on with their lives.

I asked Bog-gi about particular Korean aesthetic sensibilities. Several people I had spoken to had suggested the notion of "Han"[21] as a characteristically Korean emotion-aesthetic. (The film maker Kim Ki-duk is perhaps the most popular cultural representative of the sensibility outside Korea). He said that the artist Kim Sooja was the most active and well-known artist whose work was associated with Han. He then mentioned a famous Han piece by Nam June Paik, one of Korea's most famous ex-patriot artists. Kim Hoon's novel *Song of the Knife* is another good example of the sense of Han, as are the monochromes of the artist Seo-bo Park, he told me[22].

Bog-gi went on to explain how until 20 years ago Korean art history was not taught in art schools. Everything that he had learned personally in the last 20 years he had done so independently as a journalist and he believed that in order to properly understand Korean art history it was necessary to have knowledge of Japanese art history.

Conclusions

The most important conclusions emerging for the findings have to do with the institutional philosophy underpinning the learning outcome that forms the basis of this project:

> 'Articulate a systematic knowledge and understanding of the contemporary and historical context for their practice and related research'.

This outcome shows the kind of artists and designers we have the intention to facilitate the development of at Chelsea. These are artists and designers who are aware of the historical and contemporary cultural contexts of their practices and who are able to reflect critically upon them. This kind of artistic sensibility is one that encourages them to take responsibility for the theoretical interpretation and the historical/cultural analysis of their work rather than delegate this work to other parties. If we are to maintain this philosophy and the quality of learning experienced at Chelsea we must ensure that we accept only

[21] Wikipedia defines Han as 'a collective feeling of oppression and isolation in the face of overwhelming odds. It connotes aspects of lament and unavenged injustice' (Wikipedia entry on Han, accessed 2/09/08)

[22] Throughout our discussion Bog-gi drew out his ideas on pieces of scrap paper. At the end of the conversation I asked if I could keep the drawings as an aide-memoire of our discussion and in order to facilitate debate with Korean students at Chelsea.

those students who are capable of being and aspire to become a critical and reflective creative practitioner of this kind. With this in mind it is essential that a prospective student's ability to do this – whether they be overseas or home-EU students – is assessed at interview stage.

Of the three types of students encountered at The Korean National University of Arts it is therefore those in the latter group that we should encourage to apply to Chelsea. Students of the first kind – those unable to express themselves or their understanding of the learning outcomes – should be discouraged from applying. In order to prevent situations where the entire tutorial allocation is spent trying to assess why a student cannot understand the learning outcome we should ensure, as a first principle, that a students mastery of English is at an adequate level. Without this pre-requisite we will be unable to assess whether a student has the appropriate learning style, artistic ethos or cultural knowledge to realise the outcome and become the kind of student we expect to graduate from Chelsea.

Korean students in particular present a problematic and illuminating case study in this regard. The institutional distinction between Traditional and Modern painting in Korean art schools is founded on a cultural necessity to distinguish Asian from Western artistic traditions (and accompanying theories). However there is as yet no established discourse about Asian art history or contemporary art and therefore no unified body of critical theory has been developed in relation to it. It is therefore unreasonable to expect a prospective student to have a systematic knowledge and understanding of that specific cultural and regional context. There is however a vast and well-established discourse about Western art and its socio-cultural contexts that is generally accessible to Asian students. So a prospective student may very well know little about traditional or contemporary Korean or Asian art. This is not necessarily a problem. It only becomes so if they are equally unaware of Western contemporary art and art history, the historical development of its techniques and forms and the debates associated with them. As such they find themselves caught between two traditions and two histories, neither of which they know enough about to realise the above learning outcome. Therefore, unless we want to interpret the meaning of the learning outcome in purely Western terms, we should find a way to assess at interview

stage what, for an Asian student, an appropriate level of understanding and general knowledge about the characteristics of and differences between the two traditions is.

There is evidence that some Korean students tend towards Western-style art as a kind of emancipation from the constraints of convention, tradition, local culture and historical issues in a general sense. The logical trajectory of such a student may be to come to London to study contemporary art in a Western context. This, once again, is not in itself a problem. But it may become so in the long run if the perceived ease of admission to Western art colleges and universities compared to Korean colleges (which have strict admission exams) leads to a lowering of their academic reputations overseas. Perhaps a question about 'motivation' at interview stage could form the basis for assessing the suitability of a student for the courses at Chelsea.

We can't suspend the question of identity in an international art school and I believe it would be wrong to do so. Moreover to assume the neutrality of aesthetic judgement in an international context would be to impose a particular kind of Western aesthetic orthodoxy on the work, one which assumes universal criteria of beauty and taste regardless of cultural difference.

In order to understand the regional and cultural differences in Contemporary Art from a global perspective we should not be thinking about art 'in-itself' but must address the deeper cultures in which it is embedded. Cultural theory is therefore a more valuable and effective for understanding differences in cultural sensibilities. In order to avoid a situation where cultural and historical naivety coincides with an uncritical and uninformed aestheticism we must ensure that we have a deeper understandings of the wider cultures from which our international students have come.

In terms of the problem informing this research project it should be emphasised that the learning outcome is not simply about situating one's practice in terms of the limited field of contemporary visual art but to reflect upon the deeper cultural mechanisms at work in the creation of the particular mind-sets and aesthetic sensibilities ('impression mechanisms')

which inform the diverse characteristics of international contemporary art and our appreciations and understandings of them.

Recommendations

i) Ensure that an assessment of student's academic learning takes place at interview stage
ii) Devise methods of assessment
iii) Develop procedures for ensuring this assessment in the absence of academic presence at interview stage
iv) Increase IELTS requirements for Overseas students at Postgraduate level
v) Support further academic dialogue and debate about the pedagogical and theoretical issues associated with global art education
vi) Research into the evaluative aesthetic philosophies informing the critical engagement of studio tutors with international Fine Art students at Chelsea
vii) Contribute to the development of a theoretical discourse of contemporary East Asian art

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Weblinks

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