



**COULD BE NO.1:  
TRIOS OF GUIDES**

**SeMA BIENNALE  
MEDIACITY SEOUL 2016**

## **Trios of Guides**

## COULD BE NO.1 : Trios of Guides

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SeMA Biennale *Mediacity Seoul* 2016—directed by Beck Jee-Sook, hosted by Seoul Museum of Art, titled *NERIRI KIRURU HARARA*, and held from September 1 to

November 20, 2016—is publishing four volumes of the non-periodical publication *COULD BE* starting in April 2016 and up until the opening of the Biennale.

The publications will contain well-timed issues discovered by various contributors with different characteristics and viewpoints standing at the crossroads of the Biennale and multiple contemporary art languages. The guest editors of *COULD BE* are Yekyung Kil (Korea, editor and translator), Keiko Sei (Thailand/Myanmar/Japan, writer and curator), Chimurenga (South Africa, publishing and exhibition project team), and Miguel A. López (Costa Rica/Peru, writer and curator). Moon Jung Jang (US/Korea, graphic designer) collaborates for *COULD BE* as an art director and design advisor.

## WRITING COLLECTIVELY 04

Editorial

Yekyung Kil

A Brief Guide to *Guide to Guide*

Wonhwa Yoon

## SEOUL IS WIDE 14

Correspondence

Ji-Hyun Park, Park Hyun-jung, Woo Ahreum

Mystery Holes, the Gone, and the Remaining

Hokeypokey, Yoongky, In-ah Shin

Childhood’s End

Kim Yeongsu, Yoon Hyangro, Seewon Hyun

## ART AND TIME 55

Octavia E. Butler, Jorge Luis Borges, Walter Benjamin

Juyoung Jung, Jeamin Cha, Helen Ku

## CONTRIBUTORS 65

## Editorial

Yekyung Kil

The year 2015 saw some noteworthy changes in contemporary art systems in Korea. It was a year in which thriving art biennials in Korea had little access to experimental, self-organized art and cultural events. This is also true for the upcoming 2016 edition of SeMA (Seoul Museum of Art) Biennale *Mediacity Seoul* and the last edition held in 2014. The distance between a public art institution like SeMA and the people who have initiated, witnessed, observed, recorded, and participated in the changes since the early 2000s is vast. Possibly, such a “mental distance” is too wide to start with, and even if not, the gap between the two sides cannot be easily bridged without the support of theory-building. So, I decided to invite curator Seewon Hyun and critic Wonhwa Yoon to create a special event in which I could meet people, walk with them, and ask them to share their current thoughts for this inaugural issue of *COULD BE*. If Yoon’s program *Guide to Guide* opened up the question of what exhibition histories in Seoul would look like, the four pieces of writing published here are full of access points to changed artistic culture in Korea. Readers of this publication can start from any point, for instance, names, places, events, media, and subject head-

ings, and relate their inquisitive minds as audiences of visual arts.

The four texts in this volume were written collaboratively over a one month period from February to March this year by the twelve participants of *Trios of Guides*, a temporary writing collective. Invited by Hyun, fourteen people met on the afternoon of February 19, 2016, to attend *Guide to Guide*, a preparatory gathering or a special performance conceived by critic Wonhwa Yoon. Guided by Yoon, the participants of *Guide to Guide* started walking from the SeMA Seosomun main branch building, where two exhibitions, *Seoul Babel* and *Stanley Kubrick*, were being held, stopped over at several historical sites, and arrived at the SeMA Gyeonghuigung Museum of Art. Throughout the walking tour, the sound of Yoon’s voice as she read her script dispersed through the air and at times became engulfed by her microphone, but sent strong signals to cells undergoing apoptosis inside of me.

Among the four groups of three, three groups were organized in advance by Hyun, and most of the group members had never met or spoken to each other beforehand. Hyun would be the best person to explain her concept of *Trios of Guides*, but she preferred to talk and write rather informally because she herself joined one of the groups, forming a trio with artists Yoon Hyangro and Kim Yeongsu—Kim co-founded and co-managed “whatever space” Trading Post, one of the so-called new art

spaces that recently closed its activities. When asked for a short description of the project, Hyun stated that she invited people whom she wanted to know more about, and thought three would make up a minimal community in which each member could exist as an individual. Nevertheless, as Hyun has gained respect for her unique writing and curatorial projects as well as for her practice as a publisher and co-founder of the art space Audio Visual Pavilion, she went further than suggesting the ideal number of peers for collaborative writing as follows:

This . . . ternary model is not one-directional; *Trios of Guides* neither moves forward nor backward, and I thought such an uncertain variable would make this event interesting. There have been numerous art exhibitions and writing projects organized in the form of guides, but regardless of whether participants like the activities involved in guides, the form can be an efficient (and inefficient to some extent) method for co-production in a short period of time. As for the ternary model, I felt that at least three people were needed to keep the tension among the different views on what and how to write.

For me, three is the number that connects fragments that cannot be put into one vessel. With you, Beck Jee-sook, and Yumi Kang, I discussed topics such as SF (science or speculative fiction), women, Seoul, new art spaces, changes in society and the art world, and the history of Seoul, etc. So, it wasn't just me saying "Eureka! It's trios." Perhaps I hopped onto the train of questions raised during our conversations: Why are there no women art writers; isn't editing more crucial; and many more. And then, of course it was Yoon's program *Guide to Guide* that actually made all of the participants move and walk around the contested area of Seoul.

Since the early 2000s, Hyun and Yoon have been known for their exploration of "the boundaries of art writing and its forms of dispersion and deconstruction," an approach most notable in their recent workshops: Art Writing Practice held in 2014 for Free Camp, a student organization for educational, artistic, and cultural activism, and Art Writing Workshop held in 2015 at Ilmin Museum of Art. To build upon the two researchers' preceding workshops, this first issue set out to embody what could be their next project, and their invited participants wrote collaboratively on topics of their choice.

In “Correspondence,” the group of Park Ji-Hyun, Park Hyun-jung, and Woo Ahreum exchanged emails and a long footnote, writing about what triggered their interests after attending Yoon’s guided tour. In “Mystery Holes, the Gone, and the Remaining,” Hokeypokey, Yoongky, and In-ah Shin responded directly to *Guide to Guide* by writing comments in three separate columns reminiscent of their own independent publication titled *Hyeonsiltamgudan* (Inquiries into Reality), which is also the name of their writing collective. For “Childhood’s End,” Kim Yeongsu, Yoon Hyangro, and Seewon Hyun met at the far eastern part of Seoul for lunch and a stroll, and began writing to each other until their writing gradually coalesced into a similar style. The last piece, written by Juyoung Jung, Jeamin Cha, and Helen Ku, is titled “Octavia E. Butler, Jorge Luis Borges, Walter Benjamin.” Drawing on their work experiences as an archivist, an artist, and a curator and publisher, their writing weaves together fictional and non-fictional prose. The four pieces written by four three-person groups differ in their form, yet an underlying commonality is noticeable, that is, they present different modes of address crossing the relationship between creator-user and producer-consumer.

When I began work on this publication last December, I considered the idea of including visual essays or artist’s pages with illustrations and photographic images; but this particular issue has been developed into a zine-

like volume featuring the practical knowledge of participating writers consisting of curators, art space managers, art students, artists, a graphic designer, an archivist, and an architecture-based cultural producer. Three other editors are working with different themes and forms for the three upcoming issues of *COULD BE*, which will be published before the opening of *Mediacity Seoul: NERIRI KIRURU HARARA* on September 1, 2016. For visitors to the main exhibition venue, we, the editors, are preparing a section in which all four issues will meet our readership. I promise to provide a special place for the eloquent script of Yoon’s *Guide to Guide*.

## A Brief Guide to *Guide to Guide*

Wonhwa Yoon

*Guide to Guide* is a preliminary conference or entertainment event for *Trios of Guides*, a temporary writing collective organized by curator Seewon Hyun to produce content for the first issue of *COULD BE* edited by Yekyung Kil. On February 19, 2016, at 1:00 p.m., the project participants embarked on a guided tour. Starting at the entrance of Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA), the tour passed by the closed rear gate of the old National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Deoksugung Palace and the locked gate of the former Kyunggi Girls' High School and continued through the relocated gate of Gyeonghuigung Palace to finally arrive at the old SeMA pavilion (now called SeMA Gyeonghuigung Museum of Art), which was the venue of the first *Mediacity Seoul* in 2000. Then, each trio of guides gathered separately to plan its own writing project, discussing how, what, and even why to write.

Meanwhile, the editor wanted from the beginning to guide the writing hands along a planned route. Purposive writing to achieve a clearly defined goal was avoided in favor of strokes of luck, as it were, to capture a trail of lights left by flickering sparks from the fire. And yet the

zine needed to escape such deliberate spectacles as the magnificent fireworks displayed at the Seoul International Fireworks Festival, coincidentally also inaugurated in the year 2000. But blindly straying into the dark to encounter unknown lights could also be senseless. So, someone to mediate for the editor and participants, a sort of local guide, was needed, and that role was shared by Seewon Hyun and I.

While our tasks as guides are several, first of all, we should find glimmers in the field. This includes detecting lights in the dark and determining their status, whether they are fireflies in the mountains so fair and far away, or farmers slashing and burning fields even in those deep mountains, or maybe ashes and sparks slowly falling nearer than expected at the end of the fireworks, or, what if that flickering is the burning bush mediating the divine voice somewhere?

Thus the guides should, secondly, but not less importantly, reveal and facilitate the almost contradictory ambiguity of their habitat or "running room." Strictly belonging to neither art institutions nor non-institutional reality, in-between spaces tend to be imagined as transitional zones between the enlightening museum and clouded reality, or withered museum and incandescent reality. Such spaces could form a strained front line where two different orders confront each other, or a serene demilitarized zone somehow dislocated from both sides, or

just a purgatory to go over to the other side. These spaces are so multifaceted, they can be regarded as redemptive and deceptive at the same time.

*Guide to Guide* suggests a reverse perspective so that participants may look back on the situation within and outside the institutions from the suspicious gray zone. Intended to provide a sample guide for reference rather than a specific methodology, *Guide to Guide* consists of a two-hour guided tour looking back at a brief history of the non-artistic conditions and fluctuations that have shaped the art institutions around Seoul.

The district between the main building of SeMA and its annex in Gyeonghuigung Palace is an emerging tourist area spotlighted by the Seoul government. Here, old royal palaces and public art museums have uncomfortably co-existed for almost half a century amid controversies over abandonment, preservation, vandalism, and development. Along the path between these two buildings, the guide introduces participants to the transitional period of Korean art in which MMCA was expanded and relocated from Deoksugung Palace in Seoul to Gwacheon City, in celebration of the 1986 Seoul Asian Games and SeMA was set up and housed on the grounds of Gyeonghuigung Palace from the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games to the 2002 FIFA World Cup in South Korea and Japan.

The guided tour passes by several gates that can never be entered without permission. Only at the end,

can participants pass through the gate at Gyeonghuigung Palace and look into the Gyeonghuigung Museum of Art, an exhibition space of SeMA which has been used mainly for renting out and holding municipal events since it was built as a temporary pavilion to commemorate the history of Seoul in 1996. There is no single end or beginning waiting for the visitors. The museum is just empty, between its 2015 program already ended and its 2016 program not yet begun. The eyes guided back to the past are abruptly released in an unfamiliar spatial-temporal vacuum showing no trace of past events, such as the first edition of *Mediacity Seoul* in 2000, or its former version, *City and Image* (1996–1999), a serial exhibition shifting itself back and forth from a publicity campaign to an art exhibition, and a media show, or even all the conventional exhibitions regularly rotated for the last twenty years.

Though it is ultimately each participant's choice what to see in the void, the way down to that point is rigorously controlled. Of course, the real event of the guided tour would not be the same with rehearsals employing maps, photos and a script, even when enacted on the street. Nevertheless the guided tour is intended to inscribe words on the participants' bodies as well as to let the words blow away in the wind. *Guide to Guide* was planned as a one-time event and requested not to be documented for technical reproduction.

## Correspondence

Ji-Hyun Park, Park Hyun-jung, Woo Ahreum

### First Letter

#### Greetings

Dear Hyun-jung, hope you had a safe trip back home after the *Guide to Guide* tour yesterday. I had a good sleep; it seems I was rather tired. I dream a lot these days, and last night I dreamt of flying and drawing a spiral trajectory. I was flying very slowly, round and round, drawing a different circle each time.

#### Death of a Tribe

Have you heard of the notion of lucid dreams? There is a tribe where people supposedly live their lives in order to dream. It is believed these people are trained since childhood to enter a state of lucid dreaming at will, and adults spend their daily lives as a process of collecting dream material.

I found this story interesting and looked into the “collection of material.” Turns out that, to be clear, collecting material is a process of expanding the range of

sensory experiences. It is said that the experiences in lucid dreams are based upon real life experiences, but in the dreams those experiences are somehow transmuted rather than being an exact playback of memories.

For example, let’s think of someone’s experience of chocolate cake.

1. If this person has never had chocolate cake in reality  $\Rightarrow$  the chocolate cake in their lucid dream will taste like nothing.
2. If this person has eaten chocolate cake in reality  $\Rightarrow$  the chocolate cake in their lucid dream will taste like a chocolate cake, but it will have a new taste never experienced before. The new taste might be better or worse.

As one experiences different types of chocolate cakes, one’s “Pokédex”(illustrated Pokémon encyclopedia) will become richer in content. Therefore, the tribe members try to lead passionate lives. Their personal relationships, social lives and sense of purpose in life are also rather different, in a way that befits their unique way of life. It is a collective society where people share their dreams and experiences when they are together, yet they enter their own dreams in extreme solitude. In this country’s language, the word “death” supposedly means “long dream.”

To think of it the other way round, these are people who lead their lives and deaths in parallel . . . .

### The Death of Seoul

I was thinking about the history of the National Museum of Art at Deoksugung Palace, from Wonhwa Yoon's *Guide to Guide* field trip where we walked together. What left an impression on me was how the concept of "museum" was split into "*bangmulgwan* (museum)" and "*misulgwan* (art museum)" in the Korean language around 1938. As I learned that museums deal with the traditions of the past and art museums deal with the arts of the present, I reflected on the distinction between the living and the dead.

Another thing mentioned at *Guide to Guide* was the struggle over territory (between the living and the dead); struggles frequently happened as was the case in Deoksoo Elementary School and the former site of Kyunggi Girls' High School. As different urban programs are allocated to different sections of the city based on priority, sometimes programs in one space are either transferred into another or replaced by other programs, or an old program is revived in the process.

It also happens that layers coexist on top of one another through the configuration of a mutual relationship. The context of Seoul is an example: The urban fabric from the Joseon era (1392–1910) lies under urban *hanok*—

traditional houses—and multi-family apartments.

But rather than focus on details of the arbitration within the "structure" weaving together realms of the living and the dead, I want to focus on what happens when, say, a gigantic monster engulfs the entire system and then coughs it back up.

Let's stick to the urban metaphor; for example, in Seoul, "black holes" called complex-type redevelopment projects are appearing everywhere, absorbing and combining the surrounding areas into their respective gravitational field. These black holes expand by engulfing urban planets, and they will eventually collide with each other and merge into one giant black hole. Allocation will still happen within the new merged structure, but the allocated elements will have different aspects because they will have been recreated.

When the structure of life and death—which were clearly distinguished before—gets sucked into a "black hole," what will come out of the end of the funnel? Before imagining that, I would like to elaborate on this "black hole."

Another name for the "black hole" is "grave."

### Death of the Earth

I learned that archaeologists and historians use graves in order to differentiate countries. This is because graves

reflect all of a country's religion, society, architecture, and lifestyle. Different graves convey different cultures, and a new type of grave indicates a new civilization.

Black holes are the graves of the universe. Whatever gets sucked into a black hole has its original appearance evaporated. Then, are these black hole-graves the destination, the final stop of existence? Contemporary physics provides another perspective.

There is a theory that Stephen Hawking has been propounding since the 1970s, which involves the idea that after a black hole evaporation, all corresponding information content will be lost. This idea is very similar to the uni-directional aspect of Seoul, where the grave is perceived as life's endpoint. In this world, as death means extinction, it seems that we strive to preserve our history and spirit using records and different forms of shrines. However, due to the shortage of physical space, the living and the dead are bound to engage in fierce competition.

Hawking took a step back from his theory in 2004; the holographic principle has demonstrated that information is in fact preserved during black hole evaporation. What goes into a black hole disappears, but its information is projected onto the event horizon, the black hole's surface, and it comes back into existence in the form of a "hologram." Apparently, it is possible to mathematically establish that what entered is equal to what emerged. In other words, from the perspective of the universe, a grave

is a sort of portal.

(To go one step further, by saying that we exist—assuming existence means being an actual mass which takes up part of the universe—we are also saying that another "me" is floating on the surface of this world, as a hologram.)

Moreover, after we take the grave-portal, go through cycles of dimensional reduction and finally come out as dust, we supposedly encounter not only the entire past of everything that went through the black hole, but also the entire future of every object which will pass through it. This is the point where, being used to three dimensions, I am only able to figure out clues using vague metaphors—and where the scale of my imagination approximates to the context of Seoul. I wonder about the possibility that graves in a new sense will appear in Seoul, and how our understanding of life and death will change accordingly.

As of early 2016, scientists have developed a technology that can be used to record data in five dimensions and preserve them for 13.8 billion years—longer than the entire history of the universe. When the Sun has exploded and the Earth has been engulfed by a massive black hole, all data of humanity will be stored in a nail-sized glass disc and travel through the grave.

The Earth will soon enter its phase of final coexistence, where past, present, and future all overlap.

## Graves of Seoul

Seoul is known as a global city, with a cutting edge Information Technology (IT) industry comparable to Silicon Valley. What differentiates Seoul, bold city that it is, from other cities is that it does not stop at producing the technology, but goes on to radically embrace novelty and turn itself into an experiment.

Hyun-jung, Seoul has gone through prehistory and history and it has now reached the age of “infinite documentation.” Day after day, the capacity of data storage devices is growing to approach infinity, while the physical size of such devices is diminishing to the particle level. Lens-style “GoPro” cameras, subminiature microphones and speech recognition technology along with the development of smartwatches and GPS systems forecast body transplant types of recording media. By having media chips transplanted in one’s body, it will soon be possible to record all human sight, voice and speech, movement between places, and heart rate fluctuations.

What will happen when all of the steps from one person’s birth to death are recorded, and the physical size of the device needed to preserve that data is reduced to an insane level? What if, moreover, such things as data analysis of dead people, the extension of ego using parametric algorithms or self-expansion through Artificial Intelligence (AI) become possible? Once we are able to summon

dead people as holograms and communicate with them, will both our previous perception of graves and the notion of “coexistence” of the living and the dead be assigned a new meaning?

I am picturing a paradigm shift in Seoul, from living “for the sake of living” toward “living in order to die.” What if my infinitely expandable ego, passing through “graves” and being reincarnated, was formed through “collection”—just like in the aforementioned tribe? What if death was not a reset into a new world where all human history and records are irrelevant, but instead led to a life closely connected with the future of this current world? What if memories were not lost, but became “material” to be transmuted? What if the world became a place for long-dead people and the recently deceased to dance along with the living?

What clothes, then, Hyun-jung, would you wear when entering the grave?

## Grave of a Tribe

“Time shall repeat itself, according to habits; we shall live, once again, forgotten memories.”

P.S.

One interesting thing about Marvel Comics is that each series is set in a multiverse. This multiverse, which pro-

vides the setting for the characters and events, includes an infinite number of different universes, most of which consist of one or more dimensions.

This is a device that allows for ongoing popular series to be reconfigured; when a series dating from 1939 needed to be reinterpreted in a contemporary context, the publishers created an entirely new timeline for the series to develop in, rather than altering the timeline laid out by the original series.

Let's look at the popular character of Spider-Man, for example.

1. *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963–ongoing)

- Universe: Earth-616, a reality developed after the destruction of Earth-92131
- Superpower is a result of a radioactive spider's bite
- Works as a photographer for a newspaper

2. *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000–2009)

- Universe: Earth-1610
- Superpower is a result of a genetically altered spider's bite
- Works as a web designer for a newspaper

Likewise, when Marvel Comics needs to create a new version of other existing characters, they develop a narrative in a new universe which may be directly or indirectly

related to the previous universe that served as the setting. Sometimes time shifts are also introduced.

The different versions of characters in different universes sometimes go back to the past through time travel and create a new “alternate universe,” while some events might lead to the death of a time-space and the creation of a new universe. Accordingly, a villain in a specific world can be a hero in another universe. In some universes the Vietnam War happens, in some others it does not. In some, the X-Men exist, in some they do not. These diverse universes collide with each other and again cause expanded production.

In a world where human-scale data holograms have been realized, time might be an infinitesimal, dust-like uni-dimensional point, or it might, on the contrary, be an infinite universe expanding in all directions.

Within such a density converging to zero, where time and space are indistinguishable, and where life, death, past and future are all intersecting, overlapping and in motion—to a point where the notion of “the present” becomes irrelevant,

I reduce myself into a particle of dust,  
And then expand back into a universe.  
Very slowly.  
Round and round.

*Ji-Hyun*

## Second Letter

### Greetings

I hope this finds you well.

It has been quite a while, to the point where memories from our walk are fading. Yesterday, I revisited the places we walked together using Street View, only to have my memory even more blurred. I guess blurred is what I have now, so here goes.

### Fluctuating Ground: Seoul-Grave-Seoul

# Seoul

We heard from our guide (the critic Wonhwa Yoon) about Seoul's past and what still remains of that time. I started living in Seoul only after turning twenty; to me, Seoul is a ground which is fluctuating very slowly, but perceptibly. It is impossible to stand still, but it is also impossible to run fast. Rooting, of course, is not an option. Buildings erected on such a ground seem untrustworthy, just like holograms.

What would art be like in that place called out by our guide? Before that, let's talk about graves.

# Graves

The territorial disputes between the living and the dead

that Yoon talked about were an interesting motivation for me to write you too: spaces for the dead, space needed to remember the dead, and what the living have to give up for that.

I visited my grandparents' grave over the last Lunar New Year on February 8. It is located in Masan Cemetery Park. Now that Masan has been integrated into the city of Changwon, it would actually be Changwon Cemetery Park. A cemetery park is where spaces carved out of the mountain are distributed to dead people, or soon-to-be-dead people, to be precise. That is the most recent grave I have seen. After burning incense sticks and bowing twice, I heard a soft voice asking to look us over, us living ones.

Does my writing about a real grave give you the feeling of returning to ground level with a thud? Like an anchor, instead of a buoy?

However, the grave—the cemetery park was neither an anchor nor a buoy to me. It was rather a faint layer which, no matter how many times it is overlapped, does not increase in opacity. I have practically no memory of my grandparents. I didn't even attend their funeral. And yet, every year I visit them, burn incense and bow. To me, the grave is an empty space. But would it be different had I memories? If I had memories of them, would I caress the grave and try to recall the deceased? If I had seen them being buried here after their deaths, would that bring them back more clearly?

Remembering the dead is the responsibility of the living. Places are built and ceremonies performed in order not to forget. As you explained, Ji-Hyun, a grave reflects all of a country's religion, society, architecture and lifestyle. A grave tells us about the one who is dead and buried; it also tells us about the one who wanted to build it. Without a grave, both the one who is buried and the who buries would be forgotten.

But what if we could forget, in the sense that we wouldn't have to remember? If we didn't need to hold on to our memories, but we could just load the stored information of the deceased and that would be enough. Would graves still be needed then?

More about the cemetery park. After bowing twice and getting up, I looked around. Everything was either a grave, or a place that will be turned into a grave. I took a panorama photo and used my thumb and index finger to zoom out-zoom in-zoom out again. What would happen if the graves shrank, enlarged and shrank again, and then completely shrank into a single point? I think there would be no problem. It might even be more efficient. As graves are an empty place for me, the point would have a small size and weight, while it could be a heavier point for someone else.

Would you agree if I said that point was a "black hole"?

I would like to respond to the "Grave of Seoul" and its landscape that you hypothesized, by proposing a simulation. If we could record every moment of our lives, if the size of the storage device could be as small as a dust particle, and if all those enormous data and deep learning techniques in the field of AI could enable a dead person's ego to continue expanding, we could exhibit our own death. The living will be able to retrieve us instead of remembering us, and should there be enough data, they might be able to communicate with a sentient being that was trained through our lives. Then there would be no need for graves anymore. There would be no need to remember (us).

# Seoul

Let's go back to Seoul. The analogy of Seoul as a fluctuating ground might need some more explanation. I once searched on Google for "1월 (*ilwol*)" in Korean, which literally means the first month of the year (January), and collected the images from the results. I went on and did the same for "2월 (*iwol*)," "3월 (*samwol*)," "4월 (*sawol*)," . . . "12 (*sibiwol*)." The resulting images show information related to the search query. The fact that "January" and "1월" yielded different results reveal something about the data cloud that each keyword is connected to. I created calendar images by "shredding" the collected images, as I have done before.

No one expects to get a record of the future by searching for a future time. The notion of a record of the future doesn't even make sense. Let me put it this way: as of this writing, it is February 2016. If one searched for February 2017, whatever results were generated would be something previously saved; hence, the results would be something from the past. What about February 1997? Would there be any room for doubt there? Would that information be reliable?

So a search is recalling recorded data of the past into the present; searching for the future is recalling a future of the past into the present. Seoul, where I am standing, is similarly structured. When I came to Seoul, I opened up a new page, loaded the recorded past of Seoul on top of the present. Same for the future; I loaded the future of the past on top of the present. This is because I cannot predict the future of Seoul. I just don't have enough data. The result had lots of holes in it, parts were disjointed, and the arrangement went askew each time a spoonful of wrong memory was added. This is how I am building my image of Seoul. What would art be like in that place?

To cite myself from some time ago:

Loop; does it refer to loss of time, or loss of space?

*Hyun-jung*

## An Odd Footnote

Dear Ji-Hyun, Hyun-jung,

I enjoyed reading your letters. In the opening of the 1906 short story "Phyllis and Rosamond," before clarifying that the story is a detailed record of a day in the life of two sisters, Virginia Woolf writes that "posterity will be as glad of the catalogue as we should be if we had such a record of how the door keeper at the Globe, and the man who kept the Park gates passed Saturday March 18th in the year of our Lord 1568." An extensive documentation of a day at some point in the past belongs in the field of microhistory. If this is the case, I wonder if records of fantasies could be part of the history of science. I picture our letters, enclosed in capsules, traveling through time. Well, we should tag this; we walked through Seoul on February 19, 2016, and this writing is a record of fantasies inspired by the walk.

Our original plan was to have a conversation, loosely sharing two key words, "Seoul" and "grave," through an online chat. The adequate forms of imagination change depending on the platform, as does the content of the writing as a result. Had we had our conversation over an online chat, it would have been harder to hold on to a single thread of thought due to time constraints, but on the other hand we might have been able to address many more topics by throwing out links as

they came to mind. Then the documentation of our conversation might have served as a collection of material for someone's lucid dreams.

However, we decided to write letters in order to convey our different thoughts with more depth; my role was to take your letters as material and add footnotes or edit them into some other form. For the time being, I have been reading along your correspondence, as if I were a ghost. Now, what could your letters have been turned into?

As I read Ji-Hyun's first letter, I thought of an encyclopedia of knowledge. Bernard Werber, the French writer who caused a sensation in Korea with the trilogy of novels *Les Fourmis* (The Ants), started writing an encyclopedia at the age of fourteen by gathering knowledge on various matters that interested him. The book is sort of a boy's treasure box. The writer revealed that he consulted this encyclopedia while writing *Les Fourmis*, and he even mentioned it in his novels as if it were a real publication. After publishing the novels, he ended up also publishing the encyclopedia, *L'Encyclopédie du savoir relatif et absolu* (The Encyclopedia of Relative and Absolute Knowledge); the text falls somewhere between science and literature. For instance, the book addresses quite seriously the possibility of a new microcosm appearing each time we open a bottle. It also addresses the dreamers' tribe that Ji-Hyun mentioned. I had the idea of taking the themes

that you two are developing together or independently, and editing them into a partial encyclopedia of knowledge, not yet officially adopted, and situated between fantasy and speculation. Having a different perspective would also be interesting. For a moment, I imagined being an archaeologist in the distant future who had just unsealed your records from a capsule. We might even have a conversation as holograms.

Now for the main part. After reading Hyun-jung's response, I concluded that your letters as a conversation have a complete structure by themselves. Rather than employing extensive editing techniques, I would prefer to join the conversation. I have a few things to talk about in response to the multiverse and holograms that Ji-Hyun mentioned and the data cloud that Hyun-jung mentioned. There are also other themes I would like to initiate. Writing is a platform that always imposes limits upon us. We should stop having this conversation online. Let's pick a date and time.

*Ahreum*

## Mystery Holes, the Gone, and the Remaining

Hokeypokey, Yoongky, In-ah Shin

### We Headed for SeMA

32

On weekdays, Deoksugung-gil, a street named after the palace it circumscribes, is reserved solely for pedestrians for one and a half hours from 11:30 a.m. Taking an alternative route called Saemun-ro, I could see the Seoul Museum of History, the final stop of the walk we'd planned for that day, which would start from Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA). It seemed easier to park here at the history museum so I did so. Across from the entrance of the parking lot

I came upon Seosomun-ro, a street I felt was at once familiar and strange, as I'd spent more than half of my life in Seoul in the area. The fortress wall, which surrounded the city during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), had Four Great Gates, and Seosomun Gate was one of the four small gates that were placed in between the larger ones.<sup>2</sup> Seosomun was an exit through which corpses were carried out of the city, and it was also used when prisoners were taken to be

I believe it was at the peak of the railway workers' strike. On my way to return a book to the Seoul Metropolitan Library, I ran into a throng of protestors and took a detour toward Jeong-dong. I wandered along Deoksugung-gil, which according to superstition has the power to break up couples who walk along its path, before taking refuge in a café called Jeon's Coffee House. The protesters' cries to break and overthrow this or that followed me there, although a bit

33

I spotted a building used as a traffic patrol station, its bricks and traditional roof tiles striking a nice harmony with the historic setting of Gyeonghuigung Palace. Once parked, I took a closer look at the traffic patrol station, and to my surprise I could see that the bricks and roof tiles were in fact images printed on adhesive vinyl sheets. This city often engages in cover-ups destined to be found out “like an incomprehensible void, a mystery hole.”<sup>1</sup> What for? “What should we make of it?”

executed. Although this is now history, and not commonly known, I still feel a chill run down my spine whenever I pass by the site. When I see people walking out of buildings wearing blank faces it feels as if Seosomun Gate still exists as the gate of death, albeit hidden from our view. I quickly passed the spot where Seosomun Gate once stood and headed for SeMA.

subdued from being some distance away from the strike's epicenter. Consciously taking my mind away, I turned my gaze to a window that was older than those cries and began daydreaming of the days when this small building was as shiny and new as the Tower Palace apartment. Being back on this street brings back memories of the day of the strike in confused flashbacks. But I am a different person now and no longer daydream as I used to years ago. I pass by street vendors and tourists until I finally find a set of sculptures in the shape of people who look as if they've been pressed flat.<sup>3</sup> The first time I tried to find SeMA, those sculptures threw me off and I walked straight past the art museum. Though slightly annoyed at the time, those dwarfed figures now help me find the museum. The entrance is to the left.

1. The underlined citations are from *I Will Continue*, a novel written in Korean by the author Hwang Jeong-eun (Seoul: Changbi Publishers, 2014), 115–117.

2. Translator's note: Seosomun literally means “small west gate” in Korean.

3. Yi Hwankwon, *Jangdokdae*, 2008.

## At the Art Museum

As I grew up in a province away from the capital city, I have no recollection of the building that is now SeMA as being anything else. When I first visited the art museum, no one I knew remembered or told me that the building was formerly the Supreme Court. It was much later that I learned of the building's history. A sign now stands at the museum's entrance indicating that the building is a registered cultural heritage site and explaining its historical significance.<sup>4</sup> I "do not know" what discussions took place leading up to the repurposing of the old Supreme Court as an art museum. The Seoul I know would have annihilated the old to replace with the new. "Anyway, the key is I do not know no matter how hard I try."

The current exhibition at SeMA, titled *Seoul Babel* (from January 19 to April 9, 2016), seemed to generate a rhythm quite separate from the quiet atmosphere outside. The air was filled with variation as if some elements were bursting into life and others were disappearing into nonexistence. The discordant rhythms generated by the individual art and cultural spaces invited to the exhibition were precarious and all the more intriguing. Who is the artist and who is the viewer? What kind of artists can these viewers make? Questions were flooding into my mind when a man who had once expounded to me on the importance of art entered my thoughts. He had lamented that his fellow artists were giving up art in the

My friend told me that his hobby was going to art museums. Before I actually met him on a blind date I had asked my friend "What if he's the kind of guy who goes to see Ryan McGinley?" As a woman of refined tastes who enjoys the pleasure of visiting art museums to "appreciate true works of art" I was certain that I would not find him compatible. My friend had dismissed my misgivings not fully understanding where I was coming from, and my blind date turned out to be the kind of guy whose favorite modern artist is Gustav Klimt. Well, I admit I had prejudged him. If my friend and that man were to call me a hypocrite, I wouldn't be able to object. Anyway, for some time now I've not come across a single artwork that has

4. The sign reads: "Formerly the Supreme Court building. Registration No: Registered Cultural Heritage No. 237 / Built in: 1928 / Address: 37 Seosomun-dong, Jung-gu, Seoul, Korea. This building was completed in 1928 as the Gyeongseong Court House. Prior to that at the end of Joseon dynasty, the High Court, or Pyeongriwon occupied the site. The current building was used as the Supreme Court until in 1995 when the Supreme Court relocated to the present location in Seocho-dong. Reminiscent of Gothic style it consists of one floor underground and three floors above ground. The choice of the semi-circular arch over the pointed arch adds a sense of grandeur. The structures primarily consist of reinforced concrete and bricks overlaid with granite and red tiles. The building layout is in the shape of the Chinese character for day, sun, date, day of the month: "日." Symmetry was achieved with two square inner courts placed on either side of the central starway and passage. After the Supreme Court relocated, Seoul City Government acquired the building and renovated it to house the Seoul Museum of Art. The remodeling project revealed structural weaknesses, and the building was taken down leaving only the frontal façade preserved. The dismantled remainder was built anew. This is a prime example of preserving historically valuable buildings with a focus on keeping the front façade intact."

face of real life problems. I remember advising him to frequent the art museums as there he might find new colleagues. Each year he had been busy putting together exhibitions until he too disappeared. For a number of years now I have heard nothing of him but he has suddenly come to my mind. I wonder where he is.

left a lasting impression on me despite my genuine search for a true work of art. The same is true of my experience at SeMA. And I still complain, "Why is *Stanley Kubrick* here?" There in the lobby I saw a paper axe, a large portrait of twins, and a small model of a Space Odyssey set barely big enough to fit one person, offering quite a shallow form of entertainment. Yet visitors were busy taking photos in front of these displays. One of them asked me to take a picture for her, and I thus joined the crowd. Come to think of it, in every art museum in Seoul you will find people busy with their cameras.

## Walked along the Walls of the Deoksugung Palace

“I’m dying for a vacation,” said a riot policeman standing guard at the mouth of Deoksugung-gil. At first I wondered why riot police were stationed on this small street but found out soon enough, as the street was between the US ambassador’s residence, also known as Habib House, on the left and Deoksugung Palace on the right. Behind Habib House was the unseemly site where the old Kyunggi Girls’ High School used to be.<sup>5</sup> The grounds left to the elements without a tending hand looked barren with traces of historical buildings in a confused mixture with piles of waste.<sup>6</sup> I could see a screen above the fence with images of a thatched roof house in the woods, a boy in traditional attire crossing a stream, a nameless valley, an ox tilling the fields and a winter

Deoksugung-gil was the same. The man who assured me we would not break up after walking on that street is no longer with me. The words of an old song came to my lips: “All is gone with time, not a trace behind, but some things on Deoksugung-gil still remain.” The words evaporated at the sight of a sign put up by the Salvation Army banning followers of Shincheonji, considered a cult by most Christians, from entering the street. Some pedestrians stopped to look. For whatever reason I looked around. There were other participants of *Guide to Guide* dressed in dark clothes and our guide Wonhwa Yoon was telling them the history of the street. From afar a woman was taking photos of the scene. It was like being

It was some time ago when the lady from the Jongno District Office, who was working as a tour guide around the Seoul City Fortress Wall, enthusiastically, and at times with some emotional words, explained the various places in the Jeong-dong area. Each building, which had seemed in the past quite romantic for no particular reason, became colored with the history of the Daehan Empire (1897–1910). Interesting anecdotes were shared. For example, the myth about walking along Deoksugung-gil leading to break-ups originated because the Family Court used to be where SeMA now stands. I don’t remember all the stories she told, but they tore off the cloak of romanticism that had previously covered the building, leaving

scene of a farmhouse and traditional jars. The scenes were reminiscent of short stories by modern Korean writers Kim Yujeong and Hwang Soonwon. I “don’t know what it is” and why “a mystery hole” of scenes had to fill the large screen there. But the scenes stayed put, biding their time, while completely unable to have relevance to the land they were covering up.

in a movie directed by Hong Sangsoo. It didn’t seem real. Even the history being told, which at other times I would’ve found quite interesting, seemed vague and distant. Perhaps it was all because of the silence and solitude that have come upon the place during its long existence in time. Thoughts came and went repeatedly.

only its outer shell, a remnant of the past. That shell exists here and now, despite the memories that have seeped into the art museum, the swimming pool, and the other museums nearby. And the tourists as always take “pretty pictures” of them.

5. According to the Basic Plan for the Restoration of Seonwonjeon in Deoksugung Palace drafted by the Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea, this site is where Seonwonjeon, a royal portrait hall, used to be. From April to August 2013, the site was excavated to reveal remnants of the foundations of two buildings in the old palace compounds, namely Heungdeokjeon and Heungbokjeon.

6. At the end of the fence was a sign that read: “The site is being excavated for cultural artifacts as part of the Deoksugung Seonwonjeon restoration project. Access and photography are only allowed to authorized personnel for safety reasons.” From this I gathered that traces of the now gone Seonwonjeon had been found.

## At the End of Deoksungung-gil Was a Large Road

Buildings blocked my view of the sky and noise from the cars deafened my ears. As we continued to walk along the larger road we could see the entrance to Gyeonghuigung Palace in the distance. It was our final destination: SeMA Gyeonghuigung. I was curious about the nature of this branch of SeMA. Apparently, it is an art museum that is primarily rented out. The actual museum building consisted of a steel frame membrane resembling a very large tent. The inside seemed more appropriate for trade fairs than an art exhibitions. I wondered why they had built it like this, and while walking, my thoughts moved on to how the city extends its life span. Broadly speaking there are two approaches: fix what's

I recall an exhibition I took part in, which was the first joint show boldly conceived by undergraduate art students. In the midst of the project, the planning team unilaterally informed the participants that the exhibition had to open two weeks earlier than planned. Moreover, the venue would also change to a costlier alternative and cancellation penalties would have to be paid for the one that had already been booked. Some participants complained that the planning team had risked too much in renting SeMA Gyeonghuigung, but the majority felt it was better to have a more well-known venue. In the end, we held the exhibition, but many sacrifices were made and some artists weren't fully satisfied with their works

I turned and saw among the buildings the head of the giant man with a hammer. It reminded me of the ice cream I'd had at Paul Bassett each time I was in the area. It seems that I am not alone in seeing *Hammering Man*, which is the pride of Heungkuk Life Insurance, as a sort of a common road sign.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, pedestrians would have gathered in front of it to remember this "special" public art with the customary photograph. Today, I walked past it listening to a dialogue on art. Yet, the *Hammering Man* sculpture did not enter the conversation, which may be an indication that he is not considered very special. Our walk ended a while later, and I sat down for a cup of coffee falling back into that daydream of the

already there, or build something new. Seoul in more cases than not opts for the latter. Unfortunately, new constructions are most often undertaken with only the present in mind and no long-term view for the future, so they end up building something new again not long after. The occupants, meanwhile, also come and go in shorter cycles, which further cuts the life cycle of the buildings. This was true of the Seoul I saw today. The limited contemplation of the past will often emerge unexpectedly like mystery holes. "The things that we don't understand, no matter how hard we think about and look into them, were perhaps made that way from the beginning." "Like an incomprehensible void, mystery holes" are lurking in places across this city.

having rushed to complete them two weeks ahead of schedule. The young and passionate curating team also organized a subset of the works to be shown at the presidential Blue House. I opted out of that one, and that was the end of my first exhibition. Now back again at SeMA Gyeonghuigung I am told that the place was used primarily for exhibitions organized by various art groups. I looked around and all the people that had filled the gallery years back had been replaced by strangers taking pictures or listening to *Guide to Guide*.

past when the building now occupied by Jeon's Coffee House was a hot landmark. Where did people in those days stop to take pictures and have conversations? What is gone and what remains? Between Tower Palace and Jeon's Coffee House, which will stay and which will go? Between the artworks now at SeMA and *Hammering Man*, which will stay and which will disappear? My thoughts on these questions were rather gloomy. And unless something changes, things will stay gloomy. Unless something changes . . . .

7. Jonathan Borofsky, *Hammering Man*, 2002.

## Childhood's End

Kim Yeongsu, Yoon Hyangro, Seewon Hyun

We met on February 26, 2016, in the neighborhood of Sangbong-dong, Seoul, where Kim Yeongsu, Seawoo Chung, and Aram Hwang used to run Trading Post [an experimental site described by Kim, Chung, and Hwang as “whatever space”—Ed.]. The past tense has replaced the present tense before we knew it. As I listened again to the recording of the gloomy conversation we had that evening, I was struck by the merry tone of our voices. We kept repeating that our conversation was small talk and off the record. Despite the nature of our talk, it was necessary to keep a record of our words. The next day, H wrote the following:

I am not familiar with Yongma Land [an amusement park that has not been in use since 2011—Ed.], which Kim Yeongsu was talking about. I do not know the area where Yoon Hyangro lived. However, when I look at the work of these two artists, I am glad I was born in a slightly different period, went to a

different school, and lived in a different city. Not knowing gladdens me. I like that they don't know about the religious community Aga Dongsan—although I ask myself how they could possibly not have heard of it—just like I am happy that I don't know about Yongma Land, a place so familiar to Kim, and that I did not see the scenery that Yoon saw in Taiwan and Japan. Our curiosity will make it possible to move forward as individuals, each with our different perspectives. It's true that we shared a dish. However, taste is easily lost, which leads me to think that it might be nice to go on a trip in search of new restaurants and local dishes. Since it's not possible to understand everything, I run over our conversation again in my head before I go to sleep. What were the questions and who answered? Did we not ask the questions because we already knew the answers? As Yoon pointed out during Kim's talk about the national college entrance exam, art, unlike math, does not have clear cut answers. We agreed that we would definitely not return to that restaurant. “Yes,” everyone agreed, “let's go to the Vietnamese restaurant in Sangbong-dong next time,” and on that note, we parted.

## Five Days Later

My dear two H's,

Hello. I hope you have been doing well since we last met for dinner. It snowed in Seoul yesterday and this morning. I spent the day as if swimming inside a snow globe of Seoul.

I am currently staying in a hotel in downtown Seoul. The lobby is decorated with the work of artist Hong Seung-Hye, and there is an exhibition area inside the restaurant where I take my breakfast too. I never imagined I would come across works of contemporary art in a hotel that I would be passing through. Art that we meet in hotels, at best, usually reminds us of the work of that certain now-deceased professor from Hongik University. Obviously, breakfast taken surrounded by contemporary art is lousy, but other than that, I am doing well.

The title of the exhibition held in the area next to the restaurant is *Log into the Balance: Dimension variable  $\leq$  space*. Obviously, it has nothing to do with the 2015-founded non-profit exhibition space Dimension Variable that comes to mind. All the same, it is an interesting coincidence, wouldn't you say?

On a less interesting note, I also got into art by coincidence. Back in my college years as an art major, I never once thought about becoming an artist after graduation. Actually, I only applied to art college out of a desire to "go to a good school." To make a long story short, I did not

succeed and ended up going to a private regional university that has since changed its name. One reason for my failure could have been that I like everyone else of my generation trusted without question the words of then prime minister Lee Hae-chan, who claimed that anybody could go to college if they excelled in one area; another reason could have been my desire to find an easy way to get in to a good college. I wonder what would have happened if I had studied something other than art in high school; I even attended an art academy after school. I'm the type of person who probably never would have set foot on an art college campus had it not been for my misguided desire to find an easy way in to a good college.

I was not interested in going to classes in college. Back in those days, a college education was almost like compulsory education—one last tutorial before we went off to the battlefield. The upside of being in an art college was that we had more time for thinking and gaining diverse experiences than students in other colleges. Once I had made it clear I was not interested in making art, I didn't have any professors or lecturers on my back. Grades were given out generously. I thought about starting my own business or going abroad to study after graduating. However, interest does not equate with reality. My family's financial situation became very bad after I graduated, and I was left with no money. It was at this unclear time that I happened to hold a solo exhibition at Ccuull &

Ccuull Pool and started little by little to get used to being called an artist. What followed afterward can be easily found in my curriculum vitae. Of course, being an ignorant person who is incapable of learning from experience, I am now studying again in graduate school.

The day passed by as I wrote this letter, and I am now back at my house in the eastern outskirts of Seoul. Actually, I wanted your advice on something but got carried away talking about myself. I have been skeptical about being an artist of late. H, you told me recently that I was a romanticist. It may not mean much, but in an age where a classic is making a comeback in the name of zombies, I was flattered to be called a romanticist. Isn't romanticism opposed to neoclassicism? I have always wanted to be the one who delivers the counterpunch, and your remark made me feel that way for a brief moment. Oh! Since I don't know art history that well, maybe what I'm saying is completely wrong. As I told you earlier, I did not pay attention in class. Moreover, I majored in oriental painting, so I don't know Western art history well. In any case, I feel like I am faithfully following the path of the romanticist right down into nihilism. I do not have the courage to overcome the nonsensical situation of making art in Seoul. My greatest wish is to be officially diagnosed with *hikikomori* (social withdrawal) syndrome in Japan and become naturalized there. But I know all too well that my wish is hopeless. They wouldn't accept someone

like me even as a refugee.

I've recently been thinking about not doing art any more. It's because I find that Seoul is not a good place to do art. You saw for yourself when you visited, but there is still a relatively strong regional economy in my neighborhood here in the far eastern outskirts of Seoul. My middle school friend runs a supermarket that he inherited from his parents. He has secured a firm place within the regional economy. It's the same for my elementary school friend who runs a restaurant. They are busy setting up golf appointments. I feel out of place when I'm with them. It's been a while since I have joined them. I'm not interested in golf. I would be a third wheel anyway if I went. After all, I'm just a nobody who graduated from a regional college. When I look at my friends, I regret having gone to college. I imagine that I could have led a comfortable life as the owner of a Japanese restaurant if I had inherited the family business instead of going to college. Of course, inheriting a family business is not my cup of tea because it feels a bit like taking over a video game that somebody else has started; but in Seoul, it probably would have more meaning than doing art.

I thought about the possible pros of doing art in Seoul. Although there aren't many, if I had to come up with one, it would be the city's fast pace of consumption. You may wonder why that would be a good thing. It's because there is a clear limit as to how far one can go. I

know an artist who has received all the art awards available in Seoul, who confided that he didn't know what to do anymore. The art scene, both in terms of awards and artists, is so small that it is quickly consumed. I guess in the long run, that could be a bad thing, and sad too, since the artists are consumed, but their work does not circulate in the market. At the end of the day, I should accept that an art market that could include the likes of me does not exist. If I have one hope, it is to use that fast-paced consumption as fuel to circulate my work elsewhere. In any case, my realistic goal would be to consume and burn myself out as fast as possible. Like kindling used to light a fire, I would find some consolation if one of the sparks that I produced could start a fire elsewhere. Now that I've decided to burn myself up, art has become something strange that is neither a means nor an objective, and I'm overcome with a feeling of doubt. What can I achieve with art? What meaning does doing art in Seoul have? Hearing me talk, you may advise me to leave Seoul. The problem is, I really like Seoul. I wish to meet and talk with you two soon. That would help appease my distorted thoughts.

The meal we had together last time was disappointing. You were nice enough to visit me so far away in eastern Seoul, and I was sorry that I wasn't able to recommend a better restaurant. There aren't many good eateries in this part of town where they usually serve dishes to accompany the drinking, but if you come again, I would

like to recommend a better restaurant. How about the Vietnamese restaurant that we couldn't go to last time? Or maybe, it's ridiculous to look for exotic food here. Perhaps it would be better to have *kalguksu* (noodle soup) again since everyone enjoyed that last time.

Still trapped inside the snow globe,

*K*

#### Eight Days Later

Last time when we met in Sangbong-dong, we talked briefly about the district of Gangseo-gu. I graduated from an art high school out here. Our talk made me curious, and I took out my high school yearbook for the first time since graduation. I noticed that the layout of the album resembled the graduation exhibition catalogue we made in art college.

I skimmed through the faces of the teachers that I no longer remembered very well, and arrived at my class. In my high school, there were five classes of fifty students each in the twelfth grade, or a total of 250 senior students. What I was most curious about was the list of addresses on the last page of the album. I had forgotten about it, but it contained the addresses and telephone and mobile phone numbers of all the teachers and students. Something that

was still possible back in the early 2000s I guess. Being an art high school, the students came from various neighborhoods, and I was curious to know the breakdown of the students by district. I recall that the school had a few school buses, most probably for students living in the Mok-dong and Ilsan City areas. The breakdown showed there were fifty students from Gangseo-gu [a gu is a district within a city—Ed.], normal considering the school was located in that district. Yangcheon-gu came in second with forty students. Then, there were thirty students from Bucheon City; twenty six from Goyang City; fourteen from Yeongdeungpo-gu; ten from Mapo-gu; and nine each from Seocho-gu and Guro-gu. So apart from the students from the surrounding areas, most of the students were from the western parts of Seoul, areas known for having parents who were highly motivated with regard to their children's education. In fact, back then, there were days when I thought the competitive parents of the eighth school district and their children, who duly played the role of their eager children, were like actors in a play. Their behavior, at least inside the school, seemed to accurately mimic the objects of their desire.

I spent my adolescence in Gangseo-gu watching animations. My ninth grade homeroom teacher, an *otaku* obsessed with Japanese bubble era (from the late 1980s to the early 1990s) animation, played his favorites for us in between classes, and my high school classmate from Mok-

dong also shared with me his Berserk collection. In hindsight, my inclination toward gloomy subculture seems to have been greatly influenced by my classmate who got me into RPG games and used my ID card behind my back to create an account for himself under the name Kazuya.<sup>1</sup> I guess my life revolved around *otaku*. I even used the Internet service provider Unitel to connect with online discussion boards from time to time.

Since my three months in Taipei, Taiwan, last summer followed by my short first visit to Japan, I have been thinking about the influx of culture, its localization, and the many different branches that grow out of it as a result. Just take the case of Asia. I recognize something like that when I study art history, searching for the original, and then the original of the original, of the societies and cultures being produced by our generation, which grew up watching animations of the Japanese bubble era.

During a talk on the exhibitions held in Seoul in 2015, someone commented: “When *deok-jil* (the act of *deok*—short form of the Korean term *o-deok-hoo*, derived from *otaku*—or collecting and looking up things related to an obsessive interest) becomes art or . . . is called art, it is perceived as something sublime or noble, but this is not so. Rather, perhaps the trivial and insignificant acts

1. Mishima Kazuya is the main protagonist of the first video game of the Tekken series. Tekken is a three-dimensional fighting game created, developed, and released by Namco Bandai.

of *deok-jil*, when they come together, can triumph over the sublime and the noble. The exhibitions explore how the new generation of artists, those born in the late 1980s, are understood within a certain trend, and how these artists may digest and absorb the exhibition format within this context.” Recently, there has been a tendency to group together young artists who use diverse subculture methodologies and images, either actively or on a higher level of abstraction, under the new term “*deok art*.” As I listened to people talk about “bringing *deok-jil* into the world of art,” I thought to myself, I would rather become a solid fake than seek authenticity. I find that some of the art movements after postmodernism are closer to secondary creations. The more databases are used actively in a work, the closer it feels to being a contemporary artwork of secondary creation.<sup>2</sup> I have even seen some solo exhibitions that felt to me like an *only-jeon* (although it is strange for one artist to hold an *only-jeon* by him/herself).<sup>3</sup>

I don’t think that these “cells,” which continuously change places as well as their form and character, will allow much time for close examination. As such, I plan

2. Secondary creation refers to all works that borrow the plot and characters of an original creation. Please refer to the entry on secondary creation on [namu.wiki](http://namu.wiki) for more details.

3. *Only-jeon* is a compound word made of the English word “only” plus the Chinese character “展” meaning “exhibition.” It is an event where people with a similar interest come together to exhibit and sell secondary creation works inspired by a specific work within a specific genre.

to keep myself even busier than last year, searching and seeing things. Nowadays, people can access exhibitions in various and new spaces through photos that visitors take and upload or share. As a result of the self-promoting effect of such photos, people sometimes feel they have seen the exhibitions in person. In fact, it’s true that some things could be discussed without seeing an exhibition or a space in person. After all, it is now 2016.

### Nine Days Later

Your words “solid fake” left a deep impression on me, and I plan to ponder over it for a long time. This is not a letter, but I felt like following in your footsteps. I’ve been curious as to how the two of you were doing, and wanted to say hi.

I woke up this morning thinking that I didn’t like writing what could be spoken instead. I don’t like to write what can be said, and certainly do not want to say what I want to write, but on March 3, K told me I seemed particularly relaxed that day talking. I felt it too. I think it’s because I was able to say exactly what I had in mind. I’ve rarely said what was on my mind. As he drank his peach tea, K went on to say that education was like a service, somewhat like when someone washes your hair for you at the hair salon. We also exchanged our thoughts on what happens when an enormous amount of informa-

tion enters our ears: even if the information is not very useful, the input-output process triggers a sort of pride in our consumer-conditioned minds. In that sense, I am led to wonder about the education that the two H's and K have received up to now. These days, I don't like the word "feedback," nor the expression "hold in common" for that matter. "Comment" is a word that I'd like to shred to pieces. Someone said today: "I can't write if I don't get any comments." Well, I myself say "comment" and "hold in common" a lot unconsciously.

Meanwhile, a few days ago late at night, I watched a sermon on the website of the Christian sect that celebrity actor Park Bo-geom reportedly belongs to, the Jesus Centered Church. They say it was the church pastor who gave the actor his name, which in Korean means "shining sword." I wonder if we could try to categorize Koreans into those named by Buddhist monks and those by Christian pastors. I don't know how it is these days, but it's scary to think that we could track down all the people who were together at a given time by the addresses and telephone numbers listed on the back of a high school yearbook.

When I was young, there was a 070 number that you could dial to find out your fortune. I remember calling once and getting a voice recording saying, "It is not possible to tell your fortune because you are too young." There are things you can't do because you're either too young or too old. However, I heard the anchorperson saying on

the news this morning that Kim Jong-in, the seventy-six-year-old interim leader of the Minjoo Party, was not too old at all to become the nation's president because in this day and age people can live to be a hundred. I just find that it's not even funny. Singer Lee Ae-ran may be consoling the public with her hit song "100-Year Life," which she sings in the tone of a 1960s country person who has come to the city in search of a better life, but what do you really think about this? Shouldn't we differentiate between getting old and being truly young?

I happened to see a news story on Aga Dongsan one day. The story aired on December 1, 1996, so that must have been when I saw it. This doesn't concern art, but I thought the story showed a perfect example of a "solid fake." The followers of the sect apparently called sect leader Kim Gi-sun "aga" (same pronunciation as the Korean word for baby). They claimed that it stood for "elegant song." The sect leader wore traditional Korean clothing, *hanbok*, and ran the sect like a village or family. Kim's words were law. Aga Dongsan, was based in Daewol 2-ri in Icheon City of Gyeonggi-do Province, and accumulated its wealth through a record company named Synnara Records. Kim and her followers are said to have made money by selling fish cake and rice cake. You may also remember the Salvation Sect back in 2014. The female followers were called Mom Kim, Mom Park, and so on. In a nation that is evocative of a new religion, the various

social systems built on the concept of the family are unpredictably ridiculous.

From the words, letters, and personal conclusions that I have shared with the two of you, it heartens me to think there are more than three people around me with whom I can share funny things. As K says, let's think of it as "east Seoul and west Seoul meeting in the middle." I also really like Seoul, where I can have conversations with the two of you in my mother tongue. I bought a Chinese language book for beginners. I got as far as "wo ai ni," but can't bring myself to accept that I should use different tones when I speak. Not yet anyhow.

**Octavia E. Butler,  
Jorge Luis Borges, Walter Benjamin**

Juyoung Jung, Jeamin Cha, Helen Ku

**"Do you like this body?" he asked.**

**"It's my gift to you."**

—Octavia E. Butler, *Wild Seed*

Before I acquired this alphanumeric name, I was placed in a tattered box and stored deep inside an old closet. It was last year that I was taken out of that darkness, three years after my creator had left this world. That day, strange voices and unfamiliar body heat filled her room where the cold had always hung even in the heat of mid-summer. They handled me ever so cautiously like I was a precious object. Their worrisome eyes, filled with curiosity, examined her handwriting. Six months later, I was brought here. People wearing white gloves removed the blanket of dust that had descended on me while I was in her room. They were careful to leave no other trace on me than perhaps her fingerprints. To save me from the harmful particles in the air, I was put in a gray box and then placed in the second compartment of shelf number 23 in the museum storage. Everyone I come in contact with wears white gloves. They are the ones who gave me

this alphanumeric name. They are the ones who regularly check in on me and bring me news of the world outside. (Actually, they do not bring stories from elsewhere for me. This place is filled with secret tales of the dead and the living. This is where they feel safe from the world, or conversely, where the world can be kept safe from them.) Through them, I learned there were many discussions regarding my status. According to them, a number of conditions need to be met in order to enter this place. One thing they consider is how useful something is to posterity. I contained way too many personal notes to meet this requirement. (On top of that, my creator was having deliriums toward the end of her life. Suffering from a prolonged illness, she left deluded notes in her last few months. I wish that she had not written about these experiences, but as far as I know, all of her stories were true. She would speak to a strange man whose face she saw in a clock. She would wave to a happy-looking family who would disappear into the closet as soon as she opened its doors. Because of the sensitive materials that are better left private, I only get to meet those who promise to never expose these secrets.) Despite it all, I was able to come to this place because of a significant number of sketches she made in me. Her sketches ultimately determined how useful I was to posterity. Useful. Posterity. The unknown future. These words ring about in the air long after the white-gloved people leave the premises. Time passes even

though it is impossible to tell whether it is day or night in this room, where objects are left behind to fill the void. I cannot tell how much time has passed since my arrival, but I can make estimates based on the changes I see in the people who come regularly to check in on me. I have met dozens of strangers in my time here. On such occasions, I am transported in my gray box to a room with a small window overlooking a forest. Some of those people look at me and let out an over-the-top sigh of admiration. Others leave in disappointment. Either way, no one seeks me out for a second time. The white-gloved people try their best to preserve me against aging. I am becoming old like my creator. The difference is that I am aging more gracefully. A while ago, the white-gloved people were talking about me and my age-related degeneration. They were saying that, before it's too late, they need to convert my creator's memories into a series of numbers, which will then be stored elsewhere—a place where I can be connected to other traces left behind by my creator. I remember the people who shed tears after she departed from this world. And ever since my arrival here, I think of these questions. Useful? The unknown future? Once I get there, will I get to see her again? Or rather, will I get to become her? Would anyone like her to return? Would she be pleased with herself—wherever she may be—if she were to be reborn there?

## I had always imagined Paradise as a kind of library.

–Jorges Luis Borges, “Blindness”

I spent all morning writing replies to complaints. A middle-aged man wearing a modernized *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing) came in, angrily demanding to speak to the director. He was a slob who was just not in touch with the times, and he wouldn't shut the fuck up. He kept saying there was a bad smell, subtle but rank. The real problem here is not the bad smell. It's the fact that no one is allowed to emit one's own scent. I made a face that I hoped would read “nothing-I-can-do,” but he was merciless. (These middle-aged men who love to put in complaints at the library somehow believe that the air can be cleaned. Other common annoying types include people who ask for recommendations for national literature; ones who enthusiastically recommend such and such books that they have just finished reading; and those who ask you to help them find that particular novel written by Hemingway. The vulgarity and pitifulness of these people somehow make me want to respond to them in a more genuine way. Perhaps these people I consider vulgar are more tolerable than the ones who show up pretentiously wearing modernized *hanbok*. Any which way, these types are all surprisingly squeaky clean, lacking in any smell. The real culprits behind the smell are those who show up from time to time at the library—I can't tell whether they are men or

women, but they always come in with tired faces, scratching their heads and various body parts, just to plop over at a desk with a pile of random books beside them. They are vagrants for whom the space is neither private nor public, who could fall on either side of the fence. These people smell like sauerkraut. Then there are the old people. They take more than a minute to pull their library cards out of their wallets with shaky hands and impatient eyes. They express bitter anger and make various sounds of anguish—ugh, haw, hmph. These old people always smell like brass bowls: slightly fishy in the summer. At times, the bad smell comes from unexpected sources: regular patrons who consistently sign out books according to their established taste; frail looking nerds with wireframe glasses; those who last all through the winter in the same coat. These people think paradise is a kind of library and mistake the bad smell for the smell of old paper.) In the middle of writing my response, I stop to sniff my shoulders. I think I smell a bit. It's probably because I've been here the longest. Am I becoming steeped in this smell? Am I getting used to it? I have complicated thoughts about this smell. Initially I thought it unfair, then later, unfortunate. I resolutely finished writing the response. It was a bland letter without a hint of color, without a hint of smell. Dear patron, we apologize for the inconvenience. We will take measures to enhance your experience of our branch in a timely manner. Additionally, we are enclosing some

information on facilities maintenance for your purposes. Thank you. I printed out a leaflet that urged patrons to wash their hands and to leave their work/reading spaces tidy. I hung it up on the bulletin board beside the monthly-recommended reading poster with portraits of political figures like Martin Luther King, Kim Gu, and Kim Dae-jung. I took a few steps back to make sure it wasn't hung crooked. Looking at the portraits of the three, I conjectured that perhaps all great men have shiny foreheads. I wondered about the banality of the wash-your-hands public service announcement beside Martin Luther King, Kim Gu, and Kim Dae-jung. With a sullen face, I went to the cafeteria for lunch. The lunch menu consisted of uninspired marinated vegetables and soybean soup. A patron whom I recognized from earlier in the morning gave me a nod as I took my tray of food to a table. He was an old man who would frequently ask if I worked part time, what I majored in, which university I attended. I sat at a table behind his and slowly chomped on some sponge cake with milk. As I was chewing, I stared at the back of his gray bulgy parka. I was feeling more or less settled. Dull, but not uncomfortable. I fought the urge to sniff my sleeves once again. I decided it was impolite to be sniffing while seated for a meal.

**And even though the purchaser may be thoroughly acquainted with the book ordered from a catalogue, the individual copy always remains a surprise and the order always a bit of a gamble.**

—Walter Benjamin,

“Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting”

2F, 13, Tongui-dong, Jongno-gu, Seoul. It was once a publishing house and, at another point in its history, a Chinese restaurant. Two years ago, it was an architect's office. Now it's a combined bookstore and publishing house. There's been a revolving door of owners here—actually, tenants, to be more accurate. Amid the changes, there have been a couple of bookish tenants.

Bookstores are easier to enter than museums or galleries. People come to bookstores because they like books (or at least we'd like to think this was the case). They also come to just browse, or to promote rental services of machinery such as photocopier and credit card machine. Sometimes people come to consult us on how to make their own books or even how to start up their own bookstores. The advantage of having a small bookstore is that we can give close scrutiny to the real range of visitors that frequent us. Those who are interested in the craft of book-making meticulously examine their selection for any scratches. At the sight of a slight imperfection on the cover of a plastic-wrapped book, these customers demand a re-

placement for a brand new copy. They cannot trust even the printer's original wrapping in their search for perfection. Sometimes, people return a book they've ordered online, claiming that it was damaged even without unwrapping the package. Of course we all understand and gauge damage differently, but we really want to tell them that the book they're sending back is not damaged. In fact, we want to tell them brusquely, "they're all the same copies of the same book," but we can't. A particularly fastidious customer once came to the store in person to exchange what he thought was a damaged book.

We don't keep a lot of inventory at the bookstore. We order as few as three copies for some of the imported books. Because of this, our regulars tend to come in right after our new orders arrive. Some of them even preorder the new books through Twitter. Fortunately, we have never had anyone not claim their preordered book, except on a few occasions when we have made the mistake of selling a reserved book to the wrong customer. We have one elderly customer who asks about new releases every time he comes in and purchases them as though he was going to immediately devour them. One day, he confessed sheepishly that he kept the books preciously in their wrapping and continued on with his shopping spree. In so doing, he perpetually suspends the real function of the book. Perhaps in this way, he can delay the satisfaction of discovering a great new book. He's the type that

grows piles of books, rather than actually reading them. Another one of our notable frequent customer simply loves to collect. He likes to project into the future and imagine the library he'd like to have one day. He goes from one small bookstore in Seoul to another, seeking books based less on content and more on unique shapes, design, and binding. When there's nothing that suits his fancy, he demands that we sell him the archival or rare volumes we are holding onto, or he demands that we find him another copy to sell. Perhaps this is why we feel obligated to show him something we think he will like, while instinctually, almost as a reflex, hiding our own special collection. While we appreciate the fact that he truly values books, we are rather embarrassed by his lack of scruples when it comes to his selection.

There are some customers who are even more specific about the books they want. For example, someone once called at 8:00 p.m. looking to buy all the pink books we had in stock. The order was placed through a messaging service on a mobile device, and the credit card information was relayed over the telephone. We sent him thirty three pink books through a 24-hour delivery service. Later, we got a text message asking if the books were refundable. Our answer was: we can only refund books in their original packaging within three days.

The books are constantly in circulation at the store. Usually, new releases are prominently displayed, and ex-

isting stock gets pushed to inconspicuous corners. I'm sure every bookstore has its unique organizing principle, but we don't have anything special like that. Old, new, and used books are mostly all mixed up, and republished out of print books reappear as "new" books. We give up early if a customer comes in asking if we have any books on a particular topic, for instance film. It is not easy for either shopkeeper nor customers to find the books they are looking for here. Sometimes we call this place a sepulcher of books. New books become old, and old books become new. It is like the co-existence of those already-dead and those about-to-die.

## CONTRIBUTORS

### Jeamin Cha

Cha has participated in numerous group exhibitions and festivals, including Berlin International Film Festival (Berlin, 2015); Jeonju International Film Festival (Jeonju, 2015); Festival Film Documenter (Yogyakarta, 2014); *Total Recall* (Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul, 2014); *The Capricious Sky / Group Zero (1964)* (Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 2014); and *The Song of Slant Rhymes* (Kukje Gallery, Seoul, 2013). Her solo exhibition *histerics* was held at DOOSAN Gallery in Seoul in 2014 and traveled to DOOSAN New York the following year. She is an artist during weekdays and works at a public library on weekends.

### Hokeypokey

Hokeypokey regularly contributes her "reports" on art to the writing collective Inquiries into Reality.

### Seewon Hyun

Hyun is a Korean curator. In 2010 she organized an exhibition called *Wake Up Leaders!* at the now defunct Space Hamilton. Curious about the conditions in which the experience of drawing/painting occurs, she curated the exhibition *Cheonsoo Mart 2nd Floor* (2011) with Kiljong Park and Sunglin Cho. Two years later, she impulsively opened an exhibition space called Audio Visual Pavilion in a traditional Korean house within the four main gates of Seoul with her co-worker Inyong An where they produce exhibitions, activities, and documents. She published a book of essays on objects, *Samul yuram* (2014). [audiovisualpavilion.org](http://audiovisualpavilion.org)

### Juyoung Jung

After majoring in art theory, Jung completed her MA on the popularization of art in modern Korea and is currently preparing her PhD thesis on art management. She has served as an assistant curator at the Seoul National University Museum of Art and subsequently worked as assistant administrator of the Korean

Society of Art Theories and as a guest writer and archivist at the 4th Anyang Public Art Project's Park Library. While working as a team leader of the Conservation and Management Task Force for the Asian Culture Information Agency at the Institute of Asian Cultural Development, she participated in the grand opening of the Asia Culture Center's Library Park in Gwangju, Korea, in 2015.

### Kim Yeongsu

Kim is an artist and board game designer. After graduating from Kyungwon University in 2010, he held a solo exhibition titled *Ordinary State* at Ccuull & Ccuull Pool. Up until this exhibition, his mediums were pencil drawing and writing, but soon after he unexpectedly created a board game called *Citizen of the Universe, A's Decad*. Kim maintains that this work is a role play piece—but it is obviously a board game. While many artists have created board games, Kim insists his game is the funnest. He likes to describe his works as "experiential narratives."

### Helen Ku

Ku studied French literature and art theory. After serving as exhibitions manager at the Zeroone Design Center Kookmin University, she has been working as an independent curator as well as a freelance editor. Ku was in charge of developing and editing for the non-periodical publication *OO Document*, and is currently co-running The Book Society in Seoul.

### Park Hyun-jung

Born in 1986 in Masan, Gyeongsangnam-do Province, Park moved to Seoul to study art in university. She majored in painting and is currently in the process of producing drawings and other works that derived from them. Lately she has been contemplating the methods of producing and consuming images in the visual environment we face everyday.

### Ji-Hyun Park

Park shares videos on Facebook.

#### In-ah Shin

A former (enthusiastic) member of the Chungcheongbuk-do chapter of Club H.O.T. (a fan club of the pop group H.O.T.) who dreamt of living in Seoul in order to be closer to her idols, Shin now lives her dream as a citizen of Seoul. Now, as a fan of Seoul, she loves wandering around the city. sceneryoftoday.kr

#### Woo Ahreum

Born in 1984 in Seoul, Woo started writing on artworks and artists after studying literature and art theory. She feels rewarded in the writing process of finding formal languages in artists' works and also likes to contemplate the idea of criticism as creative work. Currently Woo is in charge of operations at K'arts Studio at the School of Visual Arts, Korea National University of Arts.

#### Yoongky

Yoongky writes and paints. As a regular contributor to the writing collective Inquiries into Reality, she explores subtle feelings and misunderstandings between persons.

#### Yoon Hyangro

Yoon is a Korean artist who held her first solo exhibition *Short-cuts* in 2012 and second solo exhibition *Blasted (Land)scape* in 2014. By re-arranging images chosen from popular media, she attempts to suggest new layers between images. She has been producing works in print and video, approaching them as mostly paintings. But lately she has been contemplating making structures with physical properties by piling on invisible layers. In describing her work, she likes the phrase "quasi-painting."

#### Wonhwa Yoon

Yoon is a translator and art writer living in Seoul. With interests in media, culture, and societies in change, she has translated into Korean *The Audible Past*, *The Optical Media*, and *The Discourse Network 1800/1900*. Since 2012, she has contributed essays and reviews on visual art to magazines including *Public Art*, *Art in Culture*, and *Domino*. In 2014 she co-curated an archival exhibition, *Human Scale*, at

Ilmin Museum of Art. Her new book, *On the Thousand and Second Night: Visual Arts in Seoul after 2009*, will be published by Workroom Press in 2016.

## COULD BE NO. 2

Keiko Sei

High school students will play the main role in *COULD BE NO. 2*. The volume will serve as a contribution from the art community to high school students, a demographic the art community tends to overlook, by allowing students to imagine what it is like to be part of a more participatory textbook.

*The text book should be made with students' participation. The content should include the broadest range of views possible and not to be presented as the greatest truth.*

This is the statement of a Thai high school student protesting against the military government's control over the school curriculum and textbooks. Textbooks in most countries, particularly in Asia, have an aura of unapproachable authority which few students dare to challenge. However, in Thailand as well as Korea, some students have started raising their voices against the government control that they think is harmful to them. A task of the art community is to turn things upside down, tear them apart, hang them in the air, and freeze them, or do everything possible to present the most diverse views and perspectives; perhaps the same can be done for school textbooks so the community can help challenge the authority of textbooks as representing "the greatest truth" and initiate debates on how to make the process of making textbooks more creative and participatory. This is the idea behind *COULD BE NO. 2*.

As an experiment for the task, five materials preselected by the editor were discussed by Korean high school students. After that, the students imagined themselves as textbook producers and suggested possible materials for inclusion in the books. A summary of the students' intense discussions, which reveals their thoughts and feelings towards wider social and political issues, will be published in *COULD BE NO. 2*. The materials suggested by the students were equally fascinating and will no doubt inspire and stimulate further discussions.

This project is also a challenge for us art and design professionals. As we offer a platform for discussion, we need to think carefully about how we can incorporate the high-schoolness and transfer it to the realm of art, design, and culture so that discussions within the experiment become more universal. The volume is expected to be published in May 2016.

