

(De)Bordering Korea: North Korea Represented in Liminal Space

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Widely called the “hermit kingdom,” North Korea is one of the most reclusive countries in the world. In particular, for South Korea, although its past and present are deeply entwined with North Korea, physical access to the country is strictly denied. This study focuses on how contemporary South Korean artists have constructed North Korea as a liminal space in which reality and fiction, past and present collide. It analyzes contemporary artworks that attempt to de-border the other Korea. These works include Kwon Hayoun’s *Model Village* (2014), a video centered on a reconstruction of an uninhabited North Korean propaganda village on the edge of the DMZ, and Park Chan-kyong’s *Sets* (2000), a series of slides of a North Korean film studio that recreated the streets of Seoul and a South Korean movie set that included a replica of P’anmunjŏm. Based on the unique relationship between the two Koreas, the paper argues that contemporary South Korean art embodies the elusive reality of North Korea that defies the clear understanding of its truth. In addition, it shows that the ambiguous representation of North Korea is a compelling reminder of the long history of national division and the psychological and physical distance between the two Koreas. This de-bordering expands the epistemological frame through

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which to perceive Korea beyond that of a binary Cold War order framework.

Keywords: North Korea, representation, de-bodering, liminality, contemporary Korean art

Introduction

In front of a dark background, transparent plastic miniature buildings occupy a white terrain (Figs. 1–2). The camera moves through the buildings, while evanescent light and shadow suffuse the terrain. As the camera's distance and angle change, the buildings, their shadows, and the ground become entangled, accentuating the emptiness of the space. This eerie landscape is the creation of Kwon Hayoun (Kwŏn Hayun, b. 1981) in her video entitled *Model Village* (모델 빌리지 Model Pilliji, 2014).¹ The village is a reconstruction of Kijong-dong, a North Korean propaganda village, which the North established in 1953 to project an image of its economic success. Also called Peace Village, it is located on the edge of the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) on the North Korean side and is visible from the South.² However, the plastic model of the village used in the video is based on the artist's imagination, not the actual village.

What does the discrepancy between the actual place in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and its reconstruction in the imagination mean? Why does the village carry no elements of reality? Finally, what does the work suggest about the representation of North Korea in contemporary visual art, and how does this mediate the viewer's perception of the North amidst a residual Cold War situation on the Korean Peninsula? This paper analyzes the visual representation of North Korea in South Korean art and how it presents the elusive reality of North Korea and its unstable relationship with the South and the rest of the world.

In discussing North Korea and contemporary artworks about it, I use the term liminality, derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold. The ethnologist Arnold van Gennep first introduced the term in his 1909 work *Les Rites de Passage*, and the anthropologist Victor Turner further elaborated on it in the 1960s.³ Van Gennep analyzed rituals and rites of passage such as the transition from childhood to adulthood and from woman to mother in terms

¹ Kwon Hayoun, *Model Village*, 2014, HD video. <https://www.hayounkwon.com/#/iii/>

² The DMZ is a strip of land 250 kilometers long and about 4 kilometers wide, running across the Korean Peninsula near the 38th parallel and dividing the peninsula in half. This buffer zone between North and South Korea was established under the Korean Armistice Agreement of 1953. The agreement allowed both Koreas to establish one village each within the DMZ. The South's village is Taesŏng-dong in the southern portion of the DMZ, only 1.6km from Kijŏng-dong. UNC Reg 252-2, quoted in Ch'aerin Pak, *1950-1980 nyŏndae banbando pimujangjidae an Taesŏng-dong maül kaebal ūi ūimi wa yŏngbyang* (Master's diss., Han'guk Chŏnt'ong Munhwa Taehakkyo, 2022), 23.

³ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).

of a three-fold pattern of separation, liminality, and incorporation.⁴ Turner expanded the concept of liminality to encompass physical beings, places, and times and liminal states that accompany any change from one state to another. Due to the geographical and sociocultural connotations of marginality and margins, the concept has been adapted and applied by researchers across disciplines.⁵ Beyond the realm of anthropology, liminality has been widely utilized as a state of ‘in-between-ness,’ from sociology, history, religious and theological studies to neurobiology and behavioral studies, to literary, media, and performance studies.⁶ In a similar vein, I adopt this concept to discuss the in-between threshold space of Korea in contemporary visual art.

North Korea as represented in Kwon’s *Model Village* is a clear example of liminality, not only due to the in-between nature of the DMZ but also the ambiguous state and the disorienting experience it provides in terms of the imagined de-bordered space.⁷ Liminality provides an opportunity to reconsider and reimagine the positionality of the North. Focusing on lens-based media, this paper analyzes artworks in which the North is constructed as an imaginary de-bordered space. It argues that the ambiguity of the space betrays the expected capacity of the media to convey the reality of the referent, embodies the unstable inter-Korean relationship, and destabilizes the status quo.

Under the changed international geopolitical order and inter-Korea relationships since the 1990s, which are represented by the dissolution of the international Cold War order, the democratization of South Korea, and the Sunshine policy adopted by President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), North Korea has gained increased visibility in contemporary visual arts. As I will discuss in this paper, these include cases from photographs documenting everyday life and government-organized, spectacular propaganda events in the country to the appropriation of the imagery of North Korea in contemporary art. In a similar vein, publications, academic conferences, and exhibitions have led to increased discussions about the country, which include the arts of North Korea produced under the dictatorial regime and the intertwined history of the two Koreas.

The important point about the expanded presence of the North in contemporary art is how the artworks position North Korea in relation to history and other parts of the world rather than accentuating the otherness of the hermit kingdom. Although the isolation of the North from the rest of the world is still often highlighted, such works claim to provide a real view of the country behind the curtain, despite often displaying stereotyped perceptions and Orientalist perspectives. However, the imagery provides a glimpse of North Korea, albeit a somewhat fragmentary collection of observations. The question is thus what the reality of

⁴ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁵ Harry Wels, Kees van der Waal, Andrew Spiegel, and Frans Kamsteeg, “Victor Turner and Liminality: An Introduction,” *Anthropology Southern Africa* 34, no. 1-2 (2011): 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2011.11500002>

⁶ Graham St John, ed. *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), 2.

⁷ Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, and Elizabeth Parker, “Locating Liminality: Space, Place, and In-Between,” *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place*, eds., Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, and Elizabeth Parker (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 1–26.

North Korea actually is and how visual representations can mediate it beyond the dichotomy of inside and outside, open and closed, and self and other.

Although the unique position of North Korea—one of the most inaccessible countries in the world—complicates the production and circulation of visual imagery of the country, its reception has rarely reflected the complexity of how to access and portray the North and interpret the images. David Shim provides an in-depth discussion of the imagery of North Korea.⁸ He considers the photographic depictions of the country in the context of international relations and claims that the visual is a form of knowledge that both participates in framing reality and affects the formulation and implementation of policy in international political discourse. Analyzing everyday photography and satellite imagery of North Korea, he challenges the assumption that images provide authentic insights into and proof of the country's economic, political, and social situation. Instead, he claims they deliver only mediated visions, which pertain to relationships of power and involve ethical and political dimensions, resulting in a portrayal of North Korea as strange, deviant, and other. This paper builds on Shim's work in reconsidering images of North Korea and the stereotypes projected onto them.

Just as this paper focuses on the transition that began in the late 1990s, Benjamin Joinau's chapter also explores South Korean cinema between 1998 and 2010, a new political era initiated by Kim Dae-jung. In the imaginary encounters of the two Koreas in films, North Korea was no longer seen as a threat for the first time and North Korean characters began to be portrayed positively. While the portrayal of the characters largely depended on old clichés—regional accent and dialect, pre-capitalist naivety and honesty, poverty, and straightforward, virile behavior—and North Korea was defined as what South Korea was *not*, cinema still provided a site for negotiating North/South oppositions.⁹ Suggesting the fictional representation as a new place to construct the complex reality of Korea across the border, the article provides a frame to analyze artworks that portray the North.

Expanding the discussion of the representation of North Korea, this study examines works by contemporary South Korean artists that merge North Korea into their artistic space. The 2015 exhibition *North Korean Perspectives: An Exhibition on Our Perception of North Korea through Photographic Representation* showcased how North Korea is represented in contemporary visual art, including artworks by South Korean. The exhibition was organized in a binary fashion around the concepts of 'the official' and 'the unofficial.' While the former consists of propaganda that sustains the authoritarian state, the latter incorporates personal interpretations and offers an alternative view of the reclusive society.¹⁰ This binary thinking—

⁸ David Shim, *Visual Politics and North Korea: Seeing is Believing* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁹ Benjamin Joinau, "Sleeping with the (Northern) Enemy: South Korean Cinema and Autistic Interface," *Debordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy*, eds. Valérie Gelézeau, Koen De Ceuster and Alain Delissen (New York: Routledge, 2013), 172-188.

¹⁰ *North Korean Perspectives: An Exhibition on Our Perception of North Korea through Photographic Representation*. Drents Museum, Assen, Netherlands, April 3–August 30, 2015; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago, IL, USA, July 23–October 4, 2015. See Marc Prust, ed. *North Korean Perspectives: An Exhibition on Our Perception of North Korea through Photographic Representation* (Groningen: Aurora Borealis, 2015).

capitalist versus communist, free versus controlled, and attainable versus inaccessible—and the aspiration to discover the truth of the other are themes taken up by this study.

In this sense, Pak Kyeri offers a nuanced approach to the representation of North Korea in visual arts.¹¹ She states that contemporary South Korean art has increasingly addressed national division and North Korea. Pak explores how Korean artists have dealt with the trauma of national division, something that is embedded in the psychology and the geography of the nation and symbolized by the border space of the DMZ, and the amnesia of South Koreans that the war has not ended, and it can resume. She also looks at how they have portrayed the North from the perspective of an outsider and their communications with North Korean people. Her research provides a framework through which to critically evaluate the presence of the North in South Korean art.

Pak uses the position of artists and subjects in relation to North Korea and the demarcation line as a means of classifying artworks. However, what is dismissed in this framework is artworks that assume an in-between space between the two Koreas or that cross the border between them. For such works, it is necessary to look at how physical and perceptual borders affect each other and how this is related to the constant flux of inter-Korean relations.

To explore these questions, I first discuss the geopolitical context that has affected the representation of North Korea, both in Korea and further afield. Following this, I will discuss photographs that portray what it looks like inside North Korea in terms of recurring motifs, styles, and their connection to the reality of North Korea. Lastly, I will analyze how South Korean artists portray the North and how they have created a liminal space to envision the other in the 21st century. Whereas some works delve into the enduring state of confrontation, others integrate fiction, imagination, and memories and construct an ambiguity that exemplifies the elusive identity of North Korea. Furthermore, by defying a national border defined by ideological differences, this article argues that such artists expand the epistemological frame through which to perceive Korea beyond that of a binary Cold War framework.

Increased Visibility of North Korea in the Visual Sphere

In the 1990s, changes in and around Korea—the reorganization of the international geopolitical order, changes in the political system of South Korea, and technological innovations in image production and circulation—resulted in the development of imagery in visual sphere and shaped perceptions of North Korea. The development of the Internet accelerated the spread of images and news and demonstrated the ability to radically affect national conceptions. Such developments as commercial remote sensing and digital photography combined with new media networks to enable the production, circulation, and consumption of the imagery

¹¹ Pak Kyeri, *Puk'anmisulgwa pundanmisul* (P'aju: At'ŭ Puksŭ, 2019).

of the North across the globe. Such images as those of North Koreans mourning the death of Kim Il-sung, the founder of the DPRK, in 1994 laid bare the personality cult in the North to an international audience. The news media also covered the North's nuclear and missile programs and graphically illustrated the economic and humanitarian crises in the country through illustrated books, photographs, video footage, and photographic essays. For instance, as Fig. 3, in John Lewis' article, captioned "the starving children of North Korea are paying the price for lack of aid, from <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9704/08/korea.food/> exemplifies, the Great North Korean Famine (1994–98), which resulted in several million deaths, is best remembered through photographs of starving children. Speculation about North Korea's collapse soon became widespread.¹²

Another factor that shaped the representation of North Korea was the end of the Cold War. With the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a strong consensus emerged that the Cold War had ended, and the world was transitioning to a new era of neo-liberalism.¹³ However, as the social anthropologist Heonik Kwon asks, "When we say the Cold War is over, whose Cold War and which dimension of the Cold War do we refer to? Did the Cold War end the same way everywhere, or was the 'struggle for the world' the same everywhere?"¹⁴ On the Korean Peninsula, the Cold War is still a lived reality. It can be seen in issues of national society and separated families, as well as in relation to individual identity. Occasional military skirmishes between the two Koreas, missile tests by the North, and the presence of US troops in South Korea can all be viewed from the perspective of the duration of the Korean War.

The Korean War, which broke out in 1950 shortly after the beginning of the Cold War, has long been called "the Forgotten War" in the United States and many other countries, including Great Britain, Canada, France, Australia, New Zealand, and China.¹⁵ As Paul Edwards asserts, for political, social, psychological, and emotional reasons, a long silence about the war lasted after the armistice was signed in 1953, and it became overshadowed by the Second World War and the Vietnam War.¹⁶ As the historian Bruce Cumings has pointed out, the history of US involvement in Korea began around the end of the Second World War. Subsequently, the United States was directly involved in national division, the massive bombing campaign against North Korea during the Korean War, and the deployment of nuclear weapons in the South in 1958. However, as Edward argues, beyond being forgotten, the war has been "ignored, with some effort to reject strong memories of the war,"¹⁷ and Americans have long been ignorant of this history.¹⁸ Without knowledge of history, the

¹² Shim, *Visual Politics and North Korea*, 39, 57.

¹³ Mark T. Berger, "the Post-Cold War Predicament: A conclusion," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (Dec 2011): 1079-1085.

¹⁴ Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁵ Paul M. Edwards, *To Acknowledge a War: The Korean War in American Memory* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁶ Edwards, *To Acknowledge a War*, 15–16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bruce Cumings, "A Murderous History of Korea," *London Review of Books* 39, no. 10 (May 2017), <https://www>.

North “looks at best like a walking anachronism, at worst like a vicious tyranny, to quote Cumings.¹⁹

From the 1990s, Cold War anti-communism transformed into anti-North Korean propaganda, with George W. Bush famously labeling North Korea as part of the “axis of evil” instead of the Soviet Union in 2002.²⁰ Since then, the North has been treated in an ahistorical and one-sided fashion,²¹ and Western media has stigmatized and ridiculed the North.²²

Looking Inside North Korea: The Nation of Dictators and Its Innocent People

Among the most common images of North Korea are those taken inside North Korea by outsiders and that focus on the nation’s political leaders and official events that represent their dictatorial rule. For instance, French photojournalist Phillip Chancel and German photographer Andreas Gursky traveled to Pyongyang in 2006 and 2007, respectively, to photograph the Arirang Festival (아리랑 축제, Arirang ch’ukche) in the Rungrado May Day Stadium (룽라도 5월 1일 경기장, Rŭngnado 5wöl 1il kyönggijang), a five-week-long annual festival that began in 2002. In a seemingly objective manner, the photographs depict the spectacle of mass games, a form of performance art or gymnastics, in which more than 50,000 performers participate in a highly regimented performance of propaganda art. The patterns and images in vivid colors represent the ideals of the country—the Great Leader smiling, the strength of the nation’s army, and a harmonious North Korean populace.

In Fig 4, *Pyongyang II Diptych* (2007), from <https://www.andreasgursky.com/en/works/2007/pyongyang-1-5/pyongyang-2>, Gursky captures the images of doves and guns, symbols of peace and the military power that maintains it. The documentary style of the photographs suggests the veracity of the photographer’s work. They are, however, meticulous constructions. Taken from high above the scene, his panoramic photographs—some of whose dimensions are over 100 x 80 inches—convey a highly mediated reality. The photographer took the pictures at various stages of the mass games, focusing on different parts each time—the foreground, the middle ground, and the background—and combined them in a single frame.²³ These digitally manipulated images lack a focal point as every element of the picture plane is highlighted. The hyperrealism of the photographs defamiliarizes the scene and makes a powerful statement about North Korea, how the collective is prioritized

lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n10/bruce-cumings/a-murderous-history-of-korea.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Dong-Choon Kim, “The Social Grounds of Anticommunism in South Korea: Crisis of the Ruling Class and Anticommunist Reaction,” *Asian Journal of German and European Studies* 2, no. 7 (2017): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40856-017-0018-1>.

²¹ Cumings, “A Murderous History of Korea.”

²² Kim, 4.

²³ Guy Lane, “Andrea Gursky Interviewed, Foto 8: The Home of Photojournalism.” June 8, 2009, <https://www.foto8.com/live/andreas-gursky-interviewed/>.

over the individual. By documenting the façade that the country presents to the world, the photographs accentuate the tyrannical rule in the country and reaffirm its otherness and distance compared to the rest of the world.

Unlike the emphasis on the uniqueness of the country—its dictatorial system and the repression of individual freedom—another recurring motif is images of the everyday lives of ordinary people. These claim to provide a unique glimpse of the country reflecting the photographers' unprecedented access of the world's most secretive nation, as they are often presented with such phrases as "A look inside North Korea," "A Peek behind the curtain, and Looking for moments beneath North Korea's 'orchestrated pageantry'."²⁴ As Catherine Zuromskis asserts, "Snapshots... can establish their subjects, no matter how carefully framed, posed, and idealized, as fundamentally true."²⁵ In this way, snapshots of North Korea are depicted as a depoliticized representation that conveys the pure and unmediated reality of the country.

The photographic series *DPR Korea: Grand Tour* is based on the four trips photographer Carl de Keyzer made to North Korea between 2015 and 2017, totaling sixty days. It claims to offer "a unique and often very surprising view of one of the world's most complex, concealed, and confusing countries."²⁶ Taken at a variety of places, from tourist landmarks to schools and the streets of Pyongyang, his photographs capture ordinary scenes. Due to the unconventional composition and varied vantage points from which the pictures are taken, the viewer is invited to peek at the real North Korea. For example, Fig 5, *Mansudae Grand Monument* (2015), from <https://www.carldekeyzer.com/dprk/iwwkkbatpzwrrrob0x3jeerjwy1n4cd>, which was taken at Mansudae Grand Monument (만수대대기념비, Mansudae taeginyōmbi), has no focal point. It depicts a group of people randomly dispersed on the left side of the image, looking in different directions. The camera is located far enough away to offset the size of the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il statues, which are located off-center, and to create a large blank space in the image. The viewer's eyes, thus, rove around the picture plane instead of focusing on the monuments. Other images such as Fig 6, *Schoolchildren's Palace* (2015), from <https://www.carldekeyzer.com/dprk/0tf2b3maxw60yg4iuez45gnkroy6ap> catch North Koreans unaware that they are being photographed. These images give the impression that the outsider—the photographer and the viewer—is intruding on a moment that is not meant to be seen.²⁷

On the surface, de Keyzer's photographs appear to document North Korean society in an

²⁴ Alan Taylor, "A Look Inside North Korea," *The Atlantic* (January 2, 2013), <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/01/a-look-inside-north-korea/100432/>, Ted Lau, "A Peek Behind the Curtain: Inside North Korea – in Pictures," *The Guardian* (October 6, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2021/oct/06/a-peek-behind-the-curtain-inside-north-korea-in-pictures>, Benazir Wehelie, "Looking for moments beneath North Korea's 'orchestrated pageantry,'" *CNN Photos* (September 13, 2016), <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/cnnphotos-north-korea-maye-e-wong/index.html>.

²⁵ Catherine Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 65.

²⁶ De Keyzer, *DPR Korea: Grand Tour* 2017. De Keyzer, *DPR Korea: Grand Tour*, 2017. <https://www.carldekeyzer.com/dprk/>.

²⁷ Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography*, 272.

unfiltered fashion, in stark contrast to the images of official events and political leaders. Upon closer inspection, however, one notices that de Keyzer has carefully arranged the signifiers of violent dictatorship—the statues and images of the Kims, propaganda monuments, and military and political slogans—to imply the politicized nature of daily life in North Korea.

The media is often quick to emphasize how the photographers' trips were strictly controlled and their images censored, but how they still managed to expose the reality of the North to the outside world, as suggested by the titles of the articles that accompany the photographs.²⁸ In this way, images that are but a superficial glance at the North become authoritative portrayals of life in the country. However, it is entirely questionable how much such foreign photographers, with little information about the places they were visiting and no Korean skills, could actually learn during their short trips, reliant as they were on their North Korean guides.²⁹ For instance, de Keyzers' trips were arranged by the British-run Koryo Tours in Beijing, China, and he was accompanied by North Korean guides,³⁰ which seems contradictory to the unique perspective he claims his photographs provide. When images such as these purport to present a glimpse of the country, what becomes evident is the impenetrability of North Korea's reality, which is consigned to the realm of the other, and the mediated nature of images of North Korea.

North Korea as a Liminal Space: The Threshold That Can(not) Be Crossed

The images taken inside North Korea, which I discussed, fail to convey the reality of the country. However, there are also South Korean artists who do not have access to the North and who have lived their entire lives with the reality of a divided peninsula. Contemporary Korean artists may have no direct memories of the Korean War, but they live with the reality of an unstable inter-Korean relationship. This instability reveals itself in their representations of the other Korea and a reimagining of the relationship with the North.

With the end of the Cold War order in the 1990s, South Korea's strategic value was somewhat reduced. As such, the authoritarian regimes, which had been a feature of the political system of South Korea, began to lose their relevance in the new international system, with important consequences for the democratization of Korea.³¹ In this context,

²⁸ See the titles, for example, Elizabeth Gear, "A Rare Look at Daily Life in North Korea," *Feature Shoot*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.featureshoot.com/2016/09/rare-look-daily-life-north-korea/>; Public Delivery, "Philippe Chancel and Eerie North Korea—A Look Behind the Curtain," *Public Delivery*, October 19, 2021, <https://publicdelivery.org/philippe-chancel-north-korea/>; Guardian, "A Peek Behind the Curtain: Inside North Korea – in Pictures," *Guardian*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2021/oct/06/a-peek-behind-the-curtain-inside-north-korea-in-pictures>.

²⁹ Shim, *Visual Politics and North Korea*, 37, 52–53.

³⁰ De Keyzer, *DPR Korea: Grand Tour*, 2017. <https://www.carldekeyzer.com/dprk/>

³¹ Hyug Baeg Im, "The US Role in Korean Democracy and Security since Cold War Era," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 6, no. 2 (2006): 157–187, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lci134>.

the first liberal president, Kim Dae-jung, a longtime democratic activist, inaugurated the Sunshine Policy toward the North and sought to build a cooperative relationship between the two Koreas.³² Kim's efforts, which included arranging economic and cultural exchanges and providing humanitarian support for North Korea, culminated in an inter-Korean summit with the North Korean leader, Kim, Jong-il, in Pyongyang in 2000.³³ Kim's successor, Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008), continued this more conciliatory stance toward the North and adopted the Peace and Prosperity Policy. This culminated in a second meeting with Kim Jong-il in 2007.

As part of the more conciliatory approach to the North, cultural exchanges between the two countries—joint programs and programs for the exchange of artistic works—were promoted as tools for improving inter-Korean relations and for reunification. North Korean films were shown on TV in South Korea from 1998, and arts events and projects related to unification were also supported.³⁴ In the context of a more liberal social climate and improving inter-Korea relations, contemporary artistic practices began to incorporate the increased presence of North Korea in South Korean society. To celebrate the start of the Mount Kumgang tourist project in 1998, for instance, the Hyundai Asan Corporation sponsored an exhibition at the Ilmin Museum of Art in Seoul entitled *Dream Kumgang: Mount Kumgang as Seen through 300 Years of Art* (몽유 금강: 그림으로 보는 금강산 300년 *Mongyu Kūmgang: Kūrimūro ponūn kūmgangsan 300nyōn*) (1999). The exhibition focused on artworks that took Mount Kumgang as their subject matter, including traditional Korean landscape paintings and contemporary works such as photography and video that artists had created after visiting Mt. Kumgang and incorporated the experience of border contact and the reimagined boundary of the nation, which was enabled by expanded communication with the North.³⁵ The exhibitions *Pyongyang: The Topic of Conversation in Seoul* (서울의 화두는 평양, Sōrūi hwadunūn p'yōngyang) (2000) and *Sunshine: Three Perspectives on North and South Korea* (선샤인-남북을 비추는 세 가지 시선, Sōnsyain-nambukūl pich'unūn se kaji shisōn) (2001) were an immediate response to the Sunshine Policy. These exhibitions were unprecedented in

³² Yong Sub Choi, "Kim Dae-jung and the Persistence of Anti-Communist Hegemony in South Korea," *Asian Studies Review* 41, no.2 (2017): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2017.1299107>.

³³ The thawing of relation led to the construction of the Gaesong City Industrial Complex in the North in 2000 and a resort at Mount Kumgang run by the Hyundai Asan company in 1998 to accommodate South Korean visitors. Hyundai Asan, a leading Korean construction company and a significant supporter of a reunification agenda, operated tour programs there as well. The first sailing of the *Hyundai Kūmgangho*, a cruise ship, was on November 18, 1998, but bus tours replaced this in 2003. According to the Korean Statistical Information Service, more than 2 million South Koreans had traveled to Mount Kumgang and Kaesong City in North Korea by July 2008, when the tour program was shut down due to the death of a South Korean tourist. Hyōnggi Kim, *Nambukkwang'gye chishik'sajōn* (Sōul: t'ongilbu kungnipt'ong'ilyōnguwōn, 2015), 31-38, 98-103; Korean Statistical Information Service, "Kūmgangsan kaesōng kwan'gwanggaeksu," March 31, 2021, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=103&tblId=TX_10301_A002&conn_path=I2.

³⁴ Haksoon Yim, "Cultural Identity and Cultural Policy in South Korea," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 8, no.1 (2002): 43.

³⁵ Leonid Petrov and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "On the Frontiers of History: Territory and Cross-Border Dialogue in East Asia," *East Asia Beyond the History Wars: Confronting the Ghosts of Violence*, eds. Tessa Morris-Suzuki et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 36.

Korean contemporary art as they involved a reassessment of Korean history and the reality of national division from a variety of perspectives.

In the years since, the visual arts have continued to address the issues of national division and North Korea. As Pak Kyeri shows, despite the end of the Sunshine Policy and increased tensions and political confrontation between the two Koreas, more artworks have explored the topic of national division.³⁶ For instance, one contemporary art project, the *Real DMZ Project*, has conducted research on the influence of the DMZ and the border area on the production of art since 2012. In 2015, the *NK Project* (북한 프로젝트, Puk'an p'ürojekt'ü) exhibition opened at the Seoul Museum of Art on the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945. The exhibition included depictions of the North by both South Korean artists and international photographers. However, it also showcased art from North Korea, including postage stamps, propaganda posters, and oil paintings, to provide a multivalent narrative and to promote a new understanding of the North.³⁷ Similarly, the 2018 Gwangju Biennial devoted one section to Chosŏnhwa, North Korean ink painting. This section, entitled *North Korean Art: Paradoxical Realism* (북한미술: 사회주의 사실주의의 패러독스, Puk'anmisul : sahoejuüi sashilchuüüi p'aerödoksü) consisted of more than 40 traditional ink wash paintings by 32 North Korean artists, and embraced the once taboo subject of North Korea in Korean art.

The short-lived thawing of inter-Korean relations allowed a small number of artists from the South to travel to North Korea. However, apart from this, the North has been largely inaccessible to South Korean artists. This has caused Korean artists to take a unique approach to the border space of the DMZ and how they represent the North. For instance, the photographer Kim Atta (Kim At'a)'s *DMZ* series from the *On-Air Project* (2004) captured the landscape of the DMZ by leaving the shutter open for eight hours. Troop movements and human and animal activities vanished over this long exposure, and the hazy landscape photographs that remain convey the ironic beauty of the heavily armed DMZ area.³⁸ In his multi-media project *Mansudae Master Class* (만수대 마스터 클래스, Mansudae masüt'ö k'üllaesü) (2013-ongoing), Che Onejoon (Ch'oe Wŏnjun) portrayed large monuments, statues, and public buildings in sub-Saharan Africa built in a socialist-realism style. The Mansudae Master Art Studio Overseas Project Group of Companies (만수대 해외개발회사, Mansudae haeoegaebalhaesa) has built these since the 1970s in competition with the South for overseas influence and to earn foreign currency. Che's photographs provide a proxy encounter with North Korean art.³⁹

It is still possible to see the lingering presence of the Korean War in how South Korean artists perceive the status quo and present it in their works. Though they engage with the

³⁶ Pak Kyeri, *Puk'anmisulgwä pundanmisul*, 206.

³⁷ Kristina Dziedzic Wright, "North Korea on Display in Seoul: The *NK Project* and Imaginative Engagement through Art in the Twenty-First-Century Museum," *Museological Review* 20 (2016): 73–83.

³⁸ Lyle Rexer, *The Edge of Vision. The Rise of Abstract Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2013), 179–95.

³⁹ This was established as an international division of the Mansudae Art Studio in Pyongyang in 1959 and is well known for international commissions in Africa and other developing countries. To see more information about the project, see the artist's website: Che Onejoon, *Mansudae Master Class*, 2015, <https://cheonejoon.com/works.php>

presence of the North and national division in a variety of ways, many of their works are constrained by the psychological border of the South and project the inaccessibility of the North. While *Mansudae Master Class*, for instance, complicates the spatiality of Korea's involvement in the Cold War, it narrates the history of the communist other in the context of the mid-20th century, thus reaffirming the perpetual status of the Cold War. In a similar vein, in its imaginary interventions into the political past and future of the country, *Freedom Village* (자유마을, Chayuūi maül) (2017) by Moon Kyungwon (Mun Kyōngwōn) and Jeon Joonho (Chōn Chunho) stays on the southern border of the DMZ in Freedom Village, the southern counterpart of Peace Village in the North.⁴⁰ Although political and artistic freedom has been increased in post-1990s South Korea, the threshold separating the South from the North, the democratic from the dictatorial, and the self from the other seems to be hard to cross.

In contrast, some artists have combined fictional elements, personal memories, and imagination with history, facts, and documentation to visualize the North beyond the border in their representations of North Korea. They present ambiguity to embody the elusive reality of North Korea and enable the experience of an in-between liminal space in which the national division is temporarily suspended. Kwon created *Model Village* while she was waiting for permission to film the village of Kijong-dong from the South Korean side of the border. It took more than two years to get approval, and by the time she received permission, she had created the village based on her imagination and finished filming it. She claims that she had already achieved what she intended to say with the models, and the reality of the village was no longer important.⁴¹

Not surprisingly, the reconstructed village bears little resemblance to the actual village. The tall, transparent flagpole is probably a reproduction of one of the world's tallest flagpoles, which displays *In'gonggi*, the flag of North Korea that exists in the Peace Village. Except that, there are few of the defining features of the village, such as multi-story buildings with massive loudspeakers, features which epitomize North Korea's fabricated image and the employment of propaganda (Figs. 7-8). In this way, Kwon's version of North Korea lacks the typical imagery associated with the DPRK. Instead, the plastic buildings suggest almost no connection to Kijong-dong or North Korea.

On a surface level, the emptiness of the space invites the viewer to see it as a ghost village. Although the North Korean government maintains that the village accommodates a 200-family collective farm with a child-care center, kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, and a hospital,⁴² the US and South Korea claim that the village is merely an illusion of prosperity. According to their intelligence, no residents have been seen in the streets; most buildings are just concrete walls without floors, their windows are painted on, and their lights

⁴⁰ Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho, *Freedom Village*, 2017, Video with sound, <https://moonandjeon.com/Freedom-Village>.

⁴¹ Pak Tōksōn, "Kwōnhayun - kyōnggyeūi shilch'e: kiōk, imiji, konggan," *Wōlgan misul* 414 (July 2019): 102–07.

⁴² Hwan Ju Pang and Bong Hyok Hwang, *A Sightseeing Guide to Korea* (P'yōngyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991), 127–28.

are routinely turned on and off to give the illusion of activity.⁴³ In this context, Kwon's work represents the village as an empty shell, the opposite of the utopian vista that the North wishes to present to the outside world.

At the same time, the village, which is visible but unreachable, holds a broader meaning. Kwon's work addresses fundamental issues surrounding the North and how it is represented. With none of the usual features associated with the North, the space is free floating, not anchored in any time or space. As a metaphor for the DPRK, which is often portrayed as ahistorical, the work suggests the unstable position of the country in the contemporary world. Despite being viewed from different angles and distances, the village frustrates the scrutinizing gaze of the camera, which resembles that of photographers trying to attain and present a glimpse of the country, as there is nothing in the space to grasp. Kwon's refusal to present stereotypes and her construction of ambiguity aptly illustrates the elusive nature of the country. As her work suggests, it is impossible for anyone to present the reality of the DPRK; the constructed nature of the country is the only available truth.

Model Village represents one intriguing way contemporary South Korean artists portray the other Korea. Kwon transcends the physical constraints of the border and provides a de-bordering experience in her portrayal of Kijong-dong. In this liminal space, the North is seen from a distance. The cold atmosphere of the space accentuates its unfamiliarity. The village is also empty of typical features of North Korea. This representation of and lack of connection to the North signifies the attenuated relationship between the two Koreas. Grinker has pointed out that the ignorance of South Koreans about the life of the North Korean people in the 1990s allowed them to imagine the North as a blank slate open to fantasy and projection.⁴⁴ In creating an imagined space that lacks a direct connection to the North or the perceived reality of North Korea, *Model Village* effectively illustrates the psychological and physical distance between South and North Korea after more than seventy years of separation.

Another aspect of the work is the de-bordered experience it enables, the symbolic and/or spatial act of transitioning from one spatial or symbolic situation to another, from the South to the North.⁴⁵ With the unstable inter-Korean relationship, which is demonstrated with the rapid deterioration after the inauguration of conservative governments in South Korea, frustrating visual access to the North, Kwon crosses both the psychological and physical border that splits Korea. The sense of disorientation that the moving camera creates embodies the nature of border-crossing and liminal space, in which the limits and borders of cultural and social identity dissolve.⁴⁶ Furthermore, as Thomassen has noted, liminality can be used as a means of deconstructing traditionally conceived spatial and conceptual categories,

⁴³ David Wharton, "Peace Village, a fake city just outside the DMZ, serves as metaphor for North Korean athletes at the Olympics," *Los Angeles Times* (February 17, 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/sports/olympics/la-sp-olympics-north-korea-mystery-20180217-story.html>.

⁴⁴ Roy Grinker, *Korea and Its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), xi.

⁴⁵ Downey, Kinane, and Parker, "Locating Liminality: Space, Place, and In-Between." 6–7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

boundaries, and/or structural limits.⁴⁷ The North Korea that Kwon has constructed is an open space liberated from the restraints imposed by the Cold War order, necessitating a reimagination of the national border itself.

Another work that provides the border-crossing experience and the liminal construction of North Korea is *Sets* (세트 Setʼü, 2000) by Park Chan-kyong (Pak Chʼankyöng) (b. 1965), which was shown in several exhibitions, including *Park, Chan-kyong—Gathering* (박찬경-모임 Pak Chʼankyöng-moʼim) that opened at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea between October 25, 2019 and February 23, 2020.⁴⁸ This consists of a series of slide projections featuring 160 photographs taken at three different sites. The first is the Pyongyang Film Studio recreation of the streets of early-to-mid-20th century Seoul from photographs taken by South Korean journalist Im Chongjin in 2000. Another is a set of photographs taken by Park on the set of the South Korean movie *Joint Security Area* (2000), which included a 90% scale replica of Pʼanmunjöm. The final set of photographs is one of simulated streets built by the South Korean army for military exercises.⁴⁹ The photographs in the work are arranged chronologically from the Japanese colonial era to the present.⁵⁰ With the series of photographs, *Sets* juxtaposes the persistence of political confrontation and the proximity of the two Koreas to accentuate the unique status of Korea at the end of the twentieth century (Figs. 9–11).

It is important to note that *Sets* appeared at a unique moment in the history of contemporary Korea. This was a time when the Sunshine Policy was in full swing. As such, Im was able to travel to Pyongyang. In addition, *Joint Security Area* assumed a non-antagonistic relationship between South and North Korean soldiers and attracted almost 6 million viewers. South Koreans also visited the movie set in large numbers. Thus, unlike *Model Village*, Parkʼs work integrates the reduced tensions of the time and portrays actual and imaginary border-crossings and virtual encounters between the two Koreas to momentarily transcend the Cold War division.

While the liminal space created by Kwon is empty of temporal and spatial features, Parkʼs construction confounds the viewer in a different way. The de-bordered space in the film studio is based on a combination of fact and fiction. Also, it reflects documents, memories, and imagination of South Korea seen from a North Korean perspective. Additionally, with traditional houses, department stores, restaurants, and movie theaters that carry signs from early modern Korea, the temporality of where the two Koreas make contact in the film studio is out of joint. It suggests the status of Korea after the long history of national division and the distance between the two, possibly demonstrating the impossibility of actual contact between the two in the present. In a similar vein, the virtual border-crossing of ordinary

⁴⁷ Björn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 216.

⁴⁸ The full title of the exhibition is *MMCA Hyundai Motor Series 2019: Park, Chan-kyong—Gathering* (MMCA 현대차 시리즈 2019: 박찬경-모임 MMCA hyöndaechʼa sirichü 2019 Pak Chʼankyöng-moʼim).

⁴⁹ Sohl Lee, “Seoul Tour/Pyongyang Express,” in *Being Political Popular: South Korean Art at the Intersection of Popular Culture and Democracy, 1980–2010*, ed. Sohl Lee (Söul: Hyunsil Publishing, 2012), 105–06.

⁵⁰ Paek Chisuk, *Pon kösül köögadüşbi* (Söul: Midiö Pösü, 2018), 125.

people at P'anmunjŏm appears to reflect the narrowed psychological distance of South Korean to the North across the demarcation line. Yet, it is still based on the fictional space, the replica of P'anmunjŏm, just as the set of military training is a reminder of persistence of the war in the peninsula.

Just as *Model Village* is a construction, so too is the fabricated nature of *Sets* apparent as a representation of a representation. In the photographs of the film studio, everything is too organized and lacking the features the viewer might expect. For example, instead of soldiers, tourists occupy the reproduction of P'anmunjŏm and pose in front of the camera. In addition, as the slide show continues, individual slides appear and disappear, each one replaced by a new image in the background of a dark room. The interval between slides and the clicking sound marks the transition to the next image, both preventing viewers from becoming immersed in the photographs and disorienting them, reminding them that they are looking at a transitional, liminal space.

The complexity of border-crossing represented in these works is in stark contrast to the previous generation of artists. North Korea was a taboo subject in South Korean art, and its popular representation was demonized in post-war South Korea.⁵¹ However, *Minjung* art (People's art) adopted a different approach. This activist art movement, which emerged in the 1980s as a response to the then military government, sought to address contentious issues of the time—democratization, unification, labor struggles, and student demonstrations. *Minjung* artists rejected the notion of high culture and the new popular culture that emerged from Japan and the West (especially the US), the colonial and post-colonial agents behind the modernization of Korea,⁵² as they did not serve the interests of ordinary people. Instead, they claimed the resumption of the popular traditions before modernization transformed Korean people's life and embraced such forms of Buddhist or shamanistic paintings, scenes of everyday life and folk art.⁵³ They also challenged abstract painting and sculpture of the 1970s, which dominated modern Korean art, to have alienated and intimidated the majority of the population, and restored figuration and narrative by incorporating 'low' visual elements, such as billboards, magazine ads, posters, and kitsch paintings.⁵⁴

In *Minjung* art, North Korea became identified with a nostalgic yearning for the past before Western culture polluted the country. Based on dichotomies of Korean vs foreign, minjung vs elite, and substance vs. aesthetic,⁵⁵ in *Minjung* art, North Korea was imagined as "an unspoiled land and time of pure Koreanness, a world away from the city and the

⁵¹ Stephen Epstein, "The Axis of Vaudeville: Images of North Korea in South Korean Pop Culture," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 7, no. 10 (2009): 1, 3081, <https://apjjf.org/-Stephen-Epstein/3081/article.html>.

⁵² Tobias Lehmann, "Minjung Art Reconsidered: Art as a Means of Resistance," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society – Korea Branch* 84 (2009): 81-84.

⁵³ Lehmann, "Minjung Art Reconsidered: Art as a Means of Resistance," 83-84.

⁵⁴ Chunghoon Shin, "Reality and Utterance: in and against Minjung Art," *Korean Art from 1953: Collison, Innovation, and Interaction*. eds. Yeon Shim Chung, Sunjung Kim, Kimberly Chung, and Keith B. Wagner (New York: Phaidon, 2020), 99-101.

⁵⁵ Frank Hoffman, "Images of Dissent—Art: Transformations in Korean Minjung Art," *Harvard Asia-Pacific Review* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 47.

West, the non-autonomous government, and the elites.”⁵⁶ Some *Minjung* artists went so far as to embrace the Juche (self-reliance) ideology. In this way, the movement challenged the stereotypical perception of North Korea as the evil headed enemy and the US as South Korea’s closest political and economic ally and expressed its devotion to unification.⁵⁷

Sin Hakch’öl was one of the *Minjung* artists who expressed nostalgia for the North in his work. In his 1987 painting *Monaegi* (모내기 Rice planting), he portrays farmers ploughing a rice paddy, ridding the country of the foreign influences that caused national division. These influences are represented by tanks, missiles, and barbed-wire fencing; foreign cultural products such as Cola-Cola and cigarettes; and Hollywood movies such as Rambo and E.T. Behind the farmers, Sin portrays the result of the expulsion of these foreign forces, namely unification. In front of the backdrop of Paektu Mountain, people dance and smile happily.⁵⁸ This de-bordered Korea is imagined as the Peach Blossom Spring, a metaphor for a utopian land, the concept of which came from a 3rd-century Daoist tale by the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming.⁵⁹ Similarly, O Yun’s 1985 work, *Painting for Wishing Unification* (통일대원도 T’ong’il taewöndo) portrays people who are dancing in a festive mood in a unified Korea, utilizing bright colors and simple lines.

Improved inter-Korean relations in the early 2000s enabled South Koreans to have firsthand experience of the North and those who grew up in the DPRK, which led to a certain amount of demystification of the North. The North came to be seen as somewhat distant from yet with a special relationship to the South.⁶⁰ While the liminal, non-space of North Korea in the works dealt with here exemplifies the ambiguous reality of North Korea, it also provides a temporary de-bordering experience that transcends the physical restraint of national division and changing the inter-Korean relationship.

Conclusion

The national division of 1945 and the subsequent outbreak of the Korean War left an indelible mark on Korea and its people. The continued military confrontation has affected the psychology of Koreans and defined the physical borders of the country. In this context, Korean artists have incorporated the presence of North Korea into their work and mediated the experience of the other Korea. The tragic reality of living next to an inaccessible other has been a constant theme in contemporary Korean art. It has been particularly visible in

⁵⁶ Grinker, *Korea and Its Futures*, 193.

⁵⁷ Frank Hoffman, “Images of Dissent—Art: Transformations in Korean Minjung Art” 44–49.

⁵⁸ O Songhüi, “1980nyöndae minjung misuresö pundanüi hyöngsanghwa: Sajin imiji ch’ayong’ül chungsimüro,” *Misulsabakpo* 54 (2020): 259–60.

⁵⁹ The tale describes the journey of a fisherman who accidentally came upon a grove of peach trees that led to a plain filled with well-built houses, rich fields, and pretty ponds. “Peach Blossom Spring,” *An Anthology of Translations of Classical Chinese Literature*, edited by John Minford and Joseph S.M. Lau (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 515–17.

⁶⁰ Epstein, “The Axis of Vaudeville,” 3.

contemporary art since the 1990s.

Beyond reflecting on their experience of and connection to North Korea, South Korean artists have influenced the viewer's understanding of the country. The role of visual representations is especially potent in the DPRK. Due to its limited interactions with the outside world and the state's control of the visual sphere, imagery in the North is often granted a special connection to the truth. However, as a result of the conflict between the artist's desire to penetrate an unknown country and the North's desire to control its exposure, images taken in the DPRK often reproduce preconceptions about the country. On the other hand, embracing the inaccessibility of the North, South Korean artists have brought the ambiguous reality of the North to the fore. In doing so, they have composed a threshold space that demonstrates their frustrated attempts to cross the border and the complicated identity of the DPRK.

Contemporary Korean artists address the inaccessibility—both physically and psychologically—of the other Korea in their representations of the country. Their de-bordering, which results in the formation of a liminal space, represents another reality of North Korea and provides another way of perceiving the country beyond the border imposed with the armistice agreement in 1953. Korean artists take cognizance of the intertwined histories and realities of the two Koreas and thereby contribute to a more diverse visual discourse on the North.

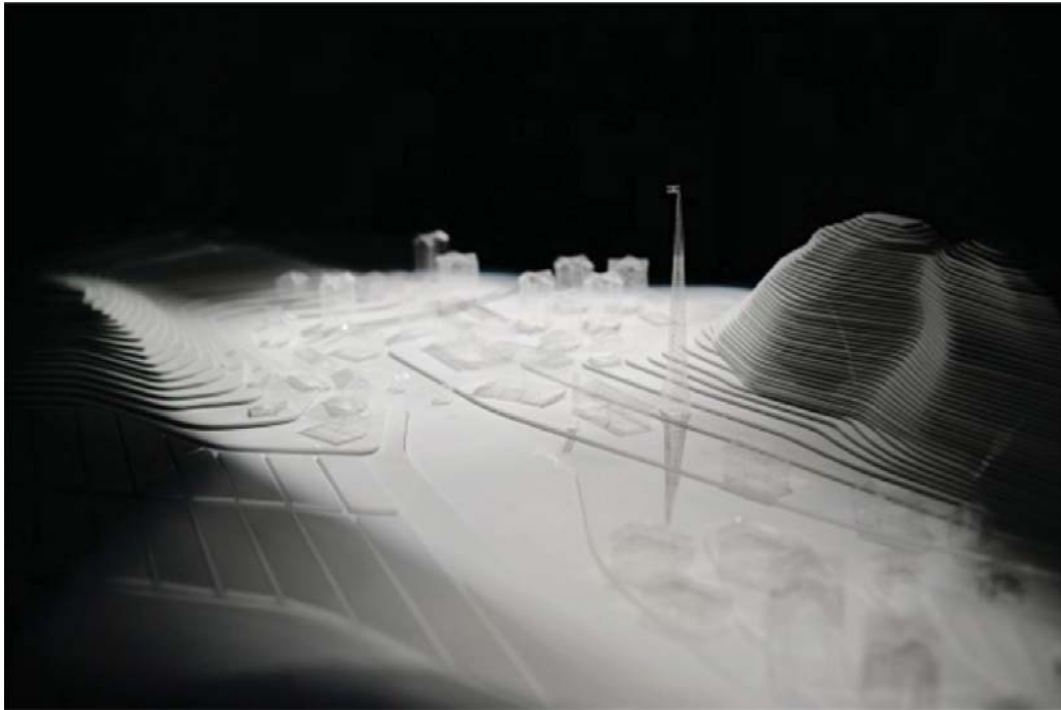


Figure 1. Kwon Hayoun, *Model Village*, 2014, HD Video
Image Courtesy of the Artist

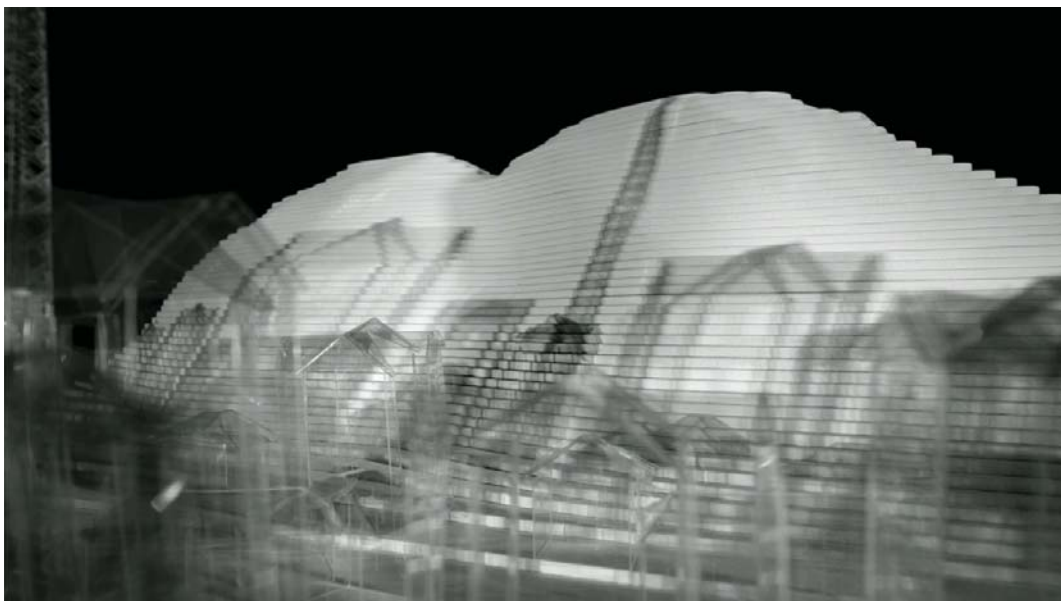


Figure 2. Kwon Hayoun, *Model Village*, 2014, HD Video
Image Courtesy of the Artist

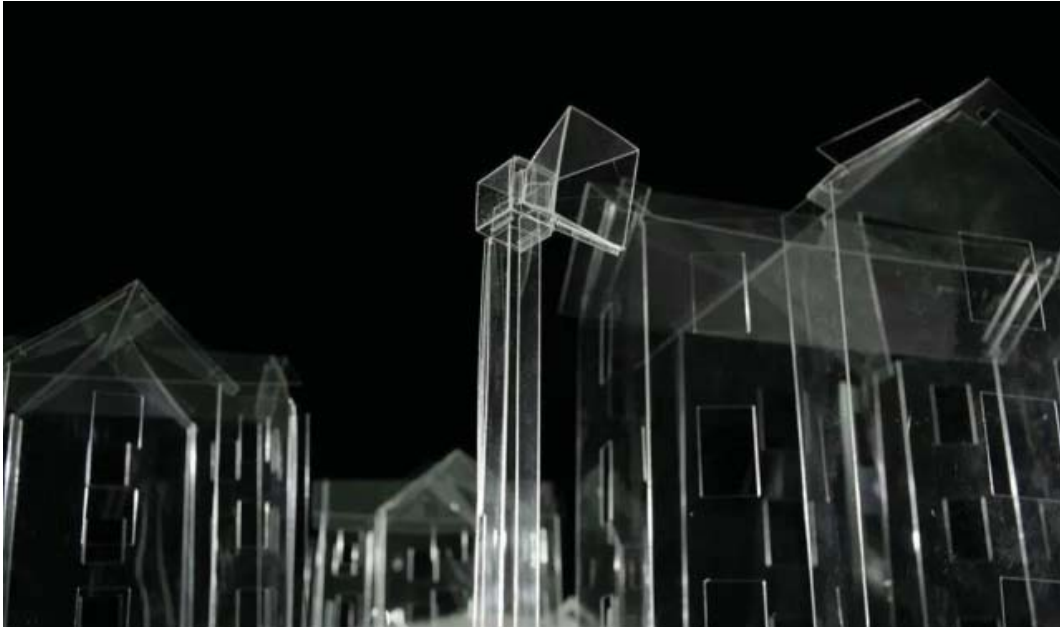


Figure 7. Kwon Hayoun, *Model Village*, 2014, HD Video
Image Courtesy of the Artist

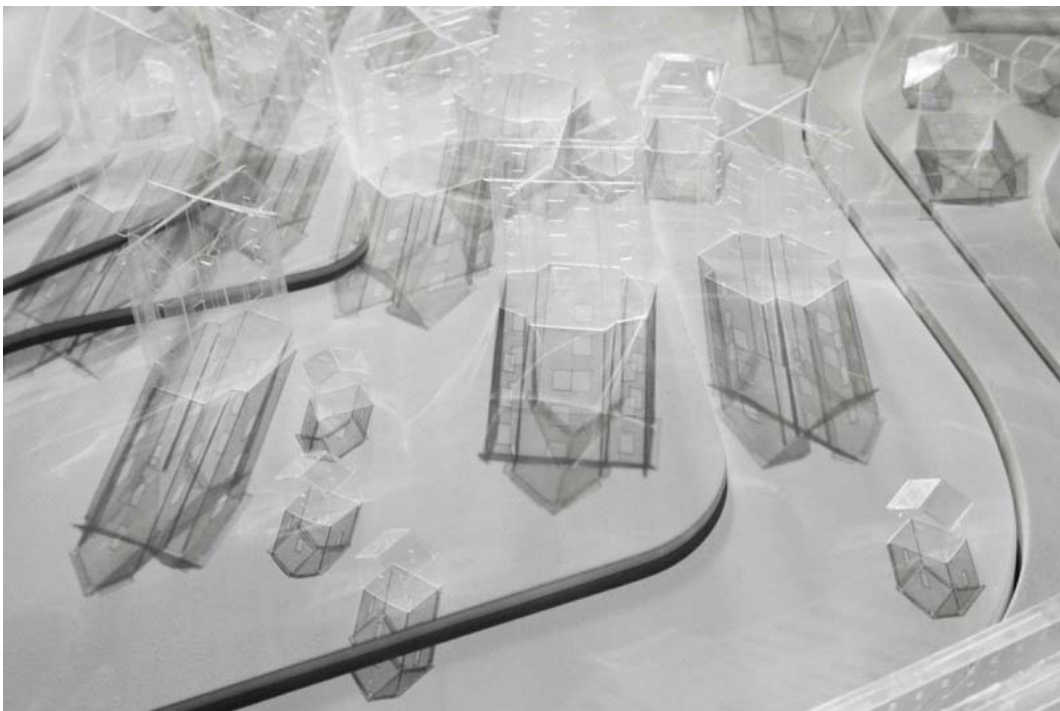


Figure 8. Kwon Hayoun, *Model Village*, 2014, HD Video
Image Courtesy of the Artist



Figure 9. Park Chan-kyong, *Sets*, 2000
Image Courtesy of the Artist and Kukje Gallery



Figure 10. Park Chan-kyong, *Sets*, 2000
Image Courtesy of the Artist and Kukje Gallery



Figure 11. Park Chan-kyong, *Sets*, 2000
Image Courtesy of the Artist and Kukje Gallery

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