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An Interview with Susu

June 4, 2010
Hongdae Toz, Seoul, Korea

Susu: My name is Susu. I am not involved with any organization, I work independently. My activism is mainly concerned with the art and culture of sexual minorities, but also with everything that relates to my life and my identity.

Carlos Motta: Can you explain more about the type of work that you do regarding culture and art?

S: In 2003, the *Korea Association for History of Modern Art* held a symposium called *Homosexuality in Art*. All the artists they discussed were male, mostly Western, white, and gay: American photographers such as Robert Mapplethorpe and a couple of Korean male artists. I thought this was problematic, so I invited several lesbian or bisexual artists and curated a show. Later on in 2005 I organized another exhibition with lesbian artists and nowadays, I am running a radio program introducing Korean women artists whose works focuses on sexuality, called *Myoangeoul*. It is broadcasted on *L-Yangjangjeom* [L stands for Lesbian, and Yangjangjeom means boutique], the one and only lesbian radio station of Korea.

CM: How have Korean art and culture approached homosexuality and queerness historically?

S: A discourse on sexuality was first introduced to the institutionalized art history in 1995 during the *Sexual Politics Culture Fest*, and the word "homosexuality" in 1996. The discourses of feminism and postmodernism were imported from the United States, and artists who had studied in the USA or the UK started producing works influenced by these theories. These backgrounds brought forth issues of homosexuality in Korea, a current which later on lead to the symposium that I mentioned before.

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In Korea, film studies have eagerly discussed homosexuality. Movies like *Farewell My Concubine* or *The Crying Game* opened up this conversation. In fact, these movies made a deep impression to most LGBT people in their 20s or 30s; they had greater influence to the community than any art or literature.

CM: How does this influence manifest itself in the formation of community or artistic groups or in the proliferation of content relating to homosexuality?

S: LGBT people lacked the language to could express themselves. Korea's gender norms were very stern and especially the idea that one *should* love the opposite sex. In other words, it was thought that sexual reproduction is an obligation for every human being. So in the 1970-80s, the question that women loving women asked themselves wasn't "Am I a lesbian?" but rather, "Am I a man?" But by watching movies that treated homosexuality openly, they were able to obtain that language. They were able to name their identities. A woman can love another woman, one can be a lesbian! After that, they were able to come out to themselves.

CM: Is there currently art production in Korea that is addressing these issues? Is there a queer art scene?

S: Yes, I guess, but it is not part of the mainstream. Most queer artists are kept in the dark. Only a couple of gay artists are invited to large scale exhibitions held at national museums; and even they are not perceived precisely as queer artists dealing with homosexuality, but simply as individual artists who have their own unique style.

CM: Can you pick one of these individual artists and explain the content of his or her work?

S: There is Oh In-hwan, whose work focuses on the invisible presence of gay sexuality. One of his works is about old gay bars in Jongno, which are more than a hundred of them clustered, but hidden. He spread out a map on the floor and placed incense or scented objects on the spots that corresponded to the locations of the gay bars. He used smell to express the invisible. Another work by him is a poster for a holiday party he had with his gay friends. The guest list is written on it, but because their names couldn't be legible, all names are blacked out. The core of Oh In-hwan's work is showing the unshowable.

CM: What is the reception of his work in the Korean art scene and in the main stream? How do people relate to it?

S: Oh's work is normally understood as postmodern art. His works are read as interactive and participatory projects; art that goes beyond the borders of visibility... However, it is not so much interpreted in relation to the general queer culture or history.

CM: Does his work respond to a legacy of queerness? Is Oh In-hwan, for example, responding to the history of feminist art in Korea? How is his work related to previous art that addressed issues of gender and sexuality?

S: There is a certain legacy, I am sure. But the people, who actually experienced that legacy,

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critiqued and contextualized the art scene based on issues of gender and sexuality are no longer in the field, for example Lim Jung-hee or Oh Hye-ju. There is a gap between them and us, so the legacy hasn't been passed on. We need critics who can understand artists' works and aesthetics within the flux of history, but they are disappearing one by one.

Also when a new discourse comes in from overseas, for instance post-colonialism, every critic uses it as his or her methodology; and if it doesn't really fit in, they look for another discourse. So all the feminism-related works are scattered about, not being able to form a stream. Artists like Oh In-hwan himself must have seen some of those works without understanding their significance.

This may be the result of Flunkeyism, but I think it is more of a structural problem of the Korean art scene. There seems to be a tendency to evaluate art works according to the recognition they receive outside Korea; whether they made the country proud at international biennales or whether they sold well overseas...

CM: So the content of the artist's work proper is not that acknowledged?

S: Global recognition counts more than the content itself. It becomes almost impossible for young queer artists to continue doing work on sexuality, gender or feminism, because the evaluation of the work always shifts along with new trends and does not maintain a consistent context. If your work isn't applicable to the latest discourse, there is no place for it in an exhibition. Artists are bound to consider adapting their work to this mold.

In addition, the government started to support public art, and now all funds are concentrated on that field. But public art mainly consists of collaborative work with the residents of local communities. It is extremely difficult to treat homosexuality in these communities unless a very secure and open culture of trust is formed. This not being the case, artists working with themes related to homosexuality are almost always ruled out.

CM: Is there some theorizing around these problems from the part of artists?

S: Between lesbian and gay artists, there are some that are working in the public art scene. These blend sexuality and gender issues into their larger work, not directly but in a roundabout way. They are trying to find an alternative way to express these issues, even if this means postponing their personal ambitions.

CM: Is anyone problematizing the lack of queer and gender issues in Korean culture?

S: No one in the institutionalized art scene, but quite a few in the film business. There are organizations such as the feminist film activist group *WOM*, or *Pinks*, a collective for sexual minority culture. The work of these groups is presented at independent film festivals, like the *Seoul Women's Culture Festival* or the *Human Rights Film Festival*. These works are distributed to the public, awarded at international festivals and financially supported by many institutions. Film critics like Park Jin-hyeong and Seo Dong-jin are actively critiquing and theorizing queer film. *The Queer Culture Festival* originally started as film festival too.

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CM: What is the role that Academia (universities and art history programs) plays in theorizing queer issues? Is there something like queer or gender studies in Korea? And what is there a relationship between academia and the art scene?

S: Park Jin-hyeong lectured on queer films at the *Graduate School of Media Studies* in Yonsei University and departments specializing in gender theory exist in several universities, such as Ewha, Sogang and Yonsei. But academic theorizing doesn't necessarily involve the arts. Gender theory and queer culture studies mostly focuses on movies or popular culture, and not so much on art. The theorizing of queer art is left to the art world.

CM: I also understand that you are interested in teenagers and teen culture. Can you speak about your involvement with these issues?

S: I began to develop an interest in sex trade. I counseled runaway teen girls at the *Seoul Resource Center for Young Women*, and naturally came across sexual minority teens. Korean society can be a very vicious place for teenage women, especially when they are runaways. While meeting these girls, I heard that a lot of them run from home because of sexuality issues. So I started a research on the actual conditions of teenage sexual minorities.

At first, it was very difficult to get in touch with them. There is a break between generations, that is, between adults and teenagers in the Korean lesbian community. Even until the early 2000s, media contents containing words like "lesbian" and "homosexual" were labeled as "harmful to minors" by the government, prohibiting its access to young people under 19. So adult communities have avoided teenagers; if they accepted them, they would receive penalties.

Also, from the 1990s to the 2000s, a common culture among teen girls was "fanfics": fictions written by teenage fans that portray gay male pop stars. A lot of straight young women read fanfics too, but among them, there are those who actually on the course of self-identifying as queer. But the common conception of lesbianism in Korea is that it is a misjudgment; that it is really friendship mistaken as love that it is a premature phase, which will eventually lead to heterosexuality. So much, that even grown-up lesbians think teen lesbians are still premature and, so to speak, hasty on deciding their sexual orientation. Under these circumstances, it is not unusual that a gap has formed between generations.

So I had a hard time meeting runaway lesbian or bisexual teens. I had no idea where they were, how I could meet them. Then I finally found them at Shinchon Park. Teenage "Ivans" gather there every Sunday, in large numbers, I must say, creating a sort of ghetto culture.

CM: What is the kind of work that you do with these queer teens?

S: The purpose of the research, which was funded by the city of Seoul, was to plan a social security service for runaway teenagers. I asked the girls the reason they ran away from home, and whether they were discriminated in their homes or schools due to their sexuality: If they received bad grades or if they dragged to mental hospitals, for example. I interviewed

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about 170 teens. I didn't just hand out surveys but used participant observation. I went to the café that the girls open every Sunday at Shinchon Park, worked together with them and learned their culture and their needs.

Teenagers that run away because of issues of sexuality face many difficulties in Korean group homes, which for the most part are gender segregated. So when teen lesbians enter group homes and they have relationships or make love with other girl roommates, it really perplexes the instructors and also makes it hard for the girls to feel "at home" in these places. But they can't they return home. Their parents, thinking their child is crazy, send them to hospitals, and in some extreme cases, lock them up. They need a separate, safe and secure place to live.

We provide them temporary shelter and financial support. We also help them find jobs so that they can lead an independent life. After they get jobs, we give them advise on the problems they could experience at work. Many incidents occur at workplaces: they get fired for being lesbians; the employers threaten to tell their parents where they live, so as to cut their pay or to demand sexual favors. Our work was supposed to stop with the research, but after seeing that actual support and counseling were urgent, we extended the plan. Work opportunities, separate shelters, safe schools, freedom from home are all essential.

When I first met the teenagers, they asked me how old I was, and whether I was a lesbian. I told them I am a lesbian in my 30s. They were so shocked! These girls had never imagined, not even once, that there could be lesbians older than them that live as lesbians and are appreciated for who they are. They thought they would turn "normal" in their 20s. When I told them that I still love women and live together with my partner, they just couldn't believe it. After seeing this I organized a lesbian camp where teens and adults can communicate.

CM: What would you say is the greatest challenge for the teen LGBTQ community now and what is the life that they can hope to have in the future?

S: Teenage Ivans yearn for an independent life from a very young age. But there are still many obstacles. Teenagers in Korea do not have any authorized civil rights as individuals, like labor rights. Moreover, sexual minority teens lack contacts with other teen organizations. I think it is important that these young people have a free and secure space to be themselves. It is also crucial that they speak up in the LGBT movement and gain strength and empower themselves. There are a couple teen activist groups; but there needs to be more.

The life they can hope for... That reminds me of a very moving experience I had. A girl I first met at Shinchon Park and later came to work with me, told me that when she grows up and makes a lot of money, she wants build a nursing home for elderly lesbians; that she wants take care of lesbians when they get old. In Korea, it is very difficult to live life once you part away from your family. But this girl, who left home at a young age, is trying to build a new family for herself by taking care other lesbians. We need to think more about these new forms of communities.