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WE SERVE THE PEOPLE

A Postcard from Afar: North Korea from a Distance

Curated by Mark Featy

January 11 - March 10, 2012

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With works by: Magnus Bärtås, Peter Cave, Alain Declercq, Jim Finn, Tony Garifalakis, Soni Kum, Jung Lee, and Karl Tuikkaenen



Alain Declercq *The Third Tunnel* 2008 C-type print 47 x 84 in

At present, our overseas propaganda is not efficient. Radical improvement must be made in this work... our publications for overseas propaganda lack variety and their quality is low. These publications are to be circulated in foreign countries, so they should be printed on good paper and the books well bound.

-Kim Jong-il'

2012 marks the centennial anniversary of the birth of the late Kim Il-sung, or Kim Song-juh as he was born,² the founder of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The year will mark a defining moment within the history of the DPRK with the official governmental website enthusing that in "2012 the Korean people will surely open the gates of a thriving nation."³ Yet such promise for the future follows on from some of the most turbulent years within the complicated and volatile history of the divided Korean Peninsula. The 2010 sinking of the South Korean Cheonan battleship near the disputed maritime border in the Yellow Sea has further incensed the relationship between DPRK and South Korea, deteriorating any of the preliminary steps towards reconciliatory processes as fore grounded in the 'Sunshine Policy' initiated by then South Korean president Kim Dae-jung in 2000.

In recent years there has been mounting speculation surrounding the perceptibly failing health of Kim Jong-il leading to wider considerations of what will happen in the event of his death. Since 2010, his son Kim Jong-un has been widely interpreted as the heir presumptive of the

1. Kim Jong-il, "Let us Strengthen Friendship and Solidarity with the Newly-emergent Countries," Kim Jong-il: Selected Works 1, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang, 1992, p 93.
2. Jasper Becker draws attention to the fact that the name Kim Il-sung was adopted from a renowned leader of the resistance against the Japanese occupation to give greater credence to the liberatory contributions made by Kim Song Juh ahead of being positioned by the Soviet forces to govern the emergent DPRK. *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong-il and the Looming Threat of North Korea*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2005, p 44.
3. "100-Year History of Kim Il-sung's Korea," Democratic People's Republic of Korea, www.korea-dpr.com [accessed November 28, 2011].

regime, having recently been named vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party. Kim Jong-un has emerged as the favored of Kim Jong-il's prospective successors and is his third known son, mothered by Ko Young-hee, described as his favorite consort. The positioning of Kim Jong-un as the likely successor within the uniquely heretic socialist system of the DPRK has been undertaken with an urgency that suggests a dynastic succession is being imminently planned. This transition process does nothing to allay concerns regarding the leadership of the state and, crucially, its relationship with the rest of the world. Indeed, very little is known of Kim Jong-un and that is likely to remain the case as his biographical history and personal attributes are massaged through the same processes of revisionism that redefined both his grandfather and father before him.

The DPRK exists as a kind of mirage of the socialist dream, a parallel universe that is almost incomprehensible to those outside of it, which is furthered by the absolute control of information and media disseminated by the highly secretive state. It is indeed through the very lack of images of the DPRK that our imagination of the country is created, as an abstract idea rather than a concrete vision. As Christian Kracht suggests, "Kim Jong-il's People's Republic is a gigantic installation, a maniacal theatrical



Magnus Bärtås *Madame & Little Boy* 2009 DVD 27 minutes

play that—with all its hermetic meticulousness and its perfect Potemkinization—simulates an entire country."⁴ Our imagination of the state is entirely fractured, existing upon the parameters of two vastly opposing positions: the totally censored and controlled representation of a thriving socialist nation and a belligerent rogue state situated within what former United States President George W. Bush termed in his State of the Union Address in 2002 as 'the axis of evil.' It would seem that within the consideration of the DPRK there is no middle ground and scarce objective truth.

A Postcard from Afar: North Korea from a Distance brings together the work of eight artists in an attempt to develop a picture of what the DPRK might be, in the absence of reliable, unbiased information. Greeting audiences as they approach apexart are two portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il as a gesture to the compulsory display of their images within all houses and buildings within the DPRK. These portraits have been commissioned through

4. Christian Kracht (with Eva Munz and Lukas Nikol) *The Ministry of Truth: Kim Jong-il's North Korea* (translated by Richard Langston and April Lamm), Feral House, Los Angeles, 2007, p 9.



an art center in Melbourne, Australia that provides studios and support to artists with intellectual disabilities, rather than from an official artist of the Misulga Tongmaeng or Korean Artists Federation in Pyongyang. The portraits presented within *A Postcard from Afar* were created by Peter Cave, but operate as representative works of all of the artists at Arts Projects who contributed to the development of the project by painting the Korean leaders. Cave's works present a com-

manding representation of these marginalized outsiders from a position which may empathize with such marginalization.

Karl Tuikkanen's *Untilted* (2011) emerges from one of a number of visits to the DPRK taken in his youth with his parents while they were active within various communist movements in Sweden and later the Swedish-Korean Friendship Association, leading to visits during the 1980s. *Untilted* draws upon the improbable and peculiar situation of the artist, aged twelve, marching in a demonstration in Pyongyang carrying a banner reading 'Yankee go home!' Tuikkanen revisits this momentous experience, mindful of the fragility of his memories of it and how they might be reconciled with a more developed understanding of the DPRK than one might have as a child. The looped original footage from his family archive, firmly embedded within a very particular situation, contrasts the determined readiness of the banner positioned beside it, awaiting only the right time and situation within which to reassert its cause. The revisited and enlarged banner has become unwieldy in its scale, as if to acknowledge the location of its call for action in the context most implausible. The title of the work plays upon the various possibilities and impossibilities of all activism while making reference to the inability to topple the regime of the DPRK.

Alain Declercq concentrates on the highly contested and fortified parameters of the divided Korea, focusing on the Third Infiltration Tunnel, one of a series of tunnels built by DPRK forces, as a means to enable the rapid deployment of troops should Pyongyang initiate an attack on Seoul. South Korea was alerted to their existence in 1974 following a reconnaissance mission which was given further substance through the testimony of defector Kim Bu-sung in 1975 with the third tunnel, the closest to Seoul, discovered three years later. Photography within the tunnel and surrounding areas is strictly prohibited and vigilantly enforced in fear of inflaming tensions across the volatile border. Declercq's *The*

Third Tunnel (2008) approaches this site with the subterfuge of an operative, contravening regulations in pursuit of reliable 'intel.'

The Hills Have Eyes (2011), by Tony Garifalakis, appears as a camouflage sheet, extracted from use in military operations and presented as a type of fabric swatch for potential and future engagements. Lurking within the repetitive, intricate patterning of the camouflage is a pair of eyes, barely visible, yet watchfully surveying the environment. The Korean Demilitarized Zone, contrary to its name, is one of the most heavily fortified and combat ready borders in the world. Upon both sides of its divide exist vast and complex networks of surveillance points and strategic armaments. Both sides are vigilant of any activity occurring on the opposing side of the parameter. Within this deeply suspicious environment someone is always watching.

Garifalakis's work *Leader of the Pack* (2011) takes its cue from the insignia and patching of cut-off denim jackets favored by motorcycle gangs the world over. It has been suggested that Kim Jong-il is a long-time motorcycle enthusiast, as North Korean authority Dr. Andrei Lankov writes, "In the 1960s Kim Jong-il was dashing, even attractive. He loved motorcycles (yes, the Dear Leader was probably the first North Korean biker) and beautiful girls."⁵ Within this work the Dear Leader is positioned as the renegade outlaw operating beyond the fringe of civilized society, he is not merely the leader of a gang but the embodiment of its oppositional ethos.

Soni Kum is a third-generation Korean who grew up within the North Korean community in Japan. *Foreign Sky* (2005) presents an intense and deeply personal reflection on North Korean identity and its diaspora. The film compiles archival footage to present a perspective on the systemic and resonant process of the marginalization of North Koreans living in Japan, and, further, interrogates the collision of alternative versions and perspectives in the construction of history. After Japan signed the San Francisco Treaty in 1951, and from that point in time on, all Koreans in Japan who did not attempt to obtain South Korean citizenship were automatically classified as North Korean refugees, without an official nationality. Kum's cultural identity has been formed in geographical estrangement from North Korea, yet has been shaped by her close family ties and education within the maligned North Korean schooling system in Japan,

5. Dr Andrei Lankov, "North Korea's deepening succession mystery," Online Asia Times, www.atimes.com, 8 February 2005 [accessed December 6, 2011].



Tony Garifalakis Leader of the Pack 2011 Mixed media on denim vest Dimensions variable

and her perpetual status as an 'alien' within that culture. *Foreign Sky* shifts between a reanalysis of factual accounts of colonization and persecution as well as a highly personal integration of familial accounts and fictional dramatizations of the emotions of her relatives.

Magnus Bårtås' work *Madame and Little Boy* (2009) shifts the conventions of documentary film through its oscillation between fact and personal perspectives. The film takes its title from the codename of the US atomic bomb that would decimate Hiroshima, bringing about the end of the war with Japan. This moment would effectively pave the way for the liberation of the Korean Peninsula after 35 years of occupation by Japanese forces in what would sadly be merely a brief period of peace and unity. The video essay, narrated by music legend Will Oldham (Bonnie Prince Billy) explores the bizarre story of the abduction to Pyongyang in 1978 of South Korean film actress Choi Eun-hee and her ex-husband, the director Shin Sang-ok by DPRK operatives in Hong Kong. After a number of years the actress and director would be offered a contract announcing their defection to the DPRK and by way of reward be provided with all of the studio and production requirements to create films for the regime. Bårtås interweaves this narrative with some of the films they produced while 'under contract,' most notably *Pulgasari* (1985). The film includes an interview with the liberated Choi Eun-hee in Seoul, footage from DPRK propaganda documentaries and Oldham's narration—filmed in a studio building next to The Nike Missile Site outside San Francisco—to consider how the complicated relationship between the divided Korean Peninsula, Japan, and the USA plays out and is reinforced through cinema and documentary films.



Jim Finn The Juche Idea 2008 DVD 62 minutes

while employed at a North Korean artist residency. The film explores the cinephilic passion of the Dear Leader and his attempts to apply the concept of Juche—the national ideology of self-reliance developed by the Kims—to address how and for what purpose art should function. More broadly *The Juche Idea* reflects upon the processes and mechanisms of art making, presenting a perspective of a socialist

Drawing upon some similar threads, Jim Finn's *The Juche Idea* (2008) reprises the story of the abduction of Choi Eun-hee. The film's central character is a South Korean video artist named Yoon Jung-lee who attempts to update the antiquated film theories of Kim Jong-il



Soni Kum Foreign Sky 2005 DVD 70 minutes

model as a means to consider the capitalist model.

The photographic series *Bordering North Korea* (2005-2008) by Jung Lee operates within the landscape tradition of defining and representing the natural terrain and through this, the specific geographical conditions of a given context. What the artist presents is a peripheral perspective on a landscape that the artist, as a South Korean, is unlikely to tread. The photographs depict various points upon the border between the DPRK and neighboring South Korea and China, presenting a distant perspective upon the nation, rather than a view from within it. Within the divided Korea such a vantage point is the closest proximity that many Koreans will have access to of their estranged extended family and once fellow citizens.

It is against this backdrop of imminent celebrations within the DPRK and increasing apprehension surrounding its future leadership that *A Postcard from Afar* is positioned. It exists as a series of uncertain imaginings of an uncertain state, at a juncture in time that seems to offer no feasible way of maintaining its current course and limited capacity for a transition toward another.

— Mark Feary © 2011 (Juche 100)
2011-2012 Unsolicited Proposal Program winner

Addendum

On December 20th North Korea announced that Kim Jong-il, the leader of the DPRK since 1994 had died. According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) "Leader Kim died of physical and mental fatigue accumulated from his trip to on-site guidance in the train at 8:30 a.m. December 17, 2011."

Images courtesy of the artists and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne; Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris; One & J Gallery, Seoul; Nordin Gallery, Stockholm; and Video Data Bank, Chicago.