

# Between Melancholy and Escape

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## Melancholy

Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates developed the so-called humorism into a medical theory in which four bodily fluids are believed to affect character traits and temperaments, and human personalities are divided into four fundamental types: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic. The word “melancholy” originated from the Greek word *μέλαινα χολή* (black bile)—a compound word made up of *melas* (melan, “black”) and *cholé* (chole, “bile”). Hippocrates viewed melancholy as a disease characterized by severe depression and extreme sadness that leads to madness.

RYU Biho’s art unfolds a world filled with melancholy. His work translates the deep sense of deprivation and loss felt by most of us living in contemporary Korea. For RYU, melancholy is a pathology of Korean society. His exploration of the psychic landscape of melancholy deals not only with grief and bereavement from irreversible losses such as death but also with various other manifestations, whether

caused by disillusionment toward human nature or the feeling of being rejected or discriminated against. His *Inner View* (2015) is an illustrative example, wherein RYU interviewed survivors and grieving family members of victims of catastrophic events—the Sealand Youth Training Center fire, the human rights abuse at the Brothers Home, the Yongsan disaster, the sinking of MV Sewol, and the Daegu subway fire—and played back the footages on old monitors situated in various areas of the installation space.

Modern Korean history is strewn with man-made disasters that took hundreds of lives. *Inner View* does not seek to explain the system perpetuating this seemingly unending cycle of catastrophe in a modern, capitalist Korea or pinpoint its causes. Instead, it shines a light on the rush to shift blame, constantly seen in the aftermath of major accidents and the persisting complacency of the Korean government. Surviving families are left to blame fate or bad luck for their horrifying tragedy. Recurrent disasters sow misery and melancholy across Korean society.

Once the name for a medical condition, “melancholy” acquired a new social, cultural, and artistic significance in the 20th century with Walter Benjamin. His “dialectical melancholy,” straddled between *trauer* (mourning) and *spiel* (play), is a tense interaction between the

two, serving as a catalyst for artistic creation. Art is understood as mimesis, and the longing for a lost object is believed to lead to an impetus to create new meanings and images. According to Benjamin, not all depressed people are *melancholiker* (melancholic), and only those who explore the idea of melancholy or perceive and understand melancholic ambivalence are melancholic.

Melancholy can be a subject of art when an artist translates objectively perceived pathological conditions in society into their unique aesthetic language. In 2018, RYU completed residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, helping him expand the horizons of his exploration of melancholy. *A Prophet's Words* (2018) is a five-chapter video that delivers “words of wisdom from the dead to the living.” Images of recent events reported by the media are made to overlap with the state of mind of Orpheus, overcome with conflicting thoughts, as he leaves the dark world of the dead. Orpheus plays his lyre to bargain with Hades, the god of the dead, for the life of his wife, Eurydice, who was killed by a snake. Moved by Orpheus’s enchanting tune, Hades agrees to let him rescue his wife, but on one condition—Orpheus must not turn back to look at his beloved until he has left the underworld. Just before the gate, seeing the bright light of day, Orpheus thinks he has reached the world of the living and turns to look at Eurydice, who still has one foot in the realm of the dead and

vanishes back into the depths of the underworld.

*A Prophet's Words* was motivated by a video of interviews with families separated nearly seven decades ago when Korea was divided along the 38th parallel and an online news article on a young Syrian refugee washed up dead on a beach in southern Turkey in the fall of 2015. The divided families and the Syrian boy are victims of political circumstances beyond their control. Their plight, struggles, and final liberation are recounted in a poetic narrative. The young Syrian boy's tragic death is juxtaposed with the despair of Orpheus, whose descent to the netherworld ultimately fails to bring his beloved back to life.

In *Moment of Brilliance* (2015), the rhetoric of melancholy becomes more poetic. At the May 18 Democracy Square in Gwangju, a group of students from Chosun University reflects the blazing sunlight of southwestern Korea to various parts of the square using mirror fragments. The clamor of light is about the yearning for democracy that drove Gwangju citizens into the streets 25 years before; the demand for the truth regarding the brutal crackdown by the military, still not established to this day; the outcry against the state power that reigns supreme more than ever; and the protest of survivors denied of their rightful compensation.

In his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 1928), Walter Benjamin proposes a practical life in which a melancholic continues searching for new possibilities, even amid despair, with no escape. In a hopeless and unsalvageable world, artworks presenting fragments of sadness produce ruins and are bound to repeat themselves endlessly, as there is no resolution or closure. Another way RYU expresses his distrust for Korean society in the clutches of capitalism is by imagining the world to come, all while maintaining a dialectical melancholy without deceiving the dismal nature of our present conditions or being facetious about it.

## Escape

The climate crisis spells the end of the capitalist world as a system that has shaped all modern values as we know it. Indiscriminate destruction, from massacres perpetrated during colonial times to the devastation of ecosystems by multinational corporations, is an inevitable outcome of capitalist production. The aim of capitalist production is not to meet human needs but to maximize profit and acquire “infinite” wealth. As competition and technological innovation decrease the rate of return on capital, this must be compensated for by an ever-increasing volume of production, leading to the destruction of ecosystems and exploitation. Even if we maintain the capitalist system, we are likely living through its last hurrah.

This journey, which began as a clear-eyed look at the capitalist system, eventually took RYU to where he actively looked for ways to escape this system. According to RYU, *Flexible Landscape* is a portrait of global capitalism. A car leisurely rolls through a scintillating night city with neon signs and billboards. This 3D animation video communicates the sensual comfort of our daily life in a world where we can consume the same brands of food, clothes, and technologies anywhere. The interactive work installed together with the video allows

viewers to create their global capitalist landscapes by moving around *objets* bearing multinational corporations' logos. *Flexible Landscape* is about our addiction to convenience and comfort delivered by the tightly knit web of services provided by global firms and the state of numbness that this has plunged us into so that we no longer care to question systems that increasingly control our lives.

Using his solo exhibitions as the platform, RYU proposes that viewers join him in escaping the capitalist system. In *Mutual Escape*, *Extreme Private Practice*, and *Incomplete*, three of his solo exhibitions held over 12 years, the artist concretely explores the possibility of an escape from the system. *Mutual Escape* (2008) is a participatory project in which viewers help each other escape their daily routines. The 10 participants, recruited through social media, joined the artist at Nanji Art Studio and went to the exhibition venue in Itaewon. On their way, the group encountered unexpected problems in various parts of Seoul, including the Seoul World Cup Stadium, the Hongik University subway station, and the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts. The installation was created using *objets* collected by the participants in connection with the unexpected situations they met on the way.

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord wrote about the

significance of rearranging new networks, such as relationships that produce novel situations. The group of people who participated in RYU's cooperative escape project is not a "ready-made community" that is stable and closely integrated; it is a temporary and diffuse community in which relationships are continuously redefined and renegotiated. In this sense, it is an organic community built on shared values outside the capital system. In *Mutual Escape*, these collective experiences become an aesthetic act and an artistic practice.

In *Extreme Private Practice*, the artist distributed a "Manual for Escaping the Routine," a list of recommended actions placed inside a baseball or a golf ball, at street corners during rush hours, city squares where people gathered to watch a football game on outdoor screens, and the rooftops of downtown buildings. The manual suggests quirky actions, such as, "If a sudden spam text message offering a loan makes you feel uneasy, break a Q-tip and make an arrowhead!" The idea is to escape together the systems controlling us. The manual asserts that creating happenings is a form of training to escape surveillance systems that spy on our every move and targeted marketing systems that determine our tastes before we even know them and make us consume products selected based on our fictitious profiles.



*Incomplete* was shown during the depths of the pandemic in 2020. The artists set up a space with a science fiction–like atmosphere representing an indefinite future. The scaffoldings symbolize the in-progress nature of events this installation will set in motion. This space is coupled with a contact zone with somewhat unstable-looking modifiable structures from which unfamiliar, odd images hang.

The artist recruits collaborating creators, with whom he carries out aesthetic interventions on “certain *objets*” at the installation venue throughout the exhibition period. Such aesthetic interventions are part of the creative process, taking the form of conflicts or clashes with “certain *objets*,” penetration, transformation or metamorphosis, or propagation or growth. They are individual and intimate artistic acts, which the artist describes as a “process of distancing from and breaking with institutionalized aesthetics and a desensitized consciousness.” The accumulation of these actions gradually transforms the exhibition space, which is not an imaginary space of coexistence that is harmonious and peaceful but that of a real-world coexistence where dangers and problems lurk. The artist also proposes to imagine the possibility of an entirely new type of fiction, stating that imagining another mode of human existence constitutes a critical task in meeting the challenge of climate change.

What can an artist do in an age of catastrophe? The question seems too immense to even attempt answering. In Amitav Ghosh's *Great Derangement*, the Indian writer and anthropologist called the climate crisis the "crisis of the imagination." RYU invites viewers to imagine the world after capitalism through his collective, if temporary, escape training, as artistic imagination is needed more than ever to usher in a new world.

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