

How to build a universe which doesn't fall apart two days later: Flexible Landscape

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In Plato's *Timaeus*, God does not create the universe, as does the Christian God; He simply finds it one day. It is in a state of total chaos. God sets to work to transform the chaos into order. That idea appeals to me, and I have adapted it to fit my own intellectual needs: What if our universe started out as not quite real, a sort of illusion, as the Hindu religion teaches, and God, out of love and kindness for us, is slowly transmuting it, slowly and secretly, into something real?¹

Is the world we are living in real? We breathe in illusions of reality manufactured by media, government, corporations, capitalism, religious groups or political groups. The virtual realities do not stop with the power of electronic mechanisms. They want us to be individuals in a massive social system of their own creation to be passive and act as pieces in a puzzle.

Ryu, Biho distrusts their intention and their power to create an illusionary social system, which seems innocent. He is fascinated by chaos in the privacy of his mind and pursues to find the hidden orders inside it. As Philip K. Dick says, Ryu seeks to find the orders of things or real system inside the chaos in order to build a universe which doesn't fall apart two days later. His attempts may be a way to understand the pseudo-reality we are living in.

Ryu begins with 'incidents', which are dealt as reality by mass media in order to find what is real in virtual illusions of reality. However, he draws a clear line between art and analytics. To him, art is a sign for individuals to cognize the chaos in reality rather than a tool to scrutinize and define what reality is. As artists reproduce narratives, images, sounds, and ideas, the representation of reality becomes a work of art.

We read our papers, attend to our work, and go to sleep at night, having been inundated (we are told daily) by a torrent of the impossible, all of it leading to confusion. As artists, we know more about the history of our field, the infinity of its alternatives, than artists ever knew before. And all this is reflected in the array of styles with which we beckon others' attention. For the first time, blissful ignorance hasn't a chance.²

As Allan Kaprow manifested in 1964, artists are not ignorant of the reality any longer; indifference and ignorance of artists toward the reality are not glorified.

¹ How to build a universe which doesn't fall apart 2 days later, Philip K. Dick, 1978

² The artist as the man of the world, Allan Kaprow, 1964

Landscape of a Social System

Although landscape painting reveals an artist's direct attempt to represent reality, the world which an artist reproduces is regarded as a fictitious image. Despite his/her own obsession to create its own reality, landscape artists often reach the conclusion that reality cannot be created by an artist; artist create the representation of reality, an unrealistic utopia.

Flexible Landscape presents the landscape of the current social system in Korea rather than creating the visible surface of reality. If 'incidents', which is the term used in history or philosophy, means revolutionary moments that break from the major flow of history, the two 'incidents' Ryu chooses are the moments that directly depict the contemporary history in Korea. It starts from two concrete incidents that had occurred in Korea, in Songdo Newtown in 2008 and Taean County in 2007. Both represent the landscape of a power system, an extension within an elaborate mechanism of social exchange. To Ryu, this is the representation of capitalist systems and social situations in Korea.

The construction of Songdo Newtown is a prime example where capitalism deforms nature, by claiming the sea and building an enormous business complex. The catastrophic accident in Taean Coast illustrates the destruction of an ecosystem caused by an oil spill. Ryu signifies these two real events as metaphorical images of the ecosystem, environment, and pollution. Based on objective reality, he personifies them with his subjective imagination. Created within a conflict-structure of external elements and individual psychology, Ryu calls this world as 'sub-topia.'

Sub-topia

Sub-topia is the world created by an artist through his/her individual imagination and energy to the immense social structures such as economic growth & crisis, the exhaustion of energy, and environmental pollution. This does not intend to provide ethical judgments of the politics involved, rather Ryu's interests lie in the ontological questions in change of physical, chemical, and natural formation forms.

In the landscape of this sub-topia, power systems are bilateral: those who have it are at one end, those who don't are at the other, and power is not always the overt subject of politics. Ryu claims that sub-topia exists within the intangible fields of education, religion, and environment, where citizens cannot easily access power systems.

Its role is to present the supplement of reality in society. Ryu Biho hopes the sub-topia, an alternative world of an artist, will offer a stimulus to engage reality through an exhibition, a social system of communication.

The Structure of Exhibition

Displayed near the entrance of the venue is Ryu's *Deep Light* series, an installation using specific sculptural forms with pitch-black color which do not even allow any reflection of light around. In this piece, there are deformed men and lifeless anatomically recognizable forms from nature depicting the

aftermath of oil and how it can destroy our environment. This is the psychological intricacy men conceal inside in contemporary environment, or a silence the artist has kept for the last eight years.

In *A Better Tomorrow*, digital imagery composed in shapes that appeared in *Deep Light*, a boy holding a stick lies down on the ground, while a city can be seen burning like Sodom. This animation-like, theatrical depiction is peculiar to Ryu Biho, who conveys narrative in a metaphorical manner.

In *A Better Tomorrow*, a digital print, a boy is seen holding a stick and lying down on the ground as a city is burning like Sodom in the background. One can see the same figures in his sculptures, *Deep Light* in the mid ground repeating a narrative detail of an apocalypse due to oil. Theatrically staged, the characters in his works, seem like being brought out from animation to convey narrative in a metaphorical manner.

Another digital print, *Fantasia*, is a landscape addressing the recovery of nature, in a departure from the conventional, anthropocentric worldview. A city can be seen in the distance, and a UFO shape falls down into waves of water.

In *Flexible Landscape*, real architectural structures in Seoul, South Korea: the Bank of Korea, Chosun Times, and Youido Full Gospel Church, are constructed distorted and skewed representing Ryu's subjective vision. These are the primary buildings that provide major services to constitute contemporary Korea. The audience can move the maquettes of buildings around in order to change the scenery in their own ways. He represents powerful authorities that govern us or provide service to us by infiltrating our daily lives in a sweet, delightful manner.

Euphoric Drive, a video of a car racing game, is a 3D animation in which one slides along a yellow street at slow speed of 10-20 kms per hour while billboards pass by. In this piece he is trying to convey how one can be at ease in a strange place when there are familiar brand names around you. If one who enjoys Starbucks coffee in the United States finds Starbucks in Korea, they might feel a familiarity, and being in a strange land might turn into a friendly recognizable space.

Invisible City, a video chronicling a performance that acts out the artist's concerns about an intangible social system. In this work, the artist goes to Daehakno park, in Seoul where an unusually high number of pigeons flock about and demonstrate their Columbidae ways. He writes the words Invisible City on the ground and these letters are covered by the pigeons in the opening of the performance. Then he persuades them away to another part of the park and slowly the words "Invisible Cities" is revealed. Unlike his other pieces, this single-channel video appears abstract and metaphysical, which opens the future direction of Ryu's interests.

Epilogue

Ryu Biho presents his third solo exhibition, *Flexible Landscape*, after *Be Complacent in a Dream* in 2001 and *The Steel Sun* in 2000. During the eight years of preparation for the new exhibition, Ryu experienced depression and distress, which influenced profound changes in him. Extracting and deflating

his anguishes one by one, Ryu tries to figure out where his struggles began. Which in turn led to the development of his interest in the social systems, aesthetics, artistic autonomy, Korean authenticity, and the clash of Taoism through the media. From its beginning in 2000, when Ryu presented *Flexible Landscape* he has come to terms with the shifts in the media landscape, environment, social systems, and above all, changes in himself.

Ryu has experimented with artistic interventions in reality, and with our relationships within society, based on real accidents. Through his sub-topia, he hopes to provide an alternative to experience the reality of the world. Through Ryu's work, the landscape of social power, and power systems, are far from fiction.