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***The South Korean art situation: Autumn, 1997. Written: Haruo Sanda***

Great fine-arts events occurred in succession at the heart of Europe in the summer of this year. However, two large events in South Korea defined this autumn, one in the suburbs of Seoul and the other the biennale in Gwangju. The two events both directly and indirectly deeply concerned the world of Japanese art. I am describing them in two articles. Haruo Sanda (Mainichi Shimbun Newspaper)

Relations of between Japan and South Korea are still complicated and delicate, so that it may be described as "a near and distant country." The unhappy history of both countries is still unresolved, so that each event brings out feelings of nationalism. Despite their awkward relations, it seems that movement toward calm interaction, unsullied by the past is being established in the field of fine arts. It is "The Japanese Contemporary Art Exhibition" on display at The National Contemporary Art Museum Gwacheon, in the Seoul suburbs, that alerts us to this change.

This exhibition was planned over the last several years as a companion show to "An aspect of Korean Art in the 1990's", an exhibition which toured the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and the National Museum of Art, Osaka. This exhibition followed a similar exchange of fine arts for exhibit in 1981. The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea opened in 1988 for the Seoul Olympic Games. It is the grandest scale national cultural institution in East Asia, and its opening marked the first time that contemporary art of Japan was collected and officially introduced in Korea. No comparable exchange had taken place in the prior 81 years, and thus our attention has been drawn to these events. Concerns were raised when at a Japanese traditional-handicrafts exhibition held at this museum in 1994, a display case was battered by a viewer damaging the ceramic works within. Seemingly ceramics, which symbolize old Japan, brought back destructive memories of colonial days, inciting this anti-Japanese action. Although traditional crafts have

only a vague relationship with contemporary art, the concerns about nationalistic retribution remain. Eun-ju CHOI, Curator of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea which planned this exhibition emphasized at the opening symposium on September 23, “We hope to find a model for society in which Korea, Japan and East Asia, the West, the past, and the future can exist together, unlike our grandfathers time when a deep grudge was held at the core of their beings, and the generation of our fathers, for whom envy was mixed with anger. I want to correctly and objectively understand the various fine arts produced in the present day. Perhaps, she put forth this statement to quell possible anti-Japanese sentiments.

Beginning in 1994, Ms. Choi selected 16 artists based on her five survey trips to Japan. From veterans, to mid-career, to young artists, they included Keita Egami, Toyomi Hoshina, **Keiko Inoh**, Emiko Kasahara, Yoshio Kitayama, Susumu Koshimizu, Takashi Murakami, Kiyoshi Nakagami, Katsushige Nakagami, Yoshitomo Nara, Hitoshi Nomura, Satoru Shoji, Shigeo Toya, Tomiaki Yamamoto, and Yukinori Yanagi. While their personal expression ranged widely, as a simplified concept Ms. Choi was selecting two categories of artists: “Those not caught by an Occidental style but who built an original expression, and those exposed to the influence of global post-modernism” (CHOI Curator). An atrium gallery and some surrounding exhibition rooms, were allocated to this exhibition. Some previously lost elements arrived the night prior to the opening, in a nerve-wracking experience of delays caused by a typhoon. Further tension was created by a rumor that the Korean side had resisted using a permanent exhibition space for a temporary exhibition of Japanese works. It could not be denied that past relations between Japan and South Korea had cast a dark shadow over the psychology of the persons concerned by this. However, the exhibition opened as planned thanks to the rapid work of the exhibition artists. At the atrium entrance, Shoji’s huge white mast, supported on many poles, was fluttering in the air. Having passed this, one’s vision was overcome by Kitayama’s enormous organic form knit of twigs and resin, as well as a work by Yamamoto comprised of countless thick boards arranged in a line from the floor to a wall,

covered by vivid polka dots. The advertising balloons in the form of animation characters created by Murakami wafted far above, near the ceiling. This space, full of variety, served as a charming pathway into the exhibition. While it is unnecessary to point this out to cognoscenti of contemporary Japanese art, the individual character of each artist was effectively displayed in the various rooms past the atrium, ranging from the kitsch tearoom of Nakahashi to Toya's profound sculpture. I am deeply interested in whether or not these works held any fascination for the South Korean viewers of the exhibition. Although we were construed anxious about anti-Japanese sentiment, the friendly review in Choson Ilbo on September 5 read, "We can experience all the various tendencies of Japanese art just by seeing this exhibition". This exhibition is a historic step forward for the future appreciation and exchange of arts between Japan and South Korea. However, although the South Korean press did not report it, apparently, it can't be overlooked that Yanagi's work for the exhibit was deleted following an inspection by museum staff. The work comprised national flags of Asia and 36 nations of the Pacific Ocean, made from colored sand, displayed in plastic cases, which were interconnected by tubes. Countless ants were allowed to move through them, by which means the patterns of the national flags would collapse.

The concept was that the free motion of ants allowed the global soul to be released from its national framework. The disapproval was the result of the presence among the 36 flags of that of the Korean democratic republic (North Korea). Though it was not expected in Japan that this type of expression would have problems with acceptance outside, it is a harsh reality that the South does not accept North Korea as a state. How one would interpret the space left open by the missing artwork? What does a spectator read in the exhibition opening while lacking one piece?

This exhibition is open until the 23rd this month.

***Japanese Contemporary Art Exhibition, "***

***written by Eun-Ju CHOI,***

***Curator of National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea***

The continuous theme in Keiko INOH's work is the "Door". The idea lies in the obscurity of the unfulfilled functions of the entrance/exits of the door. That is this "Door" becomes the wall and makes the viewers confused about whether he/she is standing in the exterior space or the interior standing in the exterior space in relation to the door.

As she states, "To survive, a clam dose not open its mouth for the exterior would and this idea parallels to a contemporary person's life style . Thus, this "Door" expresses a portraiture of the contemporary being's deprived true character.