

Building the 'Dongdaemun Rooftop Paradise' on the margins of Seoul

Over the last decade in South Korea, contemporary art has been undergoing an important transformation toward more participatory, collaborative and collective practices. By taking the case of the *Dongdaemun Rooftop Paradise*, a community engaged art project that has occupied the rooftop of an old run-down building in Seoul, this essay explores how artists seek to intervene in the urban branding that relies on spectacles, how they unsettle the hegemonic script of 'creative city' and what kind of space is imagined to become a 'paradise' within the unjust city.

Hong KAL



Fig. 1 (above right): The Dongdaemun Shoes Wholesale Building B located in Dongdaemun, seen from across the Cheonggyecheon stream. The rooftop of this building is the site of the DRP.

Fig. 2 (below left): A DRP member discovering objects while cleaning the rooftop in 2014.

CONTEMPORARY ART In South Korea (hereafter Korea) has been undergoing an important transformation toward the reciprocal relationship of artists with people from different backgrounds and the affiliation of art with other areas of cultural production, social knowledge and political practices. Korean art critics have identified the 2000s as an era of community art.¹ The recent proliferation of community art has roots in *Minjung Art*, the political art of the 1980s.² Yet, contemporary community art practices are profoundly different from their predecessor in their use of relatively diverse forms and the ideas of community that are not necessarily subversive, class-conscious, or oriented toward radical activism. They are more closely aligned with the global currency of participatory, socially engaged, and community-based art practices. As Grant Kester, a prominent art historian who advocates dialogical art, observed, the first decade of the 21st century witnessed intellectual and creative tendencies of art practices that involve collaborative, dialogical, and collective modes of production.³ In Korea and elsewhere, community art works are criticized for different reasons, such as for losing the aesthetic specificity, lacking the political criticality, being appropriated by urban regeneration strategies, or becoming complicit with neoliberal agendas. In the art world in Korea, for example, they are often dismissed as "benevolent NGO art".⁴ However, rather than negating them, it would be more productive to analyze complex and contradictory aspects of community art practices. Responding to the suspicion of these art practices as unsophisticated, politically correct, or even religious,⁵ Grant Kester has elaborated that collaborative, collective and dialogical art works are challenging residual modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy, the authorship, and the artist's relation to audience.⁶

This essay explores aesthetically and politically challenging aspects of community art in Korea. It is concerned less with what artists can do in a narrow instrumental sense and more with how they might open up a space from which to reimagine the possibilities to intervene in the city. The case study here is the *Dongdaemun Rooftop Paradise* (hereafter the DRP), a site-specific community engaged art project on the rooftop of an old run-down building in Dongdaemun, a district that is crowded with old markets and new shopping towers and which has been designated as a special tourist zone in Seoul. The DRP is a critical response to the Dongdaemun Design Plaza and Park (hereafter the DDP), an expressive new spectacle (opened in

March 2014) located about 200 meters from the rooftop. The DRP involves the reclamation of urban space against the grain of speculative urban redevelopment that resorts to spectacle and gentrification. It puts emphasis on the reconfiguration of art, artists, and community, and the re-imagination of labor that is not bounded by capitalist concepts of efficiency, speed, profit, and consumption. By taking the case of the DRP, I question how community art projects seek to intervene in the urban branding that relies on spectacles, how they unsettle and complicate the official script of 'creative city' and what kind of space is imagined to become a 'paradise' within the unjust city. I hope to shed some light on the potentials, contradictions, and perils of collaborative and collective art practices. This essay is drawn from my research and involvement with the given site and actors since 2013.

Politics of spectacles in urban redevelopment in Seoul

Seoul's urban redevelopment is heavily influenced by state intervention with close relationships with real estate capital of large conglomerates, causing the displacement of the majority of low-income occupiers. It shows a strong resemblance with gentrification, which incurs capital investment, commodification of space, and various forms of displacement.⁷ In the development of the speculative urban environment, the role of artists is identified as initiating and/or attracting the process of gentrification.⁸ More recently, the invocation of arts and culture for public consumption as a driving force for the urban economic growth has become central to the ambitious cities that seek to enhance their regional position as a global city.⁹ The urban strategies that pivot around arts and culture for economic growth owe much to debates on the relationship between culture, creativity and the city. In Seoul, as elsewhere, the assertion that creativity is a necessary component of economic growth has been taken by policymakers as a key for the successful place-making under the languages of urban renewal, regeneration, and renaissance.¹⁰ Over the past decade, Seoul has eagerly adopted the script of 'creative city', which looks for 'creative' actors and institutions for the makeover of the city.

Seoul's previous Mayor, Oh Se Hoon (2006-2011), took up 'Creative Seoul' as a catchphrase. The word 'creative' became ubiquitous in official communications, such as in 'creative governance', 'creative management' and 'creative economy'. Mayor Oh launched a mega urban redevelopment campaign called *Design Seoul*. It was launched in 2008 to showcase Seoul as the World Design Capital of 2010 appointed by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, an organization that promotes progress made by cities through design. Under *Design Seoul*, the city government carried out a series of urban projects, and the most dramatic one was probably the DDP, which was unveiled in March 2014.¹¹

The DDP is located in Dongdaemun, a district that represents historical and social transformations of urban life in Seoul. This area is well known for the market that was established early in 1905 and which survived the Japanese colonial period. After the Korean War, the market swelled with an inflow of refugees from North Korea. During the high era of developmentalism, based on the export-oriented economy of the 1960s and 1970s, the market was a center for the garment manufacturing industry, clustered with wholesale shops and sewing factories that exploited young cheap laborers from the countryside. From the 1980s onwards, with

a decline in the manufacturing industry, the market gave way to a new economy in which high-rise shopping malls with retail stores dominate. The new mega shopping towers attract large numbers of tourists and were officially designated as a special tourist zone in 2002.

The most dramatic change seen in Dongdaemun was the erection of the DDP, which was built for 460 million USD, funded by the Seoul city government and constructed by Samsung corporations. Designed by globally renowned architect Zaha Hadid (1950-2016), the DDP is a gigantic metallic silver structure in dramatic curved form, whose roof, although inaccessible, is mostly covered with green grass.¹² Apart from its organic form, the DDP stands like a massive piece of modernist sculpture premised on the idea of art autonomy and independence against the surroundings. The DDP is a spectacle as such. As most famously put forward by Guy Debord, 'spectacle' refers to social relations mediated by images, which in turn become the social relation itself.¹³ The building in its expressive and dramatic visual appearance presents the urban strategies that pivot around the staging of the image of 'creative city'. The DDP was celebrated with a promise that it would bring in cultural consumption, urban tourism, investment, and capital accumulation, namely the 'DDP effects'. From its conception, however, it faced numerous criticisms including the destruction of historical sites, the eviction of street vendors,¹⁴ and the selection of a foreign star architect who did not even visit the site for design. The absence of reference to local contexts makes the functioning of the DDP as a public space highly questionable.¹⁵

Dongdaemun Rooftop Paradise (DRP)

While the DDP is criticized for being decontextualized from and destructive of the historically charged local site, a group of eight artists and cultural actors led by senior artist Chan-kook Park conducted an 'action research' in the Dongdaemun area in winter 2013. Two months later in February 2014, they found an abandoned rooftop of an old market building about 200 meters from the colossal DDP, which was at that time under construction.¹⁶ On the rooftop, they established the *Dongdaemun Rooftop Paradise*. The building on which the DRP perches is the Shoes Wholesale Building B, which was built in the modernist inspiration in the 1950s. The building is located between the new high-rise shopping towers and the DDP to the south, and Changsin-dong, a district that has over 3000 small sewing home factories, to the north. The building comprises retail and wholesale shoe shops on the first and second floors, storage units on the third floor, and residential apartments on the fourth and fifth floors. The shops were once famous for selling trendy shoes, but now overall business is in decline. Yet the old market area is still heavily congested. In contrast, rooftops are largely abandoned. For the newcomers, the rooftop was the only available space. For a cheap rent of \$300 a month, they were allowed to use the attics and the 100-meter long roof, from where to reimagine place-making on the margins of the city (fig. 1).

The rooftop was far from empty when the DRP moved in. It was filled with tons of abandoned objects that had piled up for the past 50 years. Merchants and tenants who could not find storage space simply brought merchandise samples, stocked items, broken household appliances, and various personal belongings up to the rooftop. It took a few months to clean almost 18 tons of discarded objects and rubbish. During the process, the DRP members excavated various objects and experimented with them (fig. 2). For example, they turned refrigerators and toilet bowls into flowerpots, and TV frames into beehives, allowing new use values to emerge. Obsolete and unwanted urban junk is often used for artistic creations, yet in the DRP, the overproduced and discarded objects were neither simply transformed into aesthetic commodities nor simply recycled out of general environmental concerns.



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Through the renewal of the byproducts of capitalism, the DRP calls into question how to reconfigure the ecology of the market area that once enabled its success, but does not guarantee its future anymore. The market has a self-sufficient mechanism in which the processes of planning, design, manufacturing, distribution, and sales are clustered within a radius of one kilometer. Here, about 4000 new items are put on the market daily and sometimes new items, mostly knockoffs, are produced as fast as in three days. This speedy on-the-spot mechanism once made the market successful as a fashion hub in Northeast Asia.¹⁷ However, the elements of an outdated structure, dependent upon closed and vertical relations, the remaining labor intensive industry in poor working conditions, the unethical competition, and the rising rent, keep away new business, making the future of the market uncertain. Also, the market now has to compete with those in Guangzhou and Hanoi where garment industries are growing rapidly. For its survival, the DRP members believe, the market should renew itself with new values other than developmentalist ideas of economic efficiency, speed, and productivity that once enabled the market's success. But the DRP members are also aware of the danger of being coopted by the arts and culture-led redevelopment strategies that are oriented toward tourism, entertainment, and consumption. Their concern is thus how to revive the place and reconfigure the relations without being displaced and appropriated by the 'creative' industries.

The DRP arranged various activities including remaking the attics, beekeeping, gardening, and hosting workshops and events, under the idea of *Lab-tory* that combines knowledge, skills, and art in the interactive exchanges of research, production, and distribution. In *Real Clothes*, the workshops organized in the fall of 2014, they invited sewing experts, designers, merchants, and business owners who are in the same field, but who had rarely met in person before. They discussed problems of how to improve poor working conditions, to reduce the amount of inventory, and to make 'real clothes' other than cheap copies. The meetings led to a collaborative work, in which sewing experts participated in a design process, for the first time in their more than 20 years working experience. The practice of collaborative relations was expanded to the idea of connecting rooftops. In November 2014, the DRP opened the *DRP Sales Presentation*, an event set up like a real estate sales presentation. It advertised an attic (about 300 square feet) as a renovated, multifunctional, live-work structure. It further showcased an attic model as a mobile unit designed to be movable to nearby rooftops. By mocking a sales presentation for speculative investment by real estate developers, the DRP performed possibilities of creatively intervening in the urban branding strategies geared toward the construction of spectacular spaces for consumption, such as the DDP. From a space of urban margins such as the rooftop, the DRP imagines a 'paradise'. What is important for them is a process of becoming rather than what it ought to be.

The rooftop community

The rooftop has been visited by many people in the past three years; its atmosphere is open, casual, temporary and playful (fig. 3). Yet, the DRP is not intended to be an entertainment site for inner-city creatives, art parties, or hipsters' gatherings. While distancing themselves from cultural consumption, the DRP members are also cautious about a romanticized idea of community and an attempt to restore it. The idea of community is at the core of the debate on community art. Some art critics and historians are highly skeptical of any collective form of identification and often unfavorably view community art works as suppressing the unique identity of individual collaborators under the false coherence of a community

and thus reinforcing social stereotypes and generalizations. However, as Grant Kester has aptly pointed out, the community formation is an ongoing process that shifts between moments of relative coherence and incoherence. Simply pointing to the danger of essentializing forms of identification, Kester has argued, is not a sufficient response to complex questions raised by collaborative and collective art practices.¹⁸ It is indeed more important to observe specific and contingent strategies in them. On the rooftop, a space that is displaced, isolated, marginalized and sometimes romanticized in the unjust city,¹⁹ the DRP brings people together as a community that communicates ideas, senses, and imaginations, attending to differences within the group. It envisions the rooftop community through the reassertion of inhabitation, the revalorization of discarded objects, and the exploration of encounter, sociality, playfulness, and ambience in the everyday details.

On the rooftop, new relations have been unfolding during the past three years through the gradual accumulation of interactions between the DRP members, neighbors, merchants, and visitors. The relations are not always feel-good or harmonious, but sometimes even quite antagonistic when it comes to the rights to the space. The DRP's lease of the rooftop attics was arranged with Kim Kang-sik, the building manager, but most details were agreed verbally. After his sudden death in the winter of 2015, the new manager tried to void the lease agreement with the DRP, so that he could rent out the renewed rooftop for a higher rent. The eviction attempt failed due to the complexity of the ownership. The rooftop is officially a common area shared by the 240 owners of the shops, storage units and apartments in the building. Since the majority of them are absentee owners living in more affluent areas, like Gangnam or even abroad, it was very difficult for the new manager to achieve a collective resolution. The rights to the rooftop are further complicated due to the fact that the rooftop attic is not an authorized structure and thus any lease contract involves legal issues. Under such intricate conditions, in which the immediate eviction was avoided but is always pending, the DRP members have been exploring ways to officially claim the rights to the rooftop not only through legal terms but more importantly by inhabiting and using it as a communal space with other building tenants and merchants, such as simply eating and chatting together in the space. In the case of the DRP, what is more interesting than the question of whether artists are victims and/or facilitators of gentrification, is to see how they engage in the urban fabric and create a space from which to critique the hegemonic politics of spectacle that is evident in the nearby DDP.

In and out of the spectacle

The DRP is imbued with the spirit of radical avant-gardism that blurs the institutionalized boundaries of the aesthetics and the social. The merger of art and everyday life is advocated by political and socially engaged artists, which critically rethinks the role of the audience from passive spectators into participants and collaborators. For those artists, the term 'spectacle' refers to what they oppose artistically and politically. The DRP seeks to counter the politics of spectacle as showcased in the DDP, which lacks relations and connections with local sites and people. But, there are some intriguing questions regarding the contemporary working of spectacle. It has been observed that contemporary spectacle is not merely trying to make people passive spectators, but instead it inspires them to participate in playful interactivity and to be part of emotional experiences. Contemporary spectacle now seeks to establish the atmosphere for lived experiences, loaded with user-friendly modes and participations, co-opting the strategies that were previously used to resist spectacle.²⁰

Then, how do we locate the DRP in such a context of the new working of spectacle today? While retaining some contradictions, I would like to recognize a critical sensibility in the DRP's activities that put forward new meanings of time, space, labor, play and relations, away from those of efficiency, speed, productivity, consumption, profit, and speculation. They are urban guerrillas working in and out of spectacle and disturbing its boundaries. There is no guarantee that their experiments with urban spaces and relations will coalesce into the wider politics of the city. Then again, their intervention lies not in a measurable outcome, but in a process in which a space is opened up to unsettle the 'creative city'. In the analysis of community art practices, what is more needed is building a critical framework to understand their potentials, limits and contradictions. This is particularly crucial in the context that the mainstream art institutions and the disciplines of art history are still reluctant to recognize art works that involve communication and collaboration between artists and non-artists in rather dematerialized forms. It gives hope, however, to see more efforts being made to address in a substantial manner the important transformation toward collective practices in contemporary art production in Korea and elsewhere.

Hong KAL, Associate Professor, York University
(hongkal@yorku.ca)

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- 16 The DRP started with 8 people in affiliation with Seoul Youth Hub, an organization for young people; core members are Park Chan-kook, Kim Hyun-seung, and Lee Ji-hyun. Park as an artist, educator and director has engaged with a number of community art projects from 1990s including *Studio M* (1990s), *Milmeori Art School* (2002-11), *Non Art But Art* (2011-12), *Collaborative Squat Project in Han'gang Nodeul Seom* (2013), *Urban Guerrilla Art Project* (2013), *Dongdaemun Rooftop Paradise* (2013-), *Seoul Innovation Park* (2013-).
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Fig. 3 (below): A DRP event with social workers held on the rooftop in 2016.

All photos courtesy of the DRP.

