

Pontoon Bridges, Hongyemun, MacArthur, and Ching Tao: From Dong-Incheon Station to Incheon Station

Jung Hyun / Art Critic

“After all, the joy of traveling is not in being able to quit mid-way through the journey..... It is in deeply understanding the difference between when the journey begins and when it comes to an end.” Marcel Proust

When modern cities began to be developed, wanderers started to emerge in the European society. Wandering, which meant taking a poetic gaze into the cities, was more than simply enjoying the delight of walking. It was an escape, no different from a return to the mother's womb. Let's remember that the dreams of surrealists had a break-from-reality approach, rather than an unrealistic one. The public territory created by urbanization and commercialization border between routines and life cities. So surrealists, who were in search of the remaining vestiges of life in Paris, preferred narrow roads to highways. In another sense, wandering was a means of poetic survival. The concept of the wanderer, a new modern-day persona, was created by Walter Benjamin. Sometimes it seems the word is Benjamin's pure invention, just a concept. Or it just may be a metaphor of the square peg in a round hole, the one that fails to fit in the large organization called society. Whatever the case may be, the wanderer represents modern day observers who oppose changes of the era, living in anonymous places called cities, amongst many and unspecified persons called the public. The plan to build cities brought to life, a place that represented the pivotal events and ideologies of the era. However, the stories of individual people were lost in these new cities. In contrast, wanderers are practicing an active type of archeology by exploring the cities, bringing back the forgotten memories and searching for the traces of a personal and routines rather than the past which has been written into history.

Walking Actively: Discovering a Place

To Jooyoung Lee, the act and process of experiencing a different culture are what inspires her work. She works on a variety of joint projects simultaneously. Among these projects, “Scratching the surface diving in deep /part2” (2008) was inspired by a Norwegian-residency experience. The project started out in Incheon, which has been the historic intersection of civilizations and the origin of modernization in Korea. In the project, **Minot** Motan, an immigrant worker from Nepal, is transformed into a DJ for a day with the help of Eugene Blake, a professional DJ from Britain. Lee tries to culturally reverse the concepts of immigration and labor created by capitalism, posing two important questions. One is about the role of an artist in modern society, and the other is in regards to social status, which is determined based on social hierarchy and capitalism. The idea of walking through cities was derived from “Family Mart Social” (2009). The project, which also involved Kwon Oh-hyun and Claudia Pestana, was actually inspired by a 24-hour convenience store in Korea called Family Mart. Lee found that Family Mart served as a venue of social intermediation, a place where the members of the local community gathered together. The project started out at Yanghwajin, which is north of the Han

River, and continued on through Hapjeong and to areas around Honggik University, making a short stop at every Family Mart along the way. It was all about walking, drinking and chatting while exploring the city. Yanghwajin is a historically important area and made the project all the more meaningful. During the Chosun Dynasty, Yanghwajin was a dock along the waterway to Incheon from other areas. It was also a strategic military post in the late 18th century, as one of Hanyang's (Seoul's old name) five major strategic locations, along with Hangangjin, Noryangjin, Dongjakjin, and Songpajin. During the Byeong-Oh persecution in 1849, nine missionaries from France and around 8,000 Catholics were beheaded. A century later, the Jeoldusan Martyrs Museum was established and the Yanghwajin Foreign Missionary Cemetery was organized.

Through the "Family Mart Social 1," you can see that the 24-hour convenience store represents today's Seoul, as a cultural spot in the capitalist society, which is a product of the modern era and the most common and leading type of society where diverse civilizations coexist. Family Mart and Yanghwajin allows you to appreciate the areal layers of Seoul, which reminds one of the words Benjamin used, the claim that the wanderers in Paris were the new modern-day persona. The sentence goes, "In the asphalt over which he passes, his footsteps awaken an astonishing echo." Lee connects Yanghwajin, a historical place and an indicator of the modern era, with the 24-hour convenience store with virtually no memories, drawing attention to the areal layers of Seoul, challenging the city's boast of long history. The movie *Chungking Express* directed by Wong Kar Wai told two different stories of Hong Kong, a city that awaited the end of the British colonial rule. In the movie, the convenience store was used as an allegory that portrayed changing times by showing how casually modern day people dealt with relationships. However, Benjamin described modern Paris as "a gas lantern shining light on a two-layer ground," providing an allegory of the forgotten past buried under the ground. Then, will Lee's project of walking through Incheon be able to reveal the hidden layers of Incheon's space and time?

Two-layer ground: From Dong-Incheon Station to Incheon Station

The Incheon project starts off at Dong-Incheon Station. The areas around the station still depict the typical landscape of old city streets. Where the inner city, still with sense of nostalgia of the 1980s, and the anonymous low-story buildings meet, stands the pontoon bridges, a cultural spot famous for used book stores and epicurism. Pontoon bridges are a popular destination for people interested in architecture or studying city culture. The bridges have been featured in a number of internet blogs as well. In fact, when Lee and I visited the bridges ourselves, we followed a course introduced in one of the blogs. May be it was the especially bleak skies, but the walking and city exploring felt like stepping through numerous layers of time. Walking past Dong-Incheon towards Jayu Park, we were able to imagine Incheon during its modernization period. I believe the authenticity of a place comes from inimitable uniqueness, and there was something very exotic about everything there, from the wide branches of the extremely tall Platanus, to the seemingly inhabited Japanese style houses, to the narrow paths between the mountain ridges. To the train whistle that was finally heard only when we neared the statue of General MacArthur, and the quayside atmosphere nearby the statue greeted us with enough sense of unfamiliarity. The Chinatown, which was right past Jayu Park, was evidently built in a rush. The Chinese-Koreans living there lent an exotic touch to the area. We went past the Chinese school, with rather slipshod paintings of the three Kingdoms era lined the walls. Then

we came across a concession, where the vestiges of the Sino-Japanese territorial conflict could be found on the steps. We came down the steps to spot an Art Platform remodeled from a warehouse, standing in an uncanny way. After climbing up and down several low-lying hills, we arrived at our destination. Lee's walking project was an emotional activity that takes you through the modernization period. The walk would feel different based on the route she chooses, but you can not deny the fact that the Art Platform, a cultural place that was also our final destination after passing by the areas newly developed in Incheon, is actually a non-site built in the same context as the newly developed areas.

I wondered, did Lee and I just walk on the same two-layer ground that the wanderer, Benjamin himself or the fictional character he created, walked? During our walk, we came across the traces of the industrialization period. At the used book store near the pontoon bridges, we encountered the melting pot of civilizations. (At the book store, I bought Italo Calvino's "If on a winter's night a traveler" and Sartre's "Nausea" in the original French for just 6,000 won. The store had books written in Japanese, Chinese, German, French, English and even Hebrew.) Shortly after, on the path leading up to Jayu Park, we went past an arched gate and General MacArthur's statue, and walked through the seemingly fictionalized Chinatown (where I bought Tsing Tao beer at the unbelievable price of 2,000 won) that was built under the new Incheon development project, allowing us to explore the urban plan of the modernization period. It may sound rather emotional, but the walking, the act of searching for the traces of memories and observing the creation of areas for survival, allows you to draw a psychological map by recording the process of carrying out the missions presented by the author (such as taking pictures with a disposable camera, drawing maps, and scribbling on the streets with chalks).

In the end, Lee poses a question about the media. The daily life and experience of an artist, who has a role as a cultural mediator, rather than a producer, are introduced through mass media including magazines, the radio, internet broadcasting, and blogs. This entire process is based on interchangeability. The recent project focused on Incheon, a place filled with memories and traces of contradictory concepts such as invasion and resistance, exploitation and exchange, and heterogeneity and homogeneity, was not planned in advance but carried out as one project extended into another. And as a nomad in search of new lands, Lee hopes to expand the cultural anthropological traces of Incheon to the concession in East Asia, to Yokohama and to Shanghai.