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Conclusion

In a photograph accompanying an article published in the *Rodong Sinmun*, artists from the Mansudae Art Studio are captured listening attentively and writing in their notepads as Kim Jong Un gives instructions on how to create new paintings of Kim Il Sung from the Korean War.[1] These paintings will be placed in the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the end of the Korean War. Placed on top of long, rectangular wooden stools, several of these new paintings can be seen behind Kim Jong Un. A section of one particular painting is prominently captured in the photograph. What is immediately noticeable about the painting is how similar it is in style to other previously produced paintings of Kim Il Sung from the Korean War. It is so similar that without the benefit of the title and content of the article it would hardly be possible to guess that the painting is a brand new creation.

The article is one of the first to specifically focus on Kim Jong Un discussing art since his ascension to power in 2011, and therefore, it offers some insights into the direction and policy toward art production under the new leader. Informed by the article, not much seems to change when it comes to art production. The bombastic, sloganesque diction, the devotion to the Kim Il Sung personality cult, and the importance of history all for the ideological mobilization of the people, remain seamlessly intact. The utmost importance when creating new paintings of Kim Il Sung during the Korean War, according to Kim Jong Un, is to bring history (historical facts of the Korean War) to life by reinforcing the image of Kim Il Sung that is so deeply cherished in

[1] "Kyŏngaehanŭn Kim Chŏngŭn wŏnsunimkkesŏ Mansudae ch'angjakcha rŭl ch'atŭsigo chogukhaebangjŏnjaengsŭngri kinyŏmgwane mosil widaehan suryŏngnim ŭi yŏngsangjakp'umch'angjaksayŏbŭr chidohasiyotta,"*Rodong Sinmun*, 13 May 2013, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterKo/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2013-05-13-0001.

the hearts of the people.[2] History is brought to life by dramatization and these new paintings are supposed to continue in the tradition and style of the glorifying images of Kim Il Sung that have already come before. The image of Kim Il Sung as the eternal, benevolent father and revolutionary hero is the only image of the Great Leader the people have and are meant to have.

Perhaps the constancy of art production despite the changes in the political leadership is not too surprising considering the instrumentality of art as an ideological tool. And, ideology becomes increasingly important during times of political transition and uncertainty in totalitarian states. After the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 and the subsequent rise of Kim Jong Il, art production did not abate. Instead, it continued as strongly as before or perhaps even stronger. What can we make of this seemingly steadfast aversion to change in art production despite the change in leadership? In other words, nothing seems to change when it comes to North Korean art and why is that the case? Some scholars have argued that North Korea is indeed changing, yet the changes are imperceptible and unfamiliar to the outside world and therefore it appears as if North Korea is unchanging.[3] Perhaps this is true to a certain extent. However, art production, as evidenced by the *Rodong Simun* article, is one area where consistency and constancy seem to persist through the years.

Why nothing seems to change in art is linked to a question that has always perplexed observers of North Korea and the general public. What accounts for the remarkable resiliency of North Korea despite horrific and indigent conditions of the everyday lives of its people? As this dissertation has sought to argue, an important place to look to help explain this phenomenon is art. After the death of Kim Jong Il, paintings of his funeral procession and masses of people mourning were produced in 2012. These paintings are striking not necessarily for their style

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 13.

(which is consistent with many other North Korean paintings) but for shedding light on the link between art and the source that sustains the North Korean state. In a painting titled "Dear Leader, You Really Cannot Go," (figure 1) a hearse carrying an enormous portrait of a smiling Kim Jong Il is seen in the center. It is the day of the funeral procession of Kim Jong Il. Despite the snow and cold, crowds of people are gathered on either side of the hearse, wailing and grieving. Some people have fallen on the ground, overwhelmed by their sorrow while others are reaching their hands out to touch the hearse. This exact scene from different angles is repeated in several other paintings. In a painting titled "You Cannot Go," (figure 2) the scene of masses of crowds gathered around the hearse carrying an immense portrait of Kim Jong Il is replicated. Yet the painting captures the scene from a higher position where the viewer's line of vision travels downward to the funeral procession. Due to the distance, the faces of the crowds are invisible. The only face that is prominently visible is the portrait of a smiling Kim Jong Il on top of the hearse placed in the center of the painting.

Fig. 1 (top): Dear Leader, You Really Cannot Go, Chosŏnhwa, 2012

Fig. 2 (left): You Cannot Go, Paek Pongyŏn, Yuhwa, 2012

A sea of people are gathered mourning and wailing at the iconic Kim Il Sung square on a wintery night, all facing toward a large portrait of Kim Jong Il hanging in front of the Grand People's Study House. This is the scene captured in the painting titled "December's Kim Il Sung Square" (figure 3) and the mourners remain faceless while Kim Jong Il's smiling shines brightly. The painting titled "Tears of Blood Flowing on Kim Il Sung Square" (figure 4) features a close-up of the crowds of people gathered at the square. Virtually all of the mourners are wailing, crying, some prostrated toward the portrait of Kim Jong Il and their arms thrown up in the air in despair. The portrait of Kim Jong Il remains firmly in the center of the painting. In several other paintings, the focus is centered on the mourners and the portrait of Kim Jong Il is absent. The painting titled "Calling Out Father with our Chocked Throats" (figure 5) zeros in on a group of children sobbing while the adults featured behind them are also crying. A similar scene is captured in the painting titled "The December of the Land of Rice." In the scene, a group of mourners are holding sheaves of rice, crying and wailing, to place in front of a portrait of Kim Jong Il.

Fig. 3: December's Kim Il Sung Square, Hwang Ch'ŏl, Kim Sukwang, Kim Sŏngye, Yuhwa, 2012

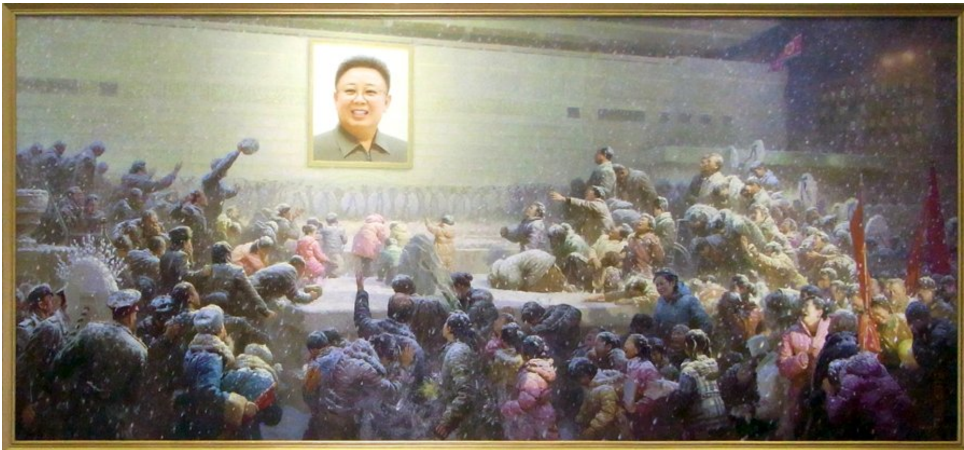

Fig. 4: Tears of Blood Flowing on Kim Il Sung Square, Yuhwa, 2012

Fig. 5: Calling out Father with our Chocked Throats, Kim Yekwang, Yuhwa, 2012

Fig. 6: The December of the Land of Rice, Yuhwa, 2012

In all of these paintings, what stands out is the emotionality of the scenes. The intense, endless grief of the people dominates every painting. The mourners are from all walks of life. Literally, North Korea has halted during this momentous time and a sense of collective, synchronized grief pervades. Kim Jong Il is center stage, his smiling face placed in the center and usually the only face discernible from the sea of faceless mourners. Even in the paintings without Kim Jong Il, his presence looms large. Ironically, in the painting "The December Land of Rice," sheaves of rice are used as offerings for Kim Jong Il despite the scarcity of food and destitute conditions of millions of North Koreans. The people will suffer while the precious rice is given to a dead Kim Jong Il and North Korea is surely not the land of rice as the title of the painting indicates.

As this dissertation has tried to show, one of the most important functions of art in North Korea is to emotionally affect the viewers. Art "turns" history into an emotionally consumable vision. At a time when a power transition is underway, when one leader passes and another of the same kin rises, the production of these images of the collective mourning gripping the entire country seeks to firmly undergird the emotional connection between the people and the Great Leaders. By visually reaffirming this emotional connection through the scenes of collective mourning, it strengthens, in the eyes of the North Korean state, the continuity of the ruling Kim family as the legitimate upholders of the socialist revolution and the preservation of the socialist utopian vision.

One way that these paintings reinforce the emotional tie between the people and the Great Leader is through the inculcation of the people's duty to the revolution. By becoming emotionally affected, the paintings seek to create socialist citizens who carry on the revolution into the future. For the people, it is a duty to ensure the continuation of the revolution. How the

concept of duty is shaped and internalized is partly through an education of values. Modris Eksteins describes the lessening in the mention of duty, the idea of service to the public embodied by the nineteenth-century European middle-class, in the letters and diaries of front soldiers of World War I. The idea of duty for the greater public that characterized the culture of World War I, according to Eksteins, transforms to a duty toward one's family against the invaders, practical concerns taking precedence over sublime principles.[4] Protection of one's individual interests is what ultimately keeps the soldiers going. During a protracted, difficult ordeal, a sense of duty for the collective can wane. A sense of disillusionment may only deepen when the end does not justify the means, leading to what Susan Buck-Morss calls "disenchantment"—the collective awakening resulting from the gap between the utopian promise and dystopian reality.[5] To offset the possibility of the people's weakening sense of duty toward the revolution leading to critical reflection, North Korean paintings seek to recharge values.

The images captured in North Korean paintings do not stand alone. Instead, they are part of a larger universe, reinforcing Pierre Bourdieu's idea on cultural production. Art is a symbolic power, closely interlinked with politics, fulfilling a legitimating function. Thus, the social contexts in which these paintings are produced determine the objective "value" of these artworks and what constitutes art under certain historical conditions.[6] Through the dramatization of history in art, what this dissertation reveals is the importance of emotion when defining historical truth. The monumental story, the Great Leader, surrounding characters and their physical descriptions, colors, use of light, size, and nature, all heighten the emotionality of art. Seizing

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[4] Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Mariner Books, 1989), 176-191.
[5] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 209.
[6] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

moments from history, extracted from a dominant, single narrative, North Korean art instructs its viewers how to see, feel, and internalize historical truth. The act of giving form to an event, a moment in history, simply makes the depiction historically true. Historical truth is always emotionally true; and this is the kernel to understanding how North Korean art works.

Throughout the images of the Great Leaders and moments from North Korean history, reality recedes into an emotive illusion of truthfulness. An emotive illusion is a means of transcendence, perhaps an escape from the trappings of reality that is a far cry from an ideal world. The paintings and monuments may be finished, but the moments are not. A void, a contradiction lingers. A disconnect between the utopian vision and everyday reality permeates. Éric Rohmer once famously asked, "Art is a reflection of our time. But isn't it also an antidote?" The metaphor of art as an antidote is illuminating because in many ways the predetermined, restrictive limits in which art is produced seek to mask the true reality of North Korea in the factual sense. Like an antidote, art counteracts the harmful forces that jeopardize the North Korean leaders' hold on power, camouflaging the tension between vision and reality and sustaining the North Korean state. As a whole, the representations of the socialist utopia are the trammels of history that restrict the unfettered movement of their viewers' minds. What is repeatedly demonstrated is how Kim Il Sung's biography is interwoven in North Korea's history through the personality cult. History is essential as the backdrop, but the real subject in North Korean art is Kim Il Sung. Art works to keep Kim Il Sung and the utopian vision in the center, sustaining the North Korean leaders' grip on power through both glorious and tumultuous times.

The Edges

Irrespective of the prescribed context within which North Korean art functions, a lingering question persists, one that pushes us to view with an even more critical eye the socialist realist art of North Korea. Alongside the propaganda and the dramatization of history woven into the story on canvas, is there a space in paintings where interpretations can run askew from the revolutionary narrative, countervailing the conventional wisdom of socialist realist art as only confined to state ideology? This is a difficult question to answer when so much of North Korean art is ideologically mobilized. Yet in an illuminating article featured in the *Artforum*, Joan Kee opens the conversation into the potentialities and possibilities of reading deeper, delving further by questioning North Korean paintings' conventions of display.[7]

Fig 7: Soldiers Longing for Return, Ryu Hwan'gi, 2002

Focusing on Ryu Hwan'gi's *Soldiers Longing for Return* (figure 7), Kee provides a close, nuanced reading of a socialist realist painting set most likely during the Korean War. Painted in 2002, *Soldiers Longing for Return*, according to Kee, toys with the conventions of display to render concrete the conditions of a certain time and space.[8] The scene of four soldiers dressed in their military garb and huddled in what seems to be a small, worn room during the middle of the

[7] Joan Kee, "Close-up: Party Lines," *Artforum* (January 2011): 176-177, 242-243.
[8] Ibid., 177.

night is accentuated by the luminous glow of a single burning candle. Emblems of domesticity are seen—a wooden, traditional Korean chest, basket filled with white cotton, and a spinning wheel. Relegated to the rear of the painting, they serve as the background of the scene. The man in the center, his face made vivid by the light of the candle, is bending forward, having written on a white paper, "Into the Arms of the General" and "To the North, To the North." Three other soldiers are seen, placed toward the bottom of the canvas, seemingly resting for the night while the presence of war is palpable by the sight of the bandaged hand of one soldier and a glimpse of a gun between two soldiers lying down.

At the time of the painting's creation in 2002, tensions were brewing domestically as competing interests sought to determine the appropriate economic path for North Korea. A struggle between ideology and pragmatism ensued as the Korea Workers' Party, more ideological in its views, and the cabinet, promoting "actual profits," jostled for control on the debate to inject marketization into the economy or not. Ultimately, the cabinet won the debate and marketization efforts were implemented in July 2002.[9] While North Korea loosened its tight grip on the economy, it beefed up its militaristic rhetoric on the heels of the "axis of evil" State of the Union address by George W. Bush, leading to a deterioration of U.S.-DPRK relations. Although the differing views of the cabinet vis-à-vis the Party and the military spilled over to inter-Korean relations with the cabinet pushing for rapprochement and the Party and military linking Seoul to a hostile United States, the general ambiance on the Korean peninsula improved with the Sunshine Policy of Kim Dae Jung.[10]

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[9] Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 143-147.

[10] Ibid., 142. For more on how inter-Korean relations generally improved during this period that moves beyond the political and economic perspectives, see *De-bordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy* (London: Routledge, 2013), edited by Valérie Gelézeau, Koen De Ceuster, and Alain Delissen.

Against this backdrop where a tension permeates by the juxtaposition of liberalization and militarization, Kee argues that the complexity of the distinctions between civilian life and the martial state is brought to life by twiddling with the painting's display. As observed by Kee, a scene that is normally captured on a large, horizontal canvas is, instead, conveyed on a smaller, vertical canvas, which raises the question of viewing by underscoring the painting's tight crop and the four edges of the painting.[11] The emphasis on the edge is further perpetuated by the viewer's line of vision when seeing the painting hanging in a museum:

> Official art shown in venues such as the Minye People's Exhibition Hall in Pyŏngyang, from which the British Museum purchased *Soldiers Longing for Return*, are generally exhibited so that their bottom edges roughly correspond to the eye level of their prospective viewers. According to these conventions, we would first see the supine bodies of the soldiers, lying roughly at our eye level, their inert forms thus sharply contrasting with our own uprightness and mobility.[12]

Kee surmises that the contrast of the supine bodies of the soldiers with the uprightness of the viewer as an avenue for critique is probably not intentional given the status of Ryu as a People's Artist. To support this, the militarization of the domestic is heightened by the placement of the symbols of domesticity to the back and the absence of any civilian figures.[13]

However, the key to Kee's argument is how the scene of militarization is compromised by an emphasis on the edge. The viewer, according to Kee, enters the world of the painting from the edge due to the painting's display, seeing first only a glimmer of a soldier's head and upper

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[11] Joan Kee, "Close-up: Party Lines," 177.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

body, the cutaway shifting the viewer's attention to the edge.[14] Kee points out that it is at the edge, on the lower right-hand corner, that the signature of the artist is found in red paint, as if the artist is stamping the painting as his own.[15] In many North Korean paintings (though not all), especially scenes with the Great Leaders, the signature of the artist is absent, not found in the painting. Kee asks, "Is the work, then, fundamentally about the implicit struggle between a world in which civilian presence is allowed versus one based on its suppression?"[16] The ambiguity of the time—a society sanctioning civilian presence against a society of suppression—is quietly transposed onto a painting, the question unanswered. In *Soldiers Longing for Return*, as Kee keenly points out, "what we see from the edge sometimes reveals more than the most frontal views."[17]

The motif of the edge can also be transposed to North Korean defector artists in South Korea. The edge takes on a different meaning for defector artists, not the corners of a canvas, but a more metaphorical edge of distance, lying beyond the prescribed boundaries of the North Korean state. Positioned from the edge—South Korea—the eyes of defector artists have turned overtly critical and satirical of their once home regime, problematizing the utopian revolutionary narrative, turning the personality cult of the Great Leaders upside down. One notable defector artist is Song Byeok (Song Byŏk). An artist who once painted propaganda posters for the North Korean state, Song escaped North Korea and settled in South Korea in 2002. In his new country, his paintings are satirical, almost comical in some cases, challenging North Korean socialism through seemingly facetious renderings in the form of pop art that have deeper political and subversive implications.

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 243.
[17] Ibid.

Fig. 8 (left): Take Off Your Clothes, Song Byeok

Fig. 9 (below): Our Great Leader, Song Byeok

In his most well-known painting, *Take Off Your Clothes* (figure 2), Song transforms Kim Jong Il into Marilyn Monroe, parodying the iconic scene of the actress in the famous white dress on top of a subway grating blowing her dress. It is the face of Kim Jong Il with his dark sunglasses and a cartoonish smile in the body of Marilyn Monroe, dressed in the billowing white dress that is at once deliciously comical and subversively creative. The use of white for the background and the dress foregrounds light, purity, and innocence. Yet this is misleading for there is nothing but darkness in North Korea. At the bottom of the painting, a school of fish is seen. As elucidated by Song, water symbolizes an imprisoned world and the fish symbolize the shackled people of North Korea.[18] The fish are seen jumping out of the water, a metaphor for North Koreans dreaming of freedom, escaping the prison that is North Korea. The fish that have escaped from the water are colored dark, an inversion of what usually black and white represent. Here, in Song's world of satire, black stands for freedom while white for imprisonment. As

[18] For an interview with Song Byeok on the painting, *Take Off Your Clothes*, see http://www.dailynk.com/korean/read.php?num=89098&cataId=nk06100.

indicated by the title of the painting, the central message is literally to take off the white dress, the shackles of totalitarianism, and give freedom to the North Korean people.

In *Our Great Leader* (figure 3), a subversive take on North Koreans bowing their heads in front of a mammoth statue of Kim Jong Il is depicted. A representation of a monument within a painting, the edge takes center stage. Kim Jong Il's face is missing, the statue cut off near the shins of the Great Leader. Only the bottom edge of the statue is visible. By cutting off the majority of Kim Jong Il's figure, most importantly his face, with only the bottom edge made available, the painting suggests the disenchantment and disillusionment with the North Korean state. By placing the edge of a faceless monument of Kim Jong Il in the center, the loyalty of the people bowing their heads is in vain, almost misguided. The people are bowing to the feet of Kim Jong Il. The fractured and broken body of Kim Jong Il is suggestive of a failed state.

The edges take on an added meaning as North Korea becomes more open to cultural influences from the outside, notably South Korea and China, and its once tightly sealed borders are witnessing an increasing cultural and technological flow of dramas, films, music, computers, and mobile devices. To earn hard currency and promote their art abroad, North Korean artists have pursued international exhibitions of their artworks and the development of art as a commodity to be sold to foreign purchasers.[19] Although chosŏnhwa continues to reign as the supreme art form, different art forms have developed especially since the 1980s, broadening the repertoire of art production to include woodcuts, embroidery, and posŏkhwa (jewel paintings) in

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[19] "Flowers for Kim Il Sung" was exhibited at the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, Austria from May 19 to September 5, 2010. Over 100 paintings from the Korean Art Gallery (Chosŏn Misulgwan) in P'yŏngyang, North Korea's national museum, were featured. This was the first time North Korea sent a large number of its artworks, especially the official portraits of the Great Leaders, abroad for an exhibition. North Korean artworks were also featured for the first time at the Sixth Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art of the Queensland Art Gallery in South Brisbane, Australia from December 2009 to April 2010. Five North Korean artists were commissioned to produce 15 works on industrial landscapes for the exhibition.
Since the 1970s, the Mansudae Art Studio, the largest art factory of its kind in the world and the premier art studio in North Korea, has produced artworks for foreign countries through its Mansudae Overseas Project Group of Companies.

addition to chosŏnhwa and oil paintings. Some of the newer forms of paintings have been produced to target foreign purchasers, landing in the hands of foreign North Korean art collectors and galleries, including those in South Korea.

The relationship between the two Koreas has been marked by fierce competition in order to claim legitimacy of the Korean peninsula and its history. The establishment of chosŏnhwa, a traditional ink and brush painting, as the national art form in North Korea and the identification of tansaekhwa, a form of abstract painting, as *Korean* monochrome painting in South Korea reveal how the competition between the two Koreas directly or indirectly affected the field of art during the 1960s and 1970s.[20] Although South Korean artists began to engage with the outside world after the end of the Korean War with their postwar abstract paintings, it was not enough to simply engage.[21] Instead, asserting a "cultural uniqueness" by identifying the Koreanness of certain artworks was demanded with tansaekhwa as the artworks fitting the bill.[22] Despite the history of competition between the two Koreas with each needing to claim Koreanness, large numbers of North Korean art exhibitions have been held in South Korea since the 2000s. And art, though with limitations, has the potential to develop into a space for contact for the two Koreas when differences and diversities of both Koreas are affirmed.[23]

As contact with the outside world increases and paradigms potentially shift, how do the edges transform? Starting from the edge of a socialist realist painting to the edges of enemy territory in South Korea, the meaning of the edges becomes more complicated as boundaries turn more porous and interfaces burgeon. Although it is safe to conjecture that politically driven

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[20] The South Korean art critic, Lee Yil, identified tansaekhwa as Korean monochrome painting during the mid-1970s. See Joan Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 27-28.
[21] Ibid., 27.
[22] Ibid., 27-28.
[23] Koen De Ceuster, "South Korea's encounter with North Korean art: between barbershop paintings and true art," in *De-Bordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy*, ed. by Valérie Gelézeau, Koen De Ceuster, and Alain Delissen, (London: Routledge, 2013), 155-171.

artworks will continue to dominate much of the cultural landscape of North Korea for the immediate future, churning out new portraits of Kim Jong Un and expanding the revolutionary history of the Kim family, will confined art continue to matter in a society increasingly open to external cultural forces and information technology? This is a question that is left unanswered, ambiguous at best. Perhaps only time will tell. Yet the recent movements inside and outside North Korea suggest how these edges fold into different narrative turns to create alternative political times and aestheticization.