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How can man dwell on this earth poetically?

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Will human life be able to continue on as it does today? Considering the ruins of the two world wars, Heidegger quotes a phrase from Hölderlin's poem, asking, "How can man dwell on this earth poetically?" This lamentation continues today, as we face crisis due to climate change and the Covid pandemic. Many scholars point to the fossil fuel civilization, which has continued for more than 200 years since the industrial revolution, and the anthropocentric dichotomy that began from the Cartesian division of spirit/material, leading to Kant's division and discrimination of subject/object. Humanism, long considered a noble and pure value, has now become synonymous with the barbarism and arrogance of humankind, which has dominated and conquered others and nature. Therefore, philosophers such as Prasenjit Duara call for a "Global Modern," and not a "Western Modern." In other words, it must not be "Post-Modern," but "Post-Western Modern," not "Non-Western Modern," but a "Global Modern" that embraces the West as one of many. Besides this Indian philosopher, numerous other scholars in various fields of study have said that a "Full Modern" in the true sense can bloom only when we overcome Western-centrism, anthropocentrism, and ways of thinking locked in dichotomy.

Surprisingly, the first examples of "Post Modern" in Western art history were seen not in fine art, but in crafts. These were the furniture made by the Shakers around the year 1800. Like all other areas, art was not exempt from the influence of dichotomous thought, which divided and established a hierarchy between spirit and material, humans and nature, consequently creating a clear divide between art and craft, causing them to represent "eternal spirituality" and "secular practicality," respectively. However, the direct, intimate relations craft had with nature and the body actually functioned as an important lever allowing it to jump over the hurdle called "Western Modern." The previously denigrated body and nature finally, for the first time, overcame the "subject" and "superiority of consciousness" that had dominated Western philosophy. Shaker furniture, which pursued unity between beauty and goodness, was the most excellent example of intimate connection among humans, god and nature; and their community was the first to prove that a utopia could exist on earth, as they practiced liberation of slaves and gender equality based on female dominance. They liberated slaves 75 years before the Civil War in the United States, built communes 100 years earlier than Karl Marx, opened the horizon for a total design model combining design and life 120 years before Bauhaus, and signaled the emergence of Post-Modernity some 120 years before Marcel Duchamp's Fountain, which suddenly popped out and forced people to rewrite the definition of art.

Hence, the existence of Shaker furniture, which emerged in its "Post-Modern" appearance even before the ripening of the Modern, put many art historians in a difficult situation. It revealed its heterogeneous presence in a time and space no one had expected, like an awl poking out of one's pocket. Rather than a consequence of the internal development process of art, this was a mutational "incident," which had taken place not within European civilization but on the new continent of exiles, going against the flow of time, and thus deeply shocking art history. Such numerous exceptional events and thoughts, which demonstrated Post-Modernity in advance while not belonging to the genealogy of the modern West, revealed themselves in the form of "multiple and non-linear Différance of time-space," and testified to the possibilities of non-Western Modern or Global Modern. This is evident even when we compare the philosophical thoughts of the East and the West. It has only been a century since the "issue of consciousness" changed into the "issue of language," and then into the

“issue of the body.” Phenomenology and analytic philosophy, which are very similar to Taoism and Zen Buddhism, emerged in the form of “delayed Post-Modernity” some 2,000 years later than those Eastern philosophies. These cases can never be converged into a single aspect of time, nor can it be proved that an independent, yet multiply existing, equal and decentralized “Earth Web” actually existed. The open etagere bookcase (sabang takja) of the Joseon Dynasty, which emerged around 1800, during the same era as the Shaker furniture, was another such example. These two types of furniture existed independently in mutually exclusive time-spaces, yet demonstrate remarkable family resemblance. Like their simple and undecorated furniture, the American Puritans and Joseon Neo-Confucian scholars both practiced strict self-reflection and a disciplined attitude of life. The aesthetics of moderation and emptying in the open etagere bookcase, and its spatial composition of function/non-function, are amazingly beautiful and modern even by today’s standards. The emergence of both will be documented as exceptional events that retrogressed the art history of their countries and transcended their times.

We Koreans spent a millenium experiencing the Buddhist culture of the 500-year Koryeo Dynasty, and the Confucian culture of the 500-year Joseon Dynasty. It is no exaggeration to say that the cultural DNA of Koreans was all formed during this period. That is because the results of the thought structures and worldviews of Neo-Confucianism and Hwaeom were translated into space and embodied as our architecture, craft and painting. Though these two ideas conflicted with one another in politics, their structures are quite similar in the philosophical aspect. As Hwaeom Buddhism brought together the centralized and unified non-Zen Buddhism and the decentralized and personal Zen Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism also tried to explain humans and nature in an integrated way through the concepts of Yi and Ki in an attempt to realize an ideal society on earth. Others and nature are not excluded from the thought process, but always considered together with the self. All beings and things support one another in an equal, decentralized, and mutually connected indra’s net.

In Choi Byung Hoon’s work, we can identify such worldviews and the cultural DNA that has continued for a millenium. The concepts of “emptying” and “space” in the artist’s work are core key words that penetrate his entire body of work. To empty is to set aside the subject “I” and empty out my desires. The Other may then enter this empty space. “Emptying myself” and “presenting myself as a subject” are completely different worldviews. To present oneself as the subject is egocentric, and by no means humanism. Humanism is emptying oneself to create “a space for others.”

Let us look at “The Space of Empty Containers.” It looks like there is a whole hanok house standing there. When building the Korean traditional house, hanok, one places timber on foundation stones to build a space for dwelling. The hanok consists of two very heterogeneous spaces—the wooden floored maru, which is made open in order to cope with the midsummer heat and humidity, and the ondol rooms with heated floors, closed off in all directions to endure the cold winter. The original form of hanok, which has maintained the lives of the Korean people for hundreds of years, can be found in each piece of furniture. The compact representation gives me goose bumps. It is fancy, magnificent, artless and simple. The closings and openings are all connected as one. The life, thoughts, nature and aesthetic sense of Koreans are all melted into a single “container of empty space.”

It is the same with the “Space of Empty Seats.” This stone bench made by carving and polishing volcanic rock, which had been buried in the ground for hundreds of millions of years, is full of endless

“silence,” enduring eternity. There is the sense of endless solitude and longing, as can be felt in Chusa’s calligraphy or the renowned painting Sehando. Great nature with its ancient purity, the countless relationships of Indra’s net, extending from the earth to the universe, and humble human beings endlessly practicing emptying, all meet here. That is why this work, which adds minimal artificiality to the powerful materiality of lava, has the most religious and spiritual atmosphere among all Choi’s works.

I have also paid close attention to the fact that artist Choi Byung Hoon is guiding us to a completely new stage, while combining the traditions and thoughts of a thousand years. A sensational event internationally as well as in Korea was when two of his benches—with the simplest composition of just two lumps of material, just placing a piece of stone on a steel plate bent into the shape of steps—were permanently collected by the Vitra Design Museum. This controversial work, *Afterimage of the Beginning*, can be described as a tension and harmony between the vertical and the horizontal, gravity and weightlessness. The true value of this bench can only be felt by sitting on it. Extreme structural simplicity follows the rhythm according to the weight of the user’s body, and then slowly establishes balance. I have never before seen an example that so dramatically embodies the organic relation between the human body and design through such minimal intervention, while also creating a meditative time-space. Due to this work, the flow of Korean art history, which led to *sabang takja* and moon jars, has taken a new turn, entering a new dimension.

In the era when Modernism was wielding its power, craft was treated as an inferior genre of art. But look. At a time when we must advance from Post-Modern to Full-Modern, we are now in a situation requiring us to think about the “limitations of art,” buried in representation of consciousness or semblance, disconnected from relationships with concrete objects. Due to its generosity and soft power, capable of relating to objects and the human body, craft has become a certain Bodhisattva of this era, with the power to deliver contemporary art, and recover the relationships between humans and all creation. “Art Furniture,” pursued by the artist, is like a mother bearing a child (art), or the goddess of the land who embraces all things. Meanwhile it is also an answer to the poet’s question: “How can man dwell on this earth poetically?” It is indeed my rare fortune to live in contemporary times and thus meet such an artist and artworks that I can praise to my heart’s content.