

While I initially  
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transmitting  
unidirectional  
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Korean art to  
the visitor, we  
instead engaged  
in an activity of  
collaboratively  
connecting the  
unknown with the  
known and known  
with the unknown.

## **The (In)visible Display: Reconstituting Museum Experience Through Performance Pedagogy**

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In this article, I reconceptualize my understanding of Korean objects in terms of how they perform pedagogically within a context of an art museum in the United States. A pedagogical performance occurs when a contextual shift initiates a process of learning that exposes, examines, and critiques the conventional, pre-existing discourse of objects and cultures. Understanding the museum as a performative site, I describe my experiences in the Arts of Korea gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. By juxtaposing past and present and visible and invisible cultural elements, I play with the standards and assumptions of cultural display. Based on this exploration, I conceptualize an entangled, performative relationship between the museum setting, its objects, and the continuous exchange of subjectivities between and among different audiences from which new possibilities for museum education can emerge.

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My connection to the display of Korean art began when I started working at the National Museum of Korea (NMK). During my year at the museum, I was based in the international relations team, where the main focus of my work was to facilitate cultural exchanges with other countries. One of the primary projects that I was involved in was the permanent installation of the Arts of Korea gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH). The NMK loaned more than thirty objects to the MFAH for this project. The MFAH began plans for its gallery after receiving the list of long-term loan objects. Having never been to the MFAH, it was difficult for me to envision what the gallery would look like based solely on the plans. I could not imagine the way the Korean artworks would be exhibited within the museum's comprehensive framework, intended to embrace arts from diverse cultures. I wondered what the end product would look like and became curious about how Korean culture would be translated in different cultural contexts. Though I saw photographs of the gallery taken by NMK curators, I did not understand the spatial qualities of the MFAH. A few years later, I moved to the United States and visited the MFAH for the first time. On my initial visit to the Arts of Korea gallery in the MFAH, I was excited by the simple fact of its existence and was glad to see artworks that reminded me of home. During my repeated visits to the Arts of Korea gallery at the MFAH, I realized that my experience of the gallery and its objects was being affected by a different cultural context.

In this article, I reconceptualize my understanding of Korean objects in terms of how they perform pedagogically within the context of an art museum in the United States. I contend that performance pedagogy is mutable insofar as it is constituted through a shifting of cultural contexts (Garoian, 1999)—a process of learning that exposes, examines, and critiques conventional, preexisting assumptions of museum artifacts and cultures to enable conceptualizing them in different ways. Performance pedagogy relates to the conceptual movements that generate from within and in-between the historically codified understandings of Korean objects and the sensations that audiences experience from their formal properties. It is from

that in-between, dynamic performative site, that the memories and cultural histories of museum audiences are evoked, enabling their subjective relationship with the object (Garoian, 1999, 2001).

Understanding the museum as a performative site, I explore (1) how installation methods and devices of the museum make certain cultural knowledge of Korean objects visible and invisible, (2) how the ontological status of Korean objects as fine art enables me to critically reflect on the elements derived from my own cultural experiences, and (3) how my participation becomes a cultural practice through which the museum's established codes and meanings of Korean art perform differently. It is through this exploration that I conceptualize an entangled, performative relationship between the museum setting, its objects, and the continuous exchange of subjectivities between and among different audiences from which new possibilities for museum education can emerge.

### **Performing the Arts of Korea Gallery**

In the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Arts of Korea gallery is situated among other Asian art galleries, including the Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, and Japanese galleries. The atmosphere of the Korean gallery is certainly different from its neighboring galleries. As I leave the Indonesian gallery, where golden ornaments with elaborate inlay decoration are hung against a flaming red wall, and enter the Korean gallery built with white walls and wooden floors, I feel an immediate change of atmosphere. It is like listening to music that suddenly changes from a high note with staccato rhythm to a soothing slow beat melody. The Korean gallery then connects me to the Indian gallery surrounded with deep indigo walls, where sculptures and paintings displayed under dramatic lighting seem like scattered stars against a mystic dark sky. In between these galleries of red and blue, the neutral atmosphere of the Korean gallery feels like a gulp of clean water that eases the transition between two pungent flavors. The Korean gallery displays an array of ceramics, Buddhist sculptures, and bronze artworks as well as Korean contemporary artworks. The last time I saw these objects was when they were being carefully wrapped in the NMK's storage to be trans-

ported to Houston. Here we meet again in a different time and space after a long journey from home.

The visual experience of the different galleries is a transition from vibrant to subtle, and again from neutral to vivid. As I walk through the museum, going in and out of the galleries of various cultures, I wonder what lingers behind me as I leave one gallery to enter another. How does the physical context of the galleries influence what I observe and remember (Falk and Dierking, 2000, p. 57)? How does the contingent and ephemeral atmosphere of different galleries affect my experience of a certain culture? What lies at the intersection of different galleries, in-between those “compartmental structures,” “fixed spaces,” or “matrices” (Carlson, 2004, p. 105) of culture, nation, and period? I visualize the museum’s cultural geography as a spatial and temporal grid in which art objects from diverse cultures are materialized and represented. In this three-dimensional space of the museum, I cross multiple spatiotemporal borders in order to experience the objects derived from different times and spaces. As I move in and out of the Indonesian gallery, the Indian gallery, and to the Korean gallery, my present experiences and perceptions engage in a critical conversation with the worldviews conveyed by the museum.

As I step into the Arts of Korea gallery, I recognize several cultural elements of Korea, carefully selected to recreate a “sense of here-ness” that transforms a physical space into a place that reenacts the historical and cultural heritage of the country (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 7). When I enter the Arts of Korea gallery, I notice the wall is finished with Venetian plaster, which creates a soft matte-like surface with depth. It somehow seems as if sound is muffled in this gallery space; it feels like the wall absorbs the noise beyond its surface. The words that pop into my mind are *pure*, *clean*, and *silent*. I associate these words with Korean art. When I think of traditional Korean ceramics, I relate it to words like *refined*, *sophisticated*, *balanced*, and *transparent*. I then notice the wood flooring of the gallery and associate it with the traditional houses of Korea, *Hanok*, which exist as wooden structures. I recall the warm and cozy feeling of once being inside a *Hanok* on a cold winter night in Korea, sitting on

the warm *ondol* floor with hot-water pipes embedded beneath. I try to imagine having a cup of tea using a celadon tea set displayed inside the glass structure. I pronounce the word *cheong-ja* and its English translation *celadon* one after another and feel how the words affect my perception.

While the museum selected and highlighted some visual elements of *Koreanness*, it also displayed the uniqueness of *Korean art* that was different from the other neighboring galleries. I realize that this visual construction of Korean sensibility is not “true” because the elements recontextualized into the museum were carefully chosen by the curator’s mediated interpretation of Korean culture before being inserted into the museum. By placing certain Korean art objects inside a space that thematizes Korean aesthetics, the museum presented those objects as representatives of Korean art as a whole. Similarly, groups of objects placed together inside the Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, and Japanese galleries become collective representatives of Asian art. I continue to wonder how this filtered representation of Korean and Asian culture affects my process of viewing. It is quite difficult to compress my complex understandings of Korean culture into a singular one. But here, in the Arts of Korea gallery, I began to think about how the external perception of my own culture, created by the museum, leads me to rethink the ways I perceive Korean art.

As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) points out, “exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create” (p. 3). Some of the mechanisms involved in museum theatricality are silent objects neatly organized in conceptual compartments, objects on pedestals suggesting a particular perspective or a single way of seeing, lighting that highlights the surface of each object to assist the viewer’s visual encounter. Scholars (Clunas, 1997; Conn, 2010; Preziosi, 2003) argue that art, as a product of Western civilization derived from the ideology of the European Enlightenment, is a way of constructing and classifying certain forms of knowledge. When the museum functions according to this Eurocentric conception, it becomes a stage that dilutes the cultural history from which the objects originated. Displays in

the museum like this celebrate Korean cultural objects merely as specimens of fine art that have been highlighted by various installation practices.

I look around to view the whole gallery space. I see an assemblage of celadons, porcelains, and Buddhist sculptures, all severed from the scenes of everyday life, functioning as specimens of fine art. It is a scene of still life. Two individual glass cases highlight late 18<sup>th</sup> century porcelains from the *Joseon* period. The label draws my attention to each object's surface to appreciate them in terms of their physical attractiveness and creativity. The larger significance of the porcelains is limited by the didactic label focused solely on their visual attributes rather than providing knowledge about the relationship between their former histories and their present installation in the gallery. By focusing on the visuality of the object rather than placing the object in the context of its former and present everyday life, the meaning of the object's life is limited.

Inside the Arts of Korea gallery, where the museum employs elements that identify certain characteristics of Koreanness, the objects' shift of context from their original spatial and temporal situation enables me to play with the new social and cultural life given by the museum. After reading the label that focuses on the aesthetic qualities of the Buddhist sculpture, I think about the functional aspects of the object associated with acts of religious worship and rituals taking place inside a temple. I think about the conceptual devices that push the utilitarian function of the object to the background and bring its aesthetic quality to the foreground. I also think about the factors that separate the aesthetic aspects and functional aspects of this sculpture. Knell (2012) claims that "the material aspect of the art object is...progressively reduced and diminished (relatively speaking) as the mythology of the object's artistic significance grows" (p. 326). By muting the functional aspect and accentuating the visual aspect of the sculpture, is the museum intentionally constructing an aesthetic "temple" of fine art? In this process, is the museum determining an institutional way of seeing by constructing a script that prevents the audience from gaining a contextual experience of and within the object?

The view of Asian objects as fine art reveals the intellectual framework that sustains the art museum and limits the possibilities to perceive, imagine, and reconceptualize the objects in different ways. For example, the double identity of the celadon tea set as both a functional and artistic object defies the museum's conceptual framework that forces them to be perceived in a predetermined way. Therefore, the interpretation of Korean objects solely as fine art becomes problematic when I apply this modernist Western ideology to art museum practices. The mutability of the Korean objects is due to their contextual shift, which comes from the change of location and time (from where and when they were produced to where and when they are appreciated), change of function (from instruments to works of art), and change of value (from everyday materials to masterpieces).

In relation to the museological devices that highlight visual beauty, I think about the partiality of Koreanness represented by artworks and the gallery's spatial design that "stands in a contiguous relation to an absent whole that may or may not be re-created" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 19). In order to fill the absent values, worldviews, daily activities, and physical settings associated with the object that are lost, veiled, or sometimes reconstructed, I contemplate the multiple pedagogical possibilities that emerge from my experience of the Korean gallery as the "liminoid" field of possibility, a field of hybrid, mixed forms" (Phelan, 1993, p. 81), that enable me to reconstitute my experience of the Korean gallery.

### **The Performative Audience: Placing Cultural Perspectives In Between**

Standing at the boundary of presence and absence of cultural representation in the Arts of Korea gallery, I am immediately transported to my memory of giving a tour to a middle-aged man from Thailand while working as a researcher at the NMK in Seoul. I gave him a brief overview of the museum's history and led him through the many galleries of the museum, which were filled with national treasures and precious Korean art objects. While walking through the hallways, I was simultaneously flipping through

the museum's tour manual in the back of my mind to decide where to stop and what to highlight from its enormous collection. I tried to perform the script formulated by the museum. However, this curious visitor requested that we make many impromptu stops in front of various objects that attracted his attention. These objects were not included in the script nor had I previously noticed them. What bewildered me was the unexpected direction in which this tour was heading; it was a pleasant bewilderment.

When I explained a slate-roof from the seventh century, he brought up the functionality of the object and told me how similar and different tiles were used in past and present Thailand. When we were talking in front of a bronze Buddhist sculpture, he linked the formal and sociocultural aspects of the object to his personal beliefs and way of life in Thailand. This provoked me to share some cultural aspects of Korea and my own stories. We shared memories and experiences evoked by the Korean art objects in front of us. In doing so, we created multi-layered cultural narratives developed from our experiences.

Citing Bakhtin, Carlson (2004) describes the concept of "utterance" as:

A strip of language that is "always individual and contextual in nature," and an "inseparable link" in an ongoing chain of discourse, never reappearing in precisely the same context even if, as often occurs, a specific pattern of words is repeated. (p. 59)

My dialogue with the Thai man enabled me to witness the object moving between us, from one sociocultural perspective to the next, acquiring different values, associations, and meanings as it conceptually changed its location (Morgan, 2012). In the linear structure of the museum where objects are displayed in chronological order, the man and I were interacting contiguously with the past and exchanging utterances to create a rich interplay of personal memory and cultural history repeated differently—we were experiencing chronological time out of joint.

A space filled with an assemblage of Korean art objects—which seemed to be lifeless specimens of fine art detached from the contexts of everyday life—

slowly transformed into a lively forum. In the process of conceptualizing objects at the intersection where cross-cultural encounters occurred, our dialogue was animated by the objects, that were enlivened by our dialogue. What I expected to be a 30 minute transmission-style tour turned into 90 minutes of deep and compelling conversation. Our dialogue reflected and changed our respective knowledge of the objects. We transformed the act of viewing objects into an intertextual and collaborative learning experience by sharing personal and cultural beliefs, relating the object to our own experiences, and revising our predetermined cultural knowledge (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011, p. 87). A pedagogical performance occurred when we shifted the contexts of the official narrative of the museum, my own narrative, and the Thai visitor's narrative, and perceived the objects from multiple directions in order to discern what became absent and present from different viewpoints. As we walked through the galleries, I considered questions to further encourage the interaction. It was surprising to experience how objective pieces of Korean art-historical knowledge were transformed into subjective points of connection that led us to think further about the artworks. While I initially imagined transmitting unidirectional knowledge of Korean art to the visitor, we instead engaged in an activity of collaboratively connecting the unknown with the known and known with the unknown. Since we were looking at Korean artworks that were displayed away from their origin and removed from their original purpose, we tried to recontextualize them according to our own time and space.

In his essay *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, art critic Owens (1992) explains that in an allegorical structure, "one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be, the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest" (p. 54). The museum's representation of the culture is one palimpsest that layers the artwork. The lived experience of the audience is another. During my interaction with the Thai visitor, I was trying to layer my objective knowledge on our subjective experiences. Our dialogue was not hierarchical but layered and entangled, which enabled us to learn about our respective

experiences of objects through each other as Owens describes. This performative strategy includes an activity in which the audience writes their own texts on separate pieces of tracing paper and overlaps them all together. As one word becomes the foreground, the others recede to the background. Then the foreground becomes transparent and lets the background show through it. As we look through the multi-layered sheets from the top, we perform an intricate and intertextual connecting activity to reconstruct the constellation of texts that are socially and culturally determined. I think of the shifting of positions between these different layers as a “dynamic engagement of a contingent and contiguous” reciprocity effect that evokes a relational experience (Pollock, 1998, p. 86).

Acknowledging the reciprocity of absence and presence as well as multiple ways of perceiving the seen and unseen is the process of a dialogical “performance of memory” that entails “verbal analogies, metaphors, and metonymies to represent [the viewer’s] perceptual experiences” (Garoian, 2001, p. 242). One way to experience this is to place different cultural territories side by side and explore the space between the two cultural structures by bringing in personal and cultural perspectives. This is what occurred between the Thai man and myself. In our performance at the museum, the objects did not exist alone. Experiences that connect our past and present also become a force to animate the objects. I consider my performance of subjectivity in the museum not merely as an internal process, but as an enactment with external understandings with the museum and the world.

Recalling my interaction with the Thai visitor in Korea enabled me to play with the ideas of detachment, displacement, and decontextualization while experiencing the Arts of Korea gallery in Houston. These performative activities transform the strange to familiar and the familiar to strange by conceptually placing objects in different locations, which enables a continuous renewal of the object’s meanings. It allows me to imaginatively *play* with the method of *(dis)play* in the museum. Instead of understanding the prefix “dis-” as a negative force that *displaces* objects from their original contexts into a museological matrix, I

place my own narrative next to the museum’s institutional narrative to renew the objects’ cultural biographies, which extends to my own time and space. Situating my argument in the final destination for objects—the art museum—I conceptualize how we might release the objects from their institutional grid and open spaces for creative and critical interpretations by challenging, disturbing, and unsettling a fixed notion of Korean culture to reexamine the fluid relationship between culture and identity.

Alpers (1991) explores the “educational possibilities of installing objects” and the “information about what is being installed” to critically examine how they “[encourage] seeing and suggesting ways to see” (p. 31). Building on this, I argue that the educational value of the museum not only lies in utilizing the representation of cultures as an end-product but also in suggesting multiple possibilities to encounter works of art. I consider this process as a way to enable the audience to “[see] the blind spot within the visible real” of the installations and fill in that in-between hole with their narratives to avoid the “reproduction of the Other *as* the Same” (Phelan, 1993, p. 3). Thus, approaching museum education through performance pedagogy evokes conceptualizing museum objects and their histories in relation to the differing cultural perspectives of the audience. Such possibilities emerge from using both the objects and knowledge accumulated by the museum to question the historical representation constructed within the dominant narrative of the institution.

Using performance pedagogy in museums provides a context for museum education that is “divergent, open, complex, and contradictory in character” (Garoian, 1999, p. 29). Based on performance pedagogy, museums might promote critical practices that investigate how differing concepts of culture are materialized in museums through their exhibitions and collections. Accordingly, museum practitioners would facilitate intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue among academics, educators, audiences, staff, and the general public from educational institutions and various social sectors to critique stereotypes of cultural representation and unveil the implicit nuances of cultural difference. The in-between spaces of the mu-

seum's narrative, different audience narratives, and my narrative become constructive forces that enrich, construct, or deconstruct the meaning of artworks. The process of interweaving our lived memories and experiences with the social and cultural implications of the museum promotes non-reductive knowledge of the artwork and enables us to acknowledge our own position and identity that shapes the perspective of viewing the objects. Consequently, pedagogical opportunities emerge from the reciprocal interaction between the represented world of the museum and the real world that viewers bring from the outside.

### Conclusion

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) claims that "not only do ordinary things become special when placed in museum settings, but the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls" (p. 51). Through my narrative of viewing Korean art, I attempted to identify this museum effect through the lens of performance pedagogy that enables me to *play* with the standards and assumptions of cultural *(dis)play*—thus flipping the metaphor associated with museological practice.

Examining the museum's institutionalized representation of culture through the display of objects, invites me to conceptualize new pedagogical implications of viewing objects and cultural representations in museums. I think about these possibilities in terms of the dialogic relationship between artworks, how the galleries are situated in relation to the overall

organization of the museum, and the continuous exchange between viewers with different cultural backgrounds. Although my argument is based on my experience of a specific Korean art gallery, I believe the pedagogical implications of decentering the traditional and singular ways of viewing Korean objects can produce a ripple effect that changes the way we encounter cultural objects in the museum.

By acknowledging that subject/object/space in the museum is contingent and relational, we move away from reductive binaries to open up creative approaches to regard the displayed artworks as objects having imminent agency. When a museum is constituted as a space that fosters such pedagogical agency, knowledge becomes "determined by the coexistence of cultural experiences that each participant acts out through performance" (Garoian, 1999, p. 51). In this space, the museum converges the narratives produced and shared between personal memory, the object's cultural history, and the structural system of the museum. Based on the dialogic relationship between these multiple agencies, a museum becomes a forum for exploration and experimentation where audiences constantly deconstruct cultural presuppositions, redefine the boundaries of different cultures, and perform their lived experiences in between.

### Notes

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