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OUR COOL LEADER:

Anti-North Korea Propaganda

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OUR COOL LEADER:

Anti-North Korea Propaganda

by

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Yongmin Lee, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Richard Isackes

Curious as to how the Kim regime of North Korea could have controlled people for 70 years by making idols of themselves, I felt strongly that I had to do something to end the absurdity and to bring freedom to the people of the country. To this end, I believed the best way is to point out the self-contradiction of Kim Jong-un and his regime, was to present an anti-North Korea propaganda image based on the irrational facts of North Korea. The ultimate aims of this thesis project are: 1) to reveal the true North Korean life and people's suffering, which is masked behind Kim Jung-un's propaganda and, 2) to send an anti-North Korean propaganda message into its territory.

Our Cool Leader: Anti-North Korea propaganda, therefore, was intended to be an audience participation event. An artifact, a satirical bust sculpture of Kim Jong-un, and the related mask performance allowed audiences to explore how North Korea Propaganda works and view the propaganda images of anti-North Korea. In the final act, I intend to send the recorded performance video and anti-propaganda leaflets to North Korea.

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I. Introduction

My View of North Korea as a South Korean

When I was in elementary school in South Korea in early 1990s, I remember a couple of slogans: 'Let's defeat the Communist party' or 'I hate communists' against North Korea. These were spoken, sung, and sometimes used on posters. I learned North Korea is on the axis of evil and considered people living in North Korea as monsters with horns. The ideological hostility continued until I served in the South Korean Navy 2005-2007, a mandatory two years duty. Confronting North Korea on a battleship, I was taught specific military strategies to defeat them.

After I came to the U.S in 2012, I started to research North Korea and the people who live there. After having read articles and watched many documentary films about North Korea, I realized I was mistaken when I considered that North Korea is a communist country. Even though North Koreans call themselves communists, they are a totalitarian state as much as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. What is worse, three generations of the Kim family have gained notoriety for their use of absolute dictatorship by using false propaganda techniques. At the same time, I also realized that most people in North Korea are not monsters at all but are sacrificial lambs for the monster named the Kim autocracy.

While undertaking this research, I met a North Korean defector Chung Gwang Seong who resettled in South Korea. He now studies English in Tyler, Texas and gives speeches about the North Korean human rights crisis in U.S universities. It was hard to

believe that we were able to discuss North Korean related issues without tension even though we grew up as each other's enemies. His life has dramatically changed after crossing the Tuman River between North Korea and China. He now has the freedom to speak, sing, listen, and watch whatever he wants as opposed to his life in North Korea where he never had that opportunity.

North Korea Propaganda: onstage and offstage

Arirang Festival: combination of propaganda techniques

In 2007, North Korea's Mass Games in the Arirang Festival were recognized by Guinness World Records as the biggest event of its kind. As photographer Werner Kranwetvogel describes, "20,000 students form a living backdrop for the proceedings, flashing colored cards in synchronized patterns to create massive images of war and symbols of patriotism". It was held in the largest stadium in the world, May Day Stadium, which holds up to 150,000 people.



Illustration 1: North Korea's Mass Game in Arirang Festival. Photo by Sarah Muirhead

The Arirang Festival was organized and started in 2002 to protest the 1988 Seoul Olympic games in South Korea and to draw the world's attention. To create this spectacle, 100,000 performers practiced over six months supervised by the state.

Arirang is a traditional Korean folk song and widely considered as the most representative music of both South and North Korea. *Arirang* is the name of a mountain pass in Korea and the lyric represents Korean's nationality and personality, *Han* (lamentation) and *Jung* (affection). Interestingly, the Arirang song in this festival has some added parts to the lyric "there is Baekdu Mountain," and "the Sun rises." In the new song, Kim Il-sung, the first leader in North Korea, is born at Baekdu Mountain, and the Sun always represents only him. Not only is the song adapted but the themes of *Arirang* are used for propagating the Kim's regime. A huge living backdrop and thousands of performers form the shape of Baekdo Mountain and the sunrise, finally shouting "dear the great leader."

A high level of technical effects and splendid visual spectacles also captivate the audience. Aerial performers fly waving red flags and others soar into the air like missiles. Also, a children's gymnastic performance shows incredible movements under the flashing cards 'Be always prepared for the future of socialism' and 'Thanks to the supreme leader Kim Jung-un.' Strikingly, at the top and end of the show, all the performers and audiences stand up toward one direction and shout and wave to Kim Jung-un altogether for about three minutes.

There is a true story reported in a South Korean Television talk show. "Now on My Way to Meet You" features panels of female North Koreans who have settled in South Korea. A fourteen-years-old girl died from acute appendicitis during the Mass Games in Arirang Festival. Because she was playing an important role in that she held one of the

pieces of Kim Il-Sung's face on a flash card, the North Korean government glorified her loyalty and sacrifice.

Media Control

For media in North Korea, there are also harsh restrictions and terrorism behind the media propaganda. Miriam Berger points out in BuzzFeed News about the hysterical situation in media environment in North Korea:

North Korea has one of the world's most repressive media environments. The state owns all domestic news outlets, and strictly limits access to outside information. The Internet is, for all purposes, banned. All journalists must be members of the ruling Workers Party of Korea. The penal code makes listening to unauthorized foreign broadcasts and possession of dissenting publications a crime against the state. Violators face punishments including hard labor, prison sentences, and the death penalty.

Under these circumstances, The 2014 World Press Freedom Index announced the result of a survey showing that North Korea is ranked 179th among 180 countries in civil liberties.

Controlling What to Believe

Officially the North Korean government claims that citizens have freedom of religion and support the free exercise of all religions. In reality, however, people in North Korea are not allowed to have a religion because Kim Il Sung, the first dictator of North Korea, is only one God for North Koreans. Even possessing a Bible is considered a serious

crime. In November 2013, North Korea publicly executed as many as 80 people, some for owning Bibles and watching South Korean movies.

Nowadays

Those false uses of propaganda and the blockage policies are beginning to crack. Many North Korean do not believe anymore what they see and what they hear on television and performances. They increasingly have been finding ways to get more entertainment and reliable news from outside of North Korea. The fact is that the North Korean governmental distribution system scarcely functions nowadays. Plus, a black market economy called, *Jangmadang*, has been vitalized by distributing Chinese goods and a South Korean media wave of TV dramas, films, and music, which has resulted in opening people's ears and eyes, as well as losing the government's control of people. Many North Korean defectors and human rights groups are trying to boost their efforts to inform the world of its absurdity. In spite of those efforts, a protest movement among North Korean citizens against the dictatorial government has not yet arisen.

Kim Jung-un: A paradoxical character

Known as the Supreme Leader in North Korea, 31 years old Kim Jung-un possesses a formidable power given to him by his father Kim Jung-il, and grandfather, Kim Il-sung. He is building his personal kingdom against South Korea, the United States, and most of the world while hiding behind nuclear weapons. In fact, his most powerful weapon is the use of propaganda in theatre, television, film, and everyday performance to control citizens, a system bequeathed to him by his predecessors. Kim Jong-un is, in this regard, the central focus of North Korea propaganda. Using the propaganda techniques and keeping secrets behind it requires sacrifice, including harsh restrictions of making contact with Western and outside culture, which lead inevitably to an extreme oppression of human rights.

In contradiction to its official hostile stance toward western capitalist culture, Kim Jung-un, himself, seems to enjoy an iconic capitalist lifestyle: Disney, NBA, and Apple products.

First, July 9, 2012, New York Times reports that North Korean state-run television on Monday showed footage of costumed versions of Tigger, Minnie Mouse and other Disney characters prancing in front of the leader, Kim Jong-un, and an entourage of clapping generals. However, The spokesperson for The Walt Disney Co. Zenia Mucha, said the use of Disney characters in the North Korean performance was not authorized by The Walt Disney Company.



Illustration 2: Mickey and Minnie Mouse performance in Pyongyang. Photo by Reuters

Second, Jan 8, 2015, Reuters in Seoul reported that exactly one year ago, flamboyant NBA hall of fame star Dennis Rodman stepped up to a microphone in the center ring of a North Korean basketball court and sang 'Happy Birthday' to leader Kim Jong Un, the world's youngest head of state. Also, Kim Jung-un himself is known as a big fan of basketball and NBA.



Illustration 3: Dennis Rodman sings Happy Birthday to Kim Jong-un before an exhibition basketball game in Pyongyang. Photo by AP Kim Kwang Hyon.

Third, March 29, 2013, according to a report the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), North Korean leader Kim Jong-un presided over an urgent operational meeting after declaring a “state of war” with South Korea and the United States at the Supreme command in Pyongyang. KCNA also released a picture of Kim Jong-un in his office. The strange thing in this picture is that there is an aluminum iMac, made by American company Apple Computer, at the right side of the table.



Illustration 4: Kim Jong-un and iMac. Photo by KCNA

2. COHEN NEW WORK FESTIVAL PROJECT: OUR COOL LEADER

Project Overview

The focal point of this project is to examine North Korean Propaganda and its self-contradiction. In the pursuit of destroying false images in North Korean propaganda and revealing the hidden absurdity in the Kim's regime to the public by suggesting anti-North Korea propaganda images, *Our Cool Leader* uses techniques based on North Korean propaganda models with reverse reactions. The satirical bust of paradoxical character Kim Jung-un, with an installation of propaganda video collage inside of the sculpture was set up on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. In conjunction with this installation, there was a mask performance that featured a North Korean family, and an awareness campaign in collaboration with LINK (Liberty in North Korea), a university student organization, encouraging participation during these happenings.

Narrative Conceit

The performance proceeded based on this fictional story by the author:

In the cool leader's favor, Chil Park enjoys the pride and privilege of membership in the elite group Worker's Party in North Korea. His wife Sun-ae Im works as a propagandist for the Worker's Party. Their son Jin-back Park is a curious boy, always asking questions. This family's daily life starts with praising in front of Kim's portrait to assure loyalty to Kim's regime. They strongly believe they owe everything including their happiness to the supreme leader. One day Jin-back brings home an uncensored videotape that contains South Korean TV dramas. Having the tape will put them in danger. Nevertheless, they find that the drama is too addictive to stop watching. All the family members begin to watch together every night secretly having doubts about the huge differences between the reality in life in South Korea and what they have been taught. People's lives in South Korea seem so much healthier and more attractive. Watching the tape makes Park's family feel despair for their situation. The state security agencies storm into the home and find the videotape. The family is captured and sent to a concentration camp. Being treated worse than animals and suffering from forced labor, torture, and malnutrition, the family is near death. Bemoaning the cruel reality, they attempt to escape from the camp. They run away through a tightly guarded fence. The country is no longer gracious to them but the object of hatred. They defect crossing the Tuman River at the frost bitten Chinese border hoping to get to know the truth about North Korea and the outside world. On a pitch-dark night, a gunshot rings out breaking the silence. Chil Park falls on the ground shouting out to Sun-ae and Jin-back to run away. Horrified by the situation the mother holds her son's hand, and they throw their bodies into the river. In spite of desperate efforts, Sun-ae cannot survive against the

roaring river. Standing alone on the bank of the river, Jin-back looks back to his notorious and dehumanizing country.

Location and Invitation

On the well-maintained and tree-lined avenue full of vitality, youth, and greenery, Martin Luther King's status marks a bold and strong gesture. In contrast, down to the fountain under a burning sun confused Kim Jung-un tries to take a firm stand wearing a Mickey Mouse hat. The choice of the placement is to evoke the settings of Kim statues in North Korea in respects of a higher position compared to the ground people walk by and a large red brick wall of the fountain as a solid background.

All of sudden, loud North Korean propaganda music arrests public attention. When people gather around, three performers who are wearing military costumes and white masks hold a parade celebrating our cool leader Kim Jong-un.

The Process of creation of the Artifact and the Event

a. Designing Anti-North Korea Propaganda Images

In North Korea, there are about 35,000 statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Surprisingly, there are even emergency bunkers underground for most of the statues in case of a sudden outbreak of war. North Koreans are forced to believe in these expensive objects as incarnations of Kim's.



Illustration 5: North Koreans bow to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's statues in Pyongyang. Photo by Reuters

Because there has not been made Kim Jong-un's statue yet, I decided to make one for the first time not in the way that it would be made in North Korea but in a way that reveals what they should know about their leader. Based on Kim Jong-un's contradictory features, I combined his serious bust with a Mickey Mouse hat, Chicago Bulls headphones, representing Dennis Rodman, and an iPhone for playing a video inside of the sculpture in order to make an iconoclastic statement.



Illustration 6: Digital Rendering of Kim Jong-un's statue

I also intended to create impressive visual spectacles during the performance. First, red ribbons from Kim Jong-un's mouth pop out and tie up performers. With red flags, those red ribbons represent the North Korean's terrifying *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology which is often symbolized by a red flag or a flame. Second, as opposed to Red, a huge piece of blue silk symbolizes the ruthless reality for people who deny the ideal. I designed the fabric to represent broken water, and it is between Heaven and Hell for people crossing the border.



Illustration 7: Tower of the Juche Ideal in Pyongyang. Photo by Wikipedia

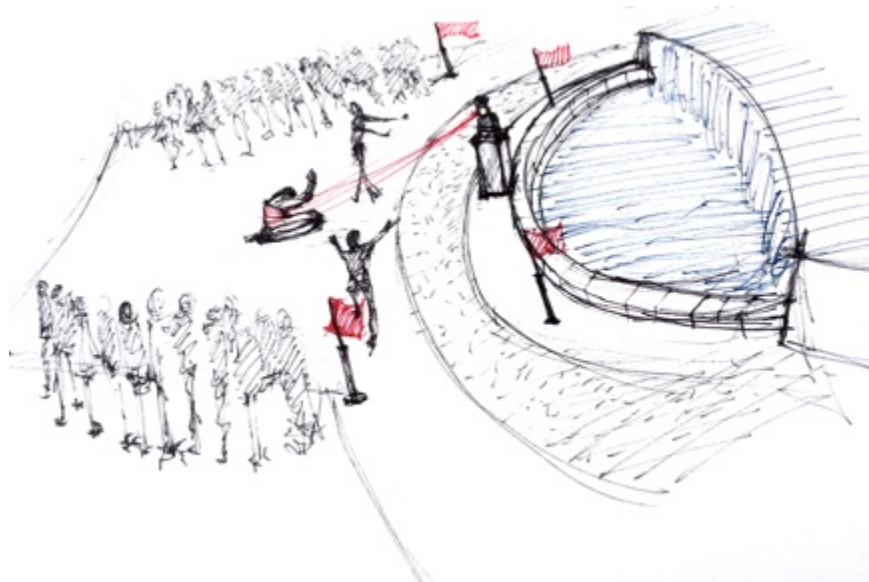


Illustration 8: A Sketch for the performance

b. The Sculpture

There are three masks that have a strong sense of realistic North Korean features. I designed them without mouth parts to allow various facial expression by performers.



Illustration 9: Masks for the performance

As the main artifact, Kim Jong-un's bust sculpture was designed to be life sized on a 4 foot stand. First I made a clay bust, and then I cast it in paper mache in order to make it hollow inside for video installation. Like a kaleidoscope, mirrors were installed to make reflections of the image.



Illustration 10: Statue Making Process

c. The Performance

Our Cool Leader Project was presented four times during The Cohen New Works Festival at the University of Texas at Austin in April of 2015. The performance, with an awareness campaign, took place in front of the fountain next to the Winship Theatre Building.



Illustration 11: Performance in the venue. Photo by Chian-ann Lu

d. The Collaborators

The performance was directed by Kimun Kim, a second year graduate student in the opera-directing program at the University of Texas at Austin. He also performed the most important role in the performance. Choreographer Jun Shen, a second year graduate student in Dance, suggested movements and taught amateur performers how to express emotions. He also performed as one of the North Korean officers. Collaborating with the student organization LINK (Liberty In North Korea), most of the members eagerly participated in this event.

Performers: Soojeong Kim, David Nielsen, Mary Barbaree, Cory Hight

Videographer: Madeline Christensen

Postcard Maker: Sarah Choi, Mary Barbaree

Also, many other LINK members helped to hold an awareness campaign.



Illustration 12: A rehearsal directed by Kimun Kim. Photo by author



Illustration 13: Awareness campaign hosted by LINK



Illustration 14: North Korean Propaganda postcards and the realities on the back



Illustration 15: A Video clip from the Anti-North Korean propaganda video

Photographs from the Cohen New Work Festival



Illustration 16: Photo by Lawrence Peart



Illustration 17: Photo by Sam Park



Illustration 18: Photo by Lawrence Peart



Illustration 19: Sam Park



Illustration 20: Photo by Lawrence Peart



Illustration 21: Photo by Lawrence Peart



Illustration 22: Photo by Lawrence Peart



Illustration 23: Photo by Sam Park



Illustration 24: Photo by Sam Park



Illustration 25: An audience is watching the video into the eyes after the show. Photo by author

3. Conclusion

If someone asks me “was your project successful?” I would like to postpone the answer because this project will not be finished until the images of anti-North Korea that I created reach people in North Korea and empower them to be awakened against the absurdity of the Kim regime.

However, I have experienced intense satisfaction at the result of this collaborative event. The response to the event from the public tells me that it made a strong impression on many people and made them aware of the cruel reality in North Korea.

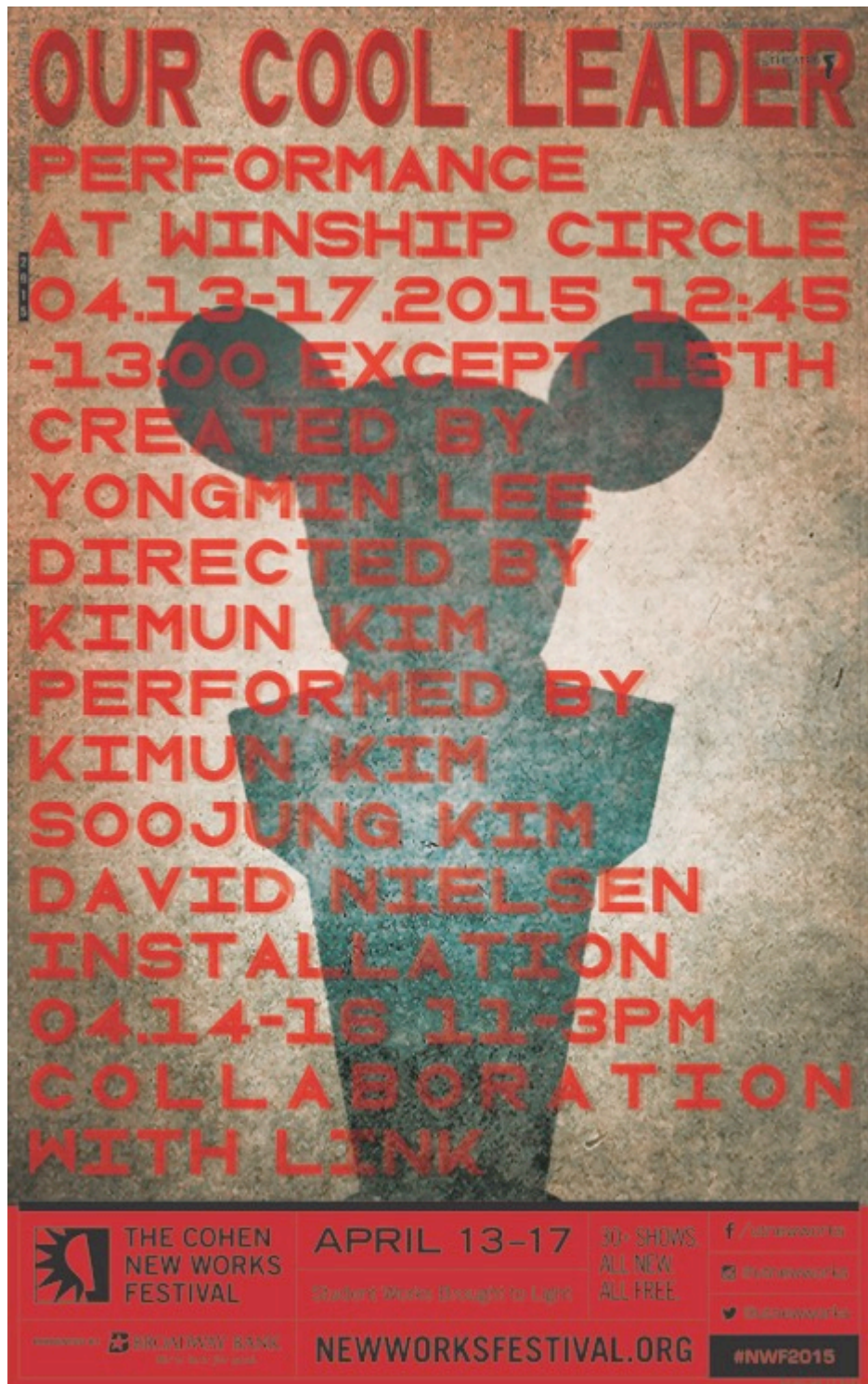
I would like to close this writing by sharing my friend Chung Gwang Seong's letter.

Hello, my name is Chung Gwang Seong.

I was born in North Korea and spent my childhood in the North. In order to find freedom, I escaped North Korea by sneaking across the Tumen River to China, then onto Thailand before arriving in South Korea. However, not all who try to escape are successful. On many occasions, the attempt to escape results in death by gunfire or drowning in the river. My niece was crossing over the river to China with my sister-in-law, but she was swept away by the river. My sister-in-law had to continue her escape and there was a little she could do to provide rescue for my niece. Although she found freedom, she still suffers from the guilt of not being able to save my niece. How sad is that.

The Kim Jong Un dictatorship steals the basic rights, freedom, and dreams of nearly all North Koreans, who live in great misery and suffer daily. Our voices and undivided attention are necessary for those who live in such an isolated and cruel society, where the concept of freedom cannot be seen, spoken of, or heard.

Appendix A: The Poster for Our Cool Leader



Appendix B: The Program for Our Cool Leader

Director's Note

In North Korea, people have no freedom or human rights. Kim Jung Un's dictatorship steals everything from people's dreams. We need to know the true North Korean life and learn of people's suffering, which is masked behind Kim Jung Un's propaganda. They are so isolated and desperate that they can easily be driven to work against the regime, even if they are labeled a traitor. Today, many North Koreans try to escape their homeland by sneaking across the Tumen River, into China. From there, they journey onward to South Korea. In their search for freedom and better lives, they are willing to face the threat of death by gunfire or drowning. When I directed this performance, I focused on the family, who initially seem happy, but when the true nature of their existence is revealed, find themselves feeling betrayed. They make an attempt to start a new life by crossing the river, which they know may end in their demise.

I would like the audience to think kindly about the people of North Korea. We are all human beings and should all be treated with dignity and respect.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS



OUR COOL LEADER ANTI-NK PROPAGANDA

Concept

The focal point of this project is to examine North Korean Propaganda and its self-contradiction. In the pursuit of destroying false images in North Korean propaganda and revealing the truth to the public, Our Cool Leader is an interactive and awakening event. What technique this project use is based on North Korean propaganda models with reverse reactions. The paradoxical character Kim Jung-un, his satirical bust sculpture with an installation of North Korean Propaganda video collage sets up on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. In conjunction with this installation, there is a performance that features North Koreans and an awareness campaign in collaboration with LNK (Liberty in North Korea), a university student organization, encouraging participation during these happenings.

Performance Synopsis

Our Cool Leader is a story about a family who shower praise upon Kim Jung Un and are seemingly happy with their lives in his regime. However, after viewing prohibited South Korean television broadcasts, they are considered traitors, and they are sent to a concentration camp. There, they are treated worse than animals and suffer under forced labor, torture, and malnutrition. To end their cruel reality, they attempt an escape across the Tumen River. Sadly, the father killed by gunfire and mother swept away by the strong current, leaving the son as the sole survivor. With memories of his past life, he forges on to seek new life and liberty.

PERFORMANCE 15 minutes

Where: WIN Circle (In front of the fountain)
When: April 13, 14, 16, 17 12:45pm

Cast

Kimun Kim (Jinback, Son)
Soojong Kim (Sunae, Mom)
David Nielsen (chil, dad)
Jun Shen (Sunny) (officer)
Mary Barbara (officer)
Cory Hight (officer)

Crew

Director
Kimun Kim
Choreographer
Jun Shen (Sunny)
Story
Yongmin Lee
Performance Designer
Yongmin Lee
Dramaturgy
Sachal Red
Production assistant
Minah Hong
Sam Park

INSTALLATION

Where: WIN Circle (In front of the fountain)
When: April 14, 15, 16 11am - 3pm

Creative Team

Sculptor
Yongmin Lee
Videographer
Madeline Christensen
Postcard Maker
Mary Barbara
Sarah Choi
Awareness Campaign
UT LNK Members (Liberty in North Korea)

Appendix C: The transcript of talk back responses

Questions that were asked:

1. What are the moments that resonated with you (still stuck with you)? Why?
 - The red ribbons that came out of Kim Jung-un's Mouth were a very powerful and symbolic.
 - Towards the end, how the blue river separated Kim from the boy.
 - The end of the piece where the boy revealed himself by taking off his mask. It means that he was "truly free" and he can "be himself."
 - Remember: The dancing was symbolic because his past self, the dancer in black, would not let him return to North Korea. In fact, he told him to remain free. Think about this: Now that the boy has escape and can start a new life, it will still be very difficult.
 - It noted how the whole family would bow to Kim; this was a strong metaphor in the fact that it conveyed the family's undying loyalty to the leader.
2. What are the parts/moments that did not make a lot of sense? → Goes with your question: Bring a United States citizen, how do you feel about the North Korean stance against Capitalism and the United States (like other countries), even though he is self-contradicting in the fact that Kim Jung-Un likes Disney, NBA, and Apple products?
 - Why did Kim wear the Mickey-Mouse Ears?

Yongmin answer: "I chose the Mickey Mouse Hat because there is a Mickey Mouse performance in North Korea without Disney authorization. He likes Disney animation and basketball and brought ... and he also likes apple products like Mac Book. He would have serious meetings about having a state of war against the US while he is using MacBook."

Audience comment: "How can he go to school in Switzerland then be in the same regime as his grandfather and father and makes no sense does it... that is hard to uh..."

Rachel: "I think he is very contradicting because he likes all of these things but hates America. He hates capitalism, and wants everything this way."

3. What is your opinion on the fact that Kim Jung-Un likes all of these American Products but hates every aspect of America?
 - Audience comment: "It defiantly shows the hypocrisy of the regime."
 - Audience comment: "It makes me think that everyone is playing along with his game because they are not stupid, they know he is crazy. But everyone is too scared to act upon it and start a revolution. Everyone is too scared...but I feel like that he cannot even follow his own regime. That is how messed up it is. He's playing this game that he cannot control either. No one can control it."
 - Audience comment: "I actually remember I saw a documentary on North Korea once, where back when his father was still in power and there were talking things they had... and someone had something Nike related and people were like that is "Japanese." I mean..."
4. After seeing this piece, what does it evokes in you? Or make you want to do something specifically? What change what is making in you personally?
 - Audience comment: "Answering with a question: It made me want to see more, so how you (Yongmin) go about making this a full length production? Or a series of mini productions?"
 - Yongmin answer: "Actually, I think 15 minutes was too short to talk about the situation in North Korea. If I have more time I would make it into a musical style with propaganda music and acting style. There are a lot stories about North Korea."
 - Audience comment: "Is this story, based on a story that you have heard before?"
 - Yongmin answer: "Actually, I made up the characters and the narrative, but based it on the true story and research. It happens."
 - Audience comment: "Is it common for North Korean citizens to watch South Korean television?"
 - Yongmin answer: "Yes they do."
 - Audience comment: "Maybe we should give money to give more Money to the South Korean television broadcast. But that must be troubling to the regime, isn't it?"
 - Yongmin answer: "Yes it is. It is also very irregular. If they caught by security guards or police they will be sent to concentration camps."

- LiNK answer: "Many people do. I think it is a lot of North Korean defectors and now they have families back in North Korea and they have relatives and they have friends. And they want to tell the rest of the world about North Korea is not the best place in the world and there are so many better things. There are organizations in South Korea that sends dramas or music in a USB drive and send it up in a balloon. It disperses. The consequences of being caught watching it can result in public execution. There are a lot of stakes that are involved watching it. So kind of like what he said it varies. Sometimes the government is very strict and other times it is not.
- Audience comment: "I am just curious, how restrictive or free is living in North Korea? What are the extent that people in the camps... (And how they live their lives)?"
- LiNK answer: "Actually, it really depends also in the region that you live in. If you live in Pyongyang, the capital city, maybe you will be wealthier, in relation if you are living in the countryside. It kind of varies. I would say that even though we talk about dispersing the Korean drama and all of that, you would still consider those people a little better off because not everyone still knows about the (thing?) and many people still do not know that there is a better world out there. I am not sure statistically how many people know about who live like that. But you would think that some are poorer than others and living there is kind of hard. That would be the norm.
- Audience comment: "What motivated you to do this production?"
- Yongmin answers: "I am from South Korea. And one of my family members has a relative in North Korea and has never met for (70) years. He didn't even know if alive or dead.
- Audience comment: "Do you agree with president Obama when he said that the important country in this situation is not America but its China? China keeps North Korea going because they don't want to unify Korea under American influence. Is that the way you feel?"
- Yongmin answers: "Yeah, actually China is very important role to change North Korea I believe. Because China does not support the refugees in their country, so when North Koreans cross the river to China, when whenever they are caught, they get sent back to North Korea. Most of them are killed or sent to concentration camps."
- 5. Final question: If you describe this piece to your friend who called you asking what you were up to. And you tell them that you just saw an awareness piece on North Korea, how would you respond to that?
- Audience comment: "It was well done. I know people said it was too short. Personally, it was a good amount. It kept my attention every moment because every moment had something going on with it.

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