

I WAS ABOUT 3 FEET FROM THE BOX, 1 FOOT FROM KOH. ADA APPEARED ON THE SCREEN BECAUSE SHE WAS UNABLE TO COME IN PERSON FOR THE INTERVIEW. THE SCREEN IS ON THE BOX. THREE OF US WERE ALL PRESENT DURING THE ENTIRE CONVERSATION (A=FAN ADA WANG, K=SAN G HYUN KOH, P=TONGJI PHILIP QIAN)

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P: *The Box* has been static for a while...

K: I am not entirely allergic to the fact that it is dormant. I was only interested in the tension. The structure itself is fairly simple and straight-forward, but it is a form of solid and material physicality. Viewers can only acknowledge the significance after my description, and I tested by not offering any background information at first and then slowly revealing the collaborative process with Phil. It might be a personal moment of inertia, because I usually refrain from explaining too much about my works-in-progress. Since people always want to comprehend works as quickly as possible, my allergy to in-depth explanations initially and the subsequent elaborations pave the way for different interpretations. In a way, I hope to demand a neutral way of observation, and truth should only enter the discourse last-minute. Some people had thought this box was repurposed from a deserted pedestal, and my descriptions eventually turned it into a relatively more precious object. The code switch is present only because of the story.

P: Is this project still ongoing?

K: It is at the moment dormant because we are having a loose attitude. I enjoy my irresponsibility as much as my responsibility, and it kind of is important to stop and think in order to activate new forms of “working.” Although I can be excessively intellectual and claim that the temperature change in the studio is a form of mark-making, I think it is more critical to realize the process of collaborative making is rhythmic. Beyond the tension which is inherent to our concentrated timeline last spring, it is now entering a state of hibernation. I think of it as a way of addressing *kairos*, which offers a different perspective on time.

P: So I understand time plays a role on the box. It either indirectly reflects the perception of time, or sculpts the box as an active maker. But as you said, it is getting very intellectual.

K: The box has always been acknowledging time, and it is, indeed, a very intellectual thing to say. I do not want to analyze the metaphysical through *The Box*, because I want to receive the presence of *The Box* on simple terms. Similar to a way of unearthing tension, it also brings forth ideas regarding friendship. Ultimately, it is both respectful and respective, both boring and sacred.

P: Does *The Box* contain the environment of our studio?

K: It is just an object. It is just a box. The accompanying textual information, in my opinion, is part of the story, and it is not part of *The Box*. I respect the object quality of the box by not telling the overriding story first, and I whole-heartedly believe in the visual metaphor. The process of making is a metaphor for the tension, as I said, and it is a concrete action. It is also very physical, because the box only occupies a space of 2 by 2 by 2 feet. The box demands concentrated attention, and it has a story but does not constitute the story. Instead, it entails its only physical being, its object quality, and our daily energies. In the process, I attempt to feel not too emotional, and I do not object to the uncared-for surfaces which are messy. It is part of the flexibility of the change and control of the artists. Our sides are mutually exclusive, and they showcase a collective and separate identities at the same time. It is the “self and the other” for both Phil, me, and most importantly, *The Box*. The story and the narrative is indeed exceptional, but it is not part of the composition and does not contribute to a better box.

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ADA AND I TOOK TURNS TO BE THE INTERVIEWER, AND AS I FINISHED A BRIEF DISCUSSION ABOUT THE BOX, IT WAS ADA'S TURN TO LEAD THE CONVERSATION.

A: I am very interested in how your childhood experience plays a role in you identifying yourself as a sculptor. When did you become familiar with the medium?

K: My mother is a fine art teacher in middle school, and she brought me to exhibitions constantly. As your invitation reached me for the interview, I have been thinking about your question in your email regarding my childhood artworks. I always performed puppet shows as I was growing up, and they were for families during specific holidays in South Korea. My relatives would not even recognize my voices because I was always shy, and the puppet shows enabled me to hide behind the curtain. But I was the sole manager for the puppet shows in my family. For my art-making now, I kind of have a similar attitude. I am relatively indifferent whether I show works to others, but I do not want to totally abstain from it. As a kid, I want to become a veterinarian or a zoo-keeper, because I loved animals. I also wanted to be an artist. My art education started in high school, and I went to an art high school. Everybody was an art major, and as the time came to attend orientations, I was much more drawn to the tactility and the plasticity of clay. My mother, however, discouraged me from pursuing sculpture and suggested painting, but the painting and drawing classes dismissed me because I looked messy. Hence sculpture became my first choice. My high school art education paved the way for my entrance to Seoul National Arts University.

A: So your high school differs from a conventional public high school because of its emphasis on the arts. What about middle school? Did you have a specific interest in sculpture?

K: 80% of the art college students in Korea went to art high school, so it was basically the way to go. I was never too interested in talking about my middle school because it was very competitive. My family moved to a different neighborhood as I was in middle school and the educational environment was cut-throat. I was used to spending plenty of time in the playground in elementary school, but I had to do intense math among and others in middle school. Since I needed to gain admission to high school, I had to study. But making artworks was an extension from the traditional education.

A: Please pardon my confusion. Could you elaborate on your preparing for the high school entrance examination?

K: In order to get into art high school, I needed to take a test. It had two components, pencil drawing and watercolor. As we all know, contemporary art styles change quickly, but these tests are based on the fundamental. I had to practice. My works were thus not free. They lived in prison. And the path to improvement is clear, because it is relatively objective whether my drawn apple looks like an apple, for instance. So besides the middle school curriculum, I drew and painted every day to pass the art high school exam.

A: I am curious about your middle school art curriculum.

K: I do not remember much, because art education in middle school is not too important in Korea. It has the same position as music or gym classes, and they are not significant subjects to be tested to go to a conventional high school.

A: Most of your works I have seen are sculptures and installations. Are you interested in pursuing any two-dimensional media?

K: I remember two things, as you ask this question. Firstly, I found a crayon drawing as I visited Korea last time, and I made it when I was two. I drew eight abstract circles, and I still really like it. Since I always drew and painted to get into art high school, I guess I did make two-dimensional things. But they are not works. They are just ways to practice. As I was in the army, I made two books of drawing. I was really an art soldier because of my special duties of sculpting

statues of various people with clay among other materials. Because of my special skills, I did not need to do many other physical things in the army. I just drew an hour a day during my free time. I was basically close to living in prison because of a strict schedule, and I found freedom in my drawing journals.

A: Have you ever considered showing them? Or are your drawings for your own reference?

K: No. After the military, I was fairly proud of my drawings. I still remembered I did 51 projects in the journal. As I went to graduate school in Korea, I realized most of them were not profound enough to be transferred into three-dimensional sculptures. They do not offer significant ideas.

A: Very interesting. I thought you were not interested in any other media except for sculpture.

K: I do, but it is my disability to devote to sculpture. I made only sculptures for 15 years, because I was influenced by my mentor. He constantly said that one needs to make something huge, colorful, and plentiful. I thus practiced according to this axiom until it became an obsession. I was not able to do two-dimensional works because I cannot calmly draw or paint.

A: Disability of diffidence?

K: Both, I guess.

A: When you discussed your two notebooks from the army, I thought you remembered these details very vividly. Do you also remember what kinds of works you made in elementary school?

K: Not really, although my mother did say this summer I always painted color to paper to make color paper. I was painting them for my puppet shows.

A: I see. It does seem you were not making any “children drawings,” the ones kids make of houses, families... The ones with the sun on one of the top corners as well as the horizon. Was it due to your exposure to contemporary art? Was it because of your mother’s influence to elevate your understanding of art? Was your childhood drawing trying to capture your inner self or inner ability?

K: I do not know, but I think she was the sole influence for my art before high school.

A: What exactly did she teach in middle school?

K: She was a fine art teacher in middle school who taught basically everything.

A: Did you learn any specific skills from her? Drawing? Watercolor?

K: No. She did not teach me any skills.

A: Where did you receive your technical training then?

K: From private institutions which specialized in art education.

A: Since when?

K: Haha, I need to enter my traumatic era again.. It was most likely from the seventh grade. I did not really want to attend such lessons because I used to want to draw and paint before my mother enrolled me in such class. But afterwards, they became what I had to do. So for the next six years until I went to college, drawing was something I did in order to gain admission. They had a practical purpose. For my first sculpture class in college, the professor asked us to wear eye masks and to make clay models. I thought I was able to escape to freedom then. It is the perfect combination of freedom and difficulty.

A: I think I am receiving a lot of information here. Your remarks are exciting to me because I was not familiar with the specialized art curriculum with private institutions in Korea.

K: I acknowledge I made works with a purpose before college, whether it is to get into high school or into college. I think most of the South Koreans I met at RISD or in New York came from art high schools.

A: For your friends who did not want to go to art high school, did you see them draw in middle school?

K: We had 15 boys among 106 students in my class in high school, and among the guys, only 2 of us are still making art. And with my undergraduate class, only 5 are doing art among 21 people. It is a lot! Usually 10% of a graduating art class will pursue art after 10 years, 5% after 20 years, and only 1 or 0 after 30 years. Artists have to survive, and it is hard.

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ADA ALL OF A SUDDEN STARTED TO ADDRESS ME.

A: Phil, how is like for your art learning experience during childhood?

P: Well, I did not go to art schools at all. It was very coincidental that I started taking art classes in elementary school. My mother ran into her drawing teacher in middle school as we moved in to a new apartment complex, so she decided to send me to her weekend art classes. I was strictly focusing on drawing and watercolor, and of course we paid attention to an academy-like method of learning as we all drew from life. It is curious because my art teacher's husband is a college professor for art, and he always commented on how receptive I was to challenges. In other words, he told me I did not have to restrict myself to the bust drawings. He encouraged me to do something different. This mentality has sort of stuck with me, because I had thought I was ready for challenges. Even today as I make work, I attempt to locate my own ego and to pave the way for failure as a way to know when to start and when to stop.

A: But you were an art history major in college.

P: You are right. I was an art history major and subsequently a fellowship teacher for art. It was as I was leading my students to re-map Sol LeWitt's wall drawings that I realized I wanted to actively participate in the arts. I did not just want to be a commentator. So I was always a participant in the arts, but not as an artist. But now I am. I traveled to New York for a summer in 2014 just to take classes at NYU, and I was pushing a full-semester load of four classes into six weeks. And I did well. So I kind of passed the "test," and I thus decided to try being an artist.

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WE TOOK A TWENTY-MINUTE BREAK, AND I WAS VERY EAGER TO PRE-PLAN THE PROGRAM TO INTRODUCE THE PIÈCE DE RÉSISTANCE IN A SUBTLE WAY.

P: What do you think is the fundamental relationship between art and research for your art?

K: It is a very broad question, I am afraid. Most of the data I intend to translate are neither false nor true, because facts are not always perfectly true or false. I collect scientific data as facts and axioms due to my obsession and inquiry for science. I just have a thirst for science.

P: You offer science such a significant position for your art, yet you are not interested in being a scientist.

K: I used to, but not any more. On the other hand, even if I collect facts, I process them to be metaphors. That is why my art is dry and somewhat cold. I want to transfer the facts into artistic ideals. It is a logical fallacy because facts address the *it is*, and values acknowledge the *it ought to be*. It is thus a chemical reaction which is associated with my art, and it does not need to be logical. Contradictions are thus fine.

P: Do you think art-making is a form of research?

K: No, because art for me is either fabrication or experimentation. Fabrication does not need research because the ideal image is already present and concluded, and I only need to translate from my ideal the physical reality. Experimentation does not have pre-conceived outcomes. Generally, I do not want to use facts as parts of the work, and that is why I have been emphasizing the position for metaphors. Or, logical inconsistency.

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ADA JUMPED IN. IT REALLY SURPRISED ME. SHE DID NOT KNOW WHAT I WAS INTERESTED IN BEFOREHAND.

A: Do you think you can use art-making as an approach to do research?

K: Art-making as methodology or as scientific research?

A: I guess you could fault my previous question. Let me try again in another way to phrase it differently. Do you think it is possible to research by only making art which does not demand data collecting?

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KOH TOOK TIME TO COMPREHEND.

K: For my work, it is not possible. Serendipity does participate in my planning and speaks to me, but I do not believe in chance. I need to process information to create works.

A: In general, art-making is considered to be object-making, and research is a form of data collecting, and it includes literature review and even this interview, for instance. Do you feel that art-making as a practical method can be a means for research? I know my questions are getting esoteric, but research as art-making?

K: Research is a way to do things, but it is not the purpose.

A: It does not have to be a purpose.

K: Research is just a tool for me, because at the end, fabrication or craft is much more important than the unprocessed data, which are only the beginning. The process of making bread, for instance, is punctuated by the taste, not by the act of baking.

A: If I understand it correctly, and I may not, it is then not possible for you to make art without doing research?

K: For my work, it used to be that I had to include research. Without research, we can just make anything as art.

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I DECIDED TO RE-JOIN THE CONVERSATION.

P: And you do not think it is okay to call anything as art?

K: It is okay now.

A: More specifically, how do you see research? Do you think your research is by actively searching for data? Or do you think it is possible to do research by going inward, by trying to activate the unconscious and the outdated? Maybe by recollecting memories? In a way, you like to collect facts, but they do not have to be new. So it is possible to re-remember?

K: Remembering and forgetting are significant experiences we all have. So one could search inward or again for scientific facts for artworks.

A: Have you ever thought about showing the combination of your background research and the final object?

K: I do not show research. It is a problem I encounter constantly, because the audience want stories and contexts. They enjoy story-telling. In contrast, I only want to show work as work, not as information.

A: Are you interested in publishing any specific research you have done for art-making?

K: I am making decks of index cards for my latest project, and I have just started experimenting with the idea.

A: Some artists do not absolutely need research. They need themselves, their emotions, their physicality... The field of education demands research because we need evidence for corroboration. I find your standpoint regarding art and research very curious and refreshing.

K: I want to be inspirational. I am first inspired by facts, but I want to build upon my process and offer inspiration. My problem is that I am too stuck in the objective, which is facts and principles as proved truth.

A: What is the fact of *The Box*?

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KOH AND I LOOKED TO EACH OTHER. AND WE PAUSED FOR A SECOND.

P: Excellent question.

K: There is no research. That might be the ultimate attraction of the box for me. Most importantly for me is also the intellectual play. It needs to accompany scientific facts. And in *The Box*, I unearth such intellectual properties. Hence research might not be necessary to generate play for *The Box*.

A: But the proved does not equate the acknowledged. Theories are proved by studies, and they are not necessarily true for all. We can talk passionately all day about Karan Barad, and how the measurement style actually plays a role in the final research outcome. Koh's approach is to seek something already acknowledged, and it does not need to be proved. For example for your project of *Feces*. It does not have to be a strict diagram. Because for all your works, *Feces* required extensive research.

K: Research is to generate replications of different feces.

A: It is probably the most research-heavy work. I am privileged to have known you personally through Phil, but for the general audience, it is not always possible to locate such knowledge and facts in your work. It is just hard to identify.

K: It could just be a lesson for others.

A: Lesson for yourself?

K: Yes. My ambition is that my work is philosophical and educational materials for human beings. That is my personal task and mission. That is why I talk about the natural fallacy from the *is* to *ought to be*. I want to extract meanings and essence which can be connected to human values, like the Aesop fables.

A: I think I get your point, but I do not comprehend the contradiction that A. You would like to educate and B. you are not interested in sharing most of the research aspects of the work. How to educate then? Where is education? The audience might not get anything, you know.

K: That is the point.

P: But where is the location of education for you?

K: My work has no educational function at all. They cannot be comprehended by the visual.

A: I do not understand.

K: It is not entirely rational. I do not always make something with a clear purpose.

A: My major confusion is how can your work entails educational components but has no inherent educational function?

K: I create artworks which are inscrutable in a way. I try to hide myself. I try not to be exposed. Communication is risky. Art cannot be understood by language, and the visual is a language. Art does not have value after completion.

P: So the box is educating?

K: No. It is hiding.

WE ALL LAUGHED, AND CALLED IT A DAY.

The idea of research indicates an intention to look to the past for inspirations for new material arrangements. The incorporation of the arts, on the other hand, instills in the act of searching a potential to be forward-thinking. It is an attempt to capture the unknown, so contemporary frameworks need to be constructed to achieve this aspiration. Ironically, the risk seems to be lower, because arts-based research could live under the omnipotent and all-encompassing umbrella of art. The more significant question to pose, then, is how concrete such research inquiries can be.

*The Box* project started as I decided to become a trickster with my artistic partner. We were interested in a push-and-pull dynamic in the construction of a simple modernist box. Initially, *The Box* was quite lively, transcending geographical limits of site-specificity of individual artist studios because it lived in multiple locations. Moreover, it created a psychological distance between us due to the intention to skirt explanations. At the end, *The Box* became such a romantic item in the studio. Its infinity was not only over-rated but controlled by us as well, which reflected back to our original tasks: I would be responsible for subtracting materials from *The Box*, and Koh would be in charge of the addition. After three months of intense labor, we sort of saw the end. I would slowly carve away all of my sides, and he would bury the rest of the structure in the ground. In a way, I would reach the ultimate state of subtraction, which is the nothingness, and he would have the world as his pedestal, achieving the totality of addition.

Such excitement did not last long for us at all. Although it is possible we still clung both emotionally and physically to the actual object and thus did not want to let go, the final moment of this box should not be this linearly logical. In other words, should this plan become the final resolution, it would introduce such a powerful final episode that it would neutralize everything we have hitherto managed in the process. Therefore, I took the initiative to use different media to address the same topics broached by *The Box*.

Prior to settling on this interview project, I attempted to use the medium of photography to eternalize the transient nature of this object. I intended to take extremely zoomed-in shots of the details on the surface of the box, introducing a different visual framework of the microscopic and thus re-inventing the context. This method would be highly foreseeable, because I would be taking pictures for an audience who would not be familiar with *The Box*. However, that I maintained residence with *The Box* betrayed my heightened understanding of *The Box*, and these photos would not be capable of reciprocally addressing our relationship with it. I wanted to embrace more risks, and have decided to extend an invitation for an interview to both Koh, the collaborator, and Ada, who was at the moment researching on the position of early-childhood education for artists.

I knew before the interview I had to be secretive about my genuine intention to investigate arts-based research. I would like to unarm people so that surprising textures of the conversations could surface. I wanted to start from a basic conversation on the formal qualities of *The Box* and then let Ada take the lead. I would then, after a break, come back and pose the more trenchant questions regarding the tenuous relationship between research and art, if any. The diversity of voices and perspectives, I assume, would contribute to a robust discussion. After all, our interview questions would serve as

loose frameworks which could capably allude to the real pursuit. In this sense, not directly addressing the research topics would further the quest to question, thus elucidating the contextual and the vicarious.

The interview proved to be fruitful. For the first part of the interview as I was posing questions regarding *The Box*, I was very rigorous and my questions were thus contained. Conversations were largely theoretical, and they bespoke resolute artistic intentions. The section Ada led was very thought-provoking for me, because it attested to my position as a editor instead of a translator. My viewpoints were acknowledged and largely eliminated so as not to contaminate those of the other two. The final episode was nothing but exhilarating thanks to the three-way exchange, and the essence existed largely in situ. Certain ideas were fetishized and then unfetishized, but we did not return to the same place. The tour of this interview would only be complete if we ended up having the urge to stand in a different place and to assume other perspectives. Perhaps we were all trying to ventriloquize, exposing ourselves with the remarks of others. Yet we did it with craft.

Arts-based research, in order to realize its maximal potential, needs to be multitudinous in medium, trustable in content, and ambiguous in conclusion. It has to be multitudinous because the researchers need to speculate about the locations of the unknown, as well as the knowledge of ignorance. It also should be trustable, because it is only with the heightened emotions and the concomitant performative nature that we could be taken on the collective journeys to places less-explored. Finally, arts-based research also demands the necessity of ambiguity, since it is significant to acknowledge that the final outcomes might be based on the aleatory and the ephemeral. On the one hand, arts-based research is vulnerable, because it seeks to explicate and contextualize the elusive and the ineffable. On the other hand, even if the research findings associated with arts-based research are not tangibly profound, they will at least reflect on the habits of conventional research: is rigidity always the very premise for an atmosphere of dialogue and argument?

Should *The Box* ever deteriorate over time, this discussion is a memorial of the once-upon-a-time.

(Tongji Philip Qian, Providence, RI, 2019)