

## Post-Corona Art is Glimpsed -in Koo Jahyun's Works

By Kai Hong, Ph.D. May 4, 2020

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According to New York Times report on May 4th, the Trump administration is privately predicting the daily coronavirus death toll will almost double over the next month, with new infections increasing from 25,000 per day to 200,000. The Times said, "The administration expects daily deaths to increase to about 3,000 by June 1 from about 1,750 now."<sup>1)</sup> The spread started out in China early this January, although there is an indication that it might emerged already in November 2019 and it reached South Korea by the end of January 2020, making all of South Korea, especially the city of Daegu a war zone for more than three months but now it has somewhat subsided. In the meantime, it's spread to Italy first, then to Spain, France and engulfing the entire European continent, without an exception, eventually lockingdown the whole continent. When it reached the shores of the United States perhaps a couple of weeks later, the corona virus pandemic reached a new apogee, especially in New York, the very power center of the globalized modern civilization. Since then, the entire world has been engulfed in this coronavirus induced crisis, the whole world has been locked down, keeping nearly all the peoples in all the countries quarantined inside their homes. (Is this not what Max Weber famously predicted -namely, the fate of modern men and women of 'modern' civilization imprisoned in 'iron cages'?)

Ironically, when the normalities of the civilized world failed to function, the hitherto hidden inner contradictions immanent in the very foundation, spiritual, moral and otherwise, of modern civilization came to the fore -namely, the barbarity, brutality, hypocrisy (of 'reason') and nihilism. Sooner or later, when the current coronavirus-induced world crisis is over in some fashion or some other; there's bound to be serious rethinking on the current course of modernity and a radical Re-Configuration of Modern Civilization will be called for, for the first time, in all seriousness. For, without such a Re-Configuration, 'self-destruction' will be the only certain destiny for modern men and women.

Even before the current crisis of modern civilization, which is nothing other than a foundational crisis, there's been thoughtful far-seeing men and women who warned against the dark sides of modern civilization in its march straight into the teeth of the vilest kind of nihilism and self-destruction. William Morris, the founding member and a leader of the "Art and Craft Movement" of the late 19th century is one such early critics of modern industrial civilization. England was the first bona-fide industrial society in the world history. More than a century prior to the current coronavirus pandemic, the 19th century English critics such as Morris, Blake and others already saw the same barbaric face of modern civilization of the 21st century. They saw the inevitable alienation and dehumanization of modern men and women in the course persistent industrialization and technological-enframing of the whole of nature (earth). Morris saw the principal reason for dehumanization of modern man into a soulless idol-worshipper of material goods only in the loss and replacement of handicraft production by industrial-mechanical production methods for mass production of the goods. In that process, the spirit of mastercraftsmanship and respect for the sacred nature of man's bodily labor. In such industrial production processes, nowhere can be found any sense of ontologically responsive relationship can be formed with any existing things (including the life forms and not just those inert); instead, any and everything in nature has only a potential use as a raw material for useful industrial production; when not, they are just useless disposable waste matters to be dumped somewhere. Notice the way Corona-deaths in New York City were buried in mass graves in an uninhabited Island off the coast of Bronx Borough of New York City; those deads are treated on the par with the mad-cow virus-infected farm animals slaughtered and dumped into a hole (mass grave) as disposable wastes. What is premised in such a collective burial in mass graves of human deads is that their humanity have not been respected, when alive or when dead. Is this not the barbaric side that are immanent to the very industrialism of modern civilization? So, modern men and women treat one another as soulless industrial goods consumers.

In order to revive deadend souls of the modern men and women of modern industrial civilization-cum-consumer societies; Morris and his colleagues called for New Art in which the craftsmanship is revived, for, there's no soulless craftsmanship. Hence, the moniker, "Art and Craft Movement" which was influential at least until into the 1920s, Bauhaus having also been strongly influenced by the main ideas and vision of this English movement. It didn't succeed to remake modern civilization or redirect the evolution of the modern/avant-garde arts. However, it's not because their diagnoses of the ills of modern civilization was wrong. They were far-sighted and correct; it was only that theirs were unseasonal or untimely. Now, some 120 years later, with the coronavirus-induced crisis of modern civilization, it is high time that we revisit their ideas and learn from their historical failures and begin again to Re-Configure modern civilization and also modern/contemporary arts in so doing. In short, it's high time that we think "Post-Corona" epoch.

Art is going to play the single most important historical role in the Re-Configuration of Modern Civilization. Originally, it was actually Art, not politics, which opened a new historical horizon for a people. But it is not going to be any 'art' that passes by that name, especially the ones which are called 'contemporary arts' or 'postmodern arts'. It's the Art that has recovered its 'original' meaning of 'Art' as Heidegger and Agamben, following Heidegger, have emphasized. Notice that Heidegger's emphasis on 'originality' has nothing to do with the common-place meaning of avant-garde version of artificial 'originality'; on the contrary and in a fascinating way, Heidegger's 'originality' resonate with the ancient Northeast Asian 'Seon-ga' or 'Doh-ga' idea of the 'originality' or the 'the primal state' or 'returning to the state of oneness with Dao'. It doesn't temporal return back to the ancient origin, but to the state of 'oneness with the sky' (in literal translation). In that state of oneness with Dao, is it possible to bring forth works of art in which the ontological mood of the spirit and soul permeate through. In other words, the kind of art works in which the soul makes its ontological presence in the similar way a mountain range or a land area has its own '山勢shan-she' or '地勢ji-she' which can only be translated as the mountain's peculiar ontological mood. If the Renaissance of the Ancient Greek Spiritual culture enabled the birth and development of Modern Western Civilization; the renaissance of the forgotten ancient Northeast Asian spiritual culture will play the similar role in the Post-Corona era Re-Configuration of the Western European version of modern civilization.

## [2] Koo Jahyun as a Post-Corona Artist

Koo Jahyun is one of rare few Master Craftsman in Korean Print-making field. He didn't choose to go to Paris or New York, as most of his Korean contemporaries had done in early 1980s in order to further his print-making studies. (There are historical reasons for this, though this is not the place to go into.) Only in Japan, the idea of "Meister" (Magister, as in Magister Ludi in Hermann Hesse's novel by the same name) remained. Koo became a Meister in the craft of Print-making and therefor also a creative Artist of Print-Making. This requires explanation: A Meister in a Craft doesn't simply mean just a highly skilled technician. If Michelangelo was just a highly skilled stone mason, he would not have become a great sculptor as to have become the creator of the great masterpiece "David". Michelangelo was in fact a Meister Stone Mason in the sense of having attained the ability to lose himself --that is, in total absorption, while working on his Marble Sculpture, totally in attunement with the very matter he is working on. In that sense, a Meister is the one who is capable of entering into the relationship of "oneness with his marble" in the case of Michelangelo or "oneness with his artistic motif in the case of Cezanne, the mountain motif" in his Mt. Saint Victoire Paintings." Meisters are in this sense the "enlightened ones" who is capable of interfacing with cosmic forces and capturing the 'infinite' of the cosmic forces within the 'finite' of the artist's canvas to paraphrase Gilles Deleue's modernism (which is very different and therefore alternative to Greenberg-Fried's version which has dominated the modernist discourses in Post-WWII painting). I'm claiming that Koo Jahyun is just this kind of a Meister in the Craft of Printing and at the same time in the Printing Art. (Here I am making a very subtle point which can be easily missed. There just is no straightforward word-for-word, concept-for-concept translation across different philosophical paradigms of the West and the East.)

In Ancient Greece, Artists were feared for having uncommon or abnormal abilities which normal men do not possess; they were thought to have been stricken by “divine madness” (which is none other than Korean shamanic concept of “divine illness or ‘shinbyong 신병’ or ‘shinmyong nada’ 신명나면). While stricken by “divine madness” through utterly losing oneself (몰아 molah) an artist becomes a ‘body without organs’ (as the dynamic circulation system of molecular-vector particles, forming a micro-universe) to borrow Deleuze’s concept which interface with the rest of the universe at molecular level as molecular-dynamic systems, vibratory system to other vibratory systems across and at different hierarchies of themselves. Frankly, more than two thousand years ahead of Deleuze, Oriental thinkers were talking about “body-without-organ” in their conception of human body as Qi-energy circulating micro-cosmos (소우주). In that strict sense, only a Meister Craftsman can become a ‘genuine’ artist in the ‘original’ sense of the term ‘artist’ (stricken by divine madness) and create works of art in which the ontological truth (of the very materiality of this or that particular material) can be revealed in all their ontological mood and splendor. I think Koo Jahyun does exactly this in his Gold-leaf collage on Tempera paintings, for example. And, furthermore, this is where Koo Jahyun differs, in a decisive way, from Yves Klein’s seemingly similar Gold-leaf-laden monochrome paintings. Let me explain:

In early 1960s, Martin Heidegger and Ernesto Chillida collaborated on a book, “Space and Art” in which Chillida came with an idea of Lithocollage. On the flat surface of his Lithographic Print, he placed very thin paper cut-outs in some simple graphic designs. These paper cut-outs were as thin as 0.001 mm. However thin, at the molecular-particular level, the thin paper-cut-outs are invisible dynamic system of incessantly moving molecules, creating vibrating energy waves and hence are SUSCEPTIBLE to gravitational forces, however miniscule. It can be compared to (sculptural) reliefs with its own miniscule kind of ‘spaces’ generated; it is a space at molar level, yet it enables matters emerge in their own molar-kind of ontological moods. I say, likewise with Koo Jahyun’s gold-leaf on tempera. 0.001 mm gold leaf collages on tempera requires utmost skilled Mesitercraftsmanship, as gold-leaves are notoriously fragile and temperamental, easily scattered in particular dispersions, requiring total absorption of the Meister Craftsman whose hand and mind are guided solely by unconscious intuition -i.e., when and only when the Meister is ONE WITH the matier of the gold leaves (물심합일 in the sense of 격물이치).

In contradistinction to what Koo Jahyun does, Yves Klein’s gold leaf monochrome paintings are altogether different kinds of artistic species. Klein’s is only to meet the demands of Modernist Aesthetic standards which Greenberg and Fried had set, arbitrarily as it were. While abiding by the modernist ontological commitment to the given ontological conditions of his Painterly medium of canvas which FLAT and BOUNDED usually in a rectangular shapes. Whether in blue or in gold colors, Klein’s is a modernist painting with only a limited life-span, useful even only within the historical span of modernist painterly evolution whose evolutionary dynamic preset by Greenberg-Friedman modernist problematics. That is why Klein’s type of Monochrome or Korean epigone are incapable of becoming Post-Corona Art.

They are merely the art works understood within the discursive frame of commodity aesthetics of post-modern Capitalism.

1) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/04/us/coronavirus-live-updates.html>

2) Deleuzian notion of Modernism, see <Art as Abstract Machine> by Stephen Zepke