

Zones of seeing: Artistic, touristic and digital images of the DMZ

Beccy Kennedy, Manchester School of Art

Abstract

The article examines visual elements of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) by considering its spatial and political uniqueness and its attraction for artists and tourists. The case study is contextualized in relation to a research project – ‘Imaging the DMZ’ – which included a visit to the ‘Real DMZ’ art project by Samuso Art Space (2012), which took place within the DMZ itself. The investigation into the ways that the DMZ has been imaged also includes observations of key artworks and conversations with contemporary artists from South Korea who visualize the DMZ, as well as analysis of online images of the area. The article argues that the DMZ’s ambiguous, yet politically divisive, ontology is what makes it distinctive and appealing to the imagination of tourists, the media and artists, but that the latter may be best placed to highlight and challenge some of the more static, binary representations of the DMZ and of the two Koreas that circulate within the (post) digital world.

Keywords

borders

contemporary Korean art

dark tourism

DMZ

hyperreality

territory

Introduction

The division of Korea demarcates two national domains, digitally as well as geopolitically. South Korea has a large online community and the Internet has been an important platform for the promotion of Korean artworks. Meanwhile, North Korea still has no legal access to the World Wide Web, and Communist propaganda artists within this nation use pre-digital means, such as billboards, to display aspects of visual culture. South Korean contemporary artists have sought a central place within the global art scene, with many, over the past ten years, choosing to study and practise their professions in Europe and the USA. This article examines some of the ways in which the 160-mile-long and 2.5-mile-wide Korean Demilitarized Zone (the DMZ) between North and South Korea, which stretches across the 38th parallel, has been imaged since it was opened as a South Korean tourist venture. By imaging I refer to the kinds of images of the DMZ produced for consumption in virtual (digital/online) and real (gallery/studio/outdoor) spaces, with particular focus on artistic and photographic depictions of the area. I also consider how artists, as well as bloggers and tourists or tour guides, image the DMZ more cognitively as an imagined space or place and as a signifier of conflict, but also of potential unity. Arguably, the turbulent and intrinsic ideological binarity of the zone is where fear meets hope and where the global normative ‘self’ – represented by the Capitalist West – meets the contrasting abnormal ‘other’ – represented by North Korea and Socialism. This political binary, paired with the DMZ’s unique physical in-betweenness, is what attracts artists and visitors alike.

By digital imaging I mean the ‘digital capture and production’ (Galer and Horvat 2005: viii) of objects, whether they are processed through analogue methods and then disseminated through digital means (e.g., via social media) or captured on a digital camera and imaged in a non-digital format. By digital, or rather post-digital, I highlight the presence – or omnipresence – of digital interventions in relation to how we perceive objects and places through various lenses. The way that the DMZ is imaged by artists, tour guides, tourists and others ultimately connects to their experience of it as a physical place. However, as a contested territory the DMZ is not available to the social or communal ‘everyday’ pursuits of people living inside a nation state. Accordingly, it cannot be subject to the same sorts of imaging, whether in terms of how it is produced (or censored) or how it is imagined. This article highlights some of the recurring visual methods and concepts that artists explore in relation to the uncommon, physical (non)place of the DMZ, while referring to ways in which tour operators and digital bloggers highlight visual and experiential aspects of the area. The analysis interrogates the visual and physical allure of the place, focusing on its contested and divided ontology.

Methodology for ‘Imaging The DMZ’ research project

A continued scholarly and curatorial interest in Korea’s divided history and its contemporary art scene (see Kennedy 2009; Jung and Kennedy 2013), along with an increasing awareness of the fascination of the DMZ – and other post-conflict zones – among tourists, encouraged funding to be sought and secured for a short research project around the imaging of the DMZ (Manchester Metropolitan University Research Accelerator Grant, 2012–2013). Despite people’s fascination with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – often referred to as a hermit nation – and with increasing numbers of South Korean and international tourists

visiting the DMZ every year, little research and no comprehensive written analyses pertaining to Visual Culture or Art History have explored the visuality of the area, although there are several key texts on North Korean culture, propaganda art and the international political significance of images of North Korea (Shim and Nabers 2011; Shim 2013). On the other hand, researchers *have* examined the motivations for, and development of international and local tourism to the DMZ. There are no official records of the number of tourists to the DMZ held by the Korea Tourism Organisation (The Associated Press, NBC News 2012), but numerous tour companies take tourists to parts of the DMZ daily, while international tourist visits to South Korea have risen steadily for 50 years (Korean Tourism Organisation accessed n.d.). As a flourishing ecosystem, the region has also attracted research by environmental scientists.

Clearly, the DMZ possesses an ocular dimension that makes it worth visiting (and seeing). The only study that specifically focuses on the visuality of the DMZ is Hunter's (2013). This examined 2202 images of the DMZ accessed via the Google and Naver search engines and considered how the incidence of imaged objects correlated with different types of tourism, such as 'Border Tourism'. The visual properties of the DMZ are inextricably tied to how it is encountered as a tourist construct because this is the only way in which it can be seen by global citizens *including* artists (except for the soldiers, officials and tour guides who work there). The research into the visualization of the DMZ, therefore, examines images of the DMZ in connection to touristic pursuits.

The 'Imaging the DMZ' research project concentrated on the ways in which the DMZ, or the issue of divided Korea, is imaged by South Korean artists and culture makers in relation to the politicized motivations of the image-makers. This search for DMZ-focused artworks entailed the following: a structured visit to the 2012 Gwangju Biennial (including an interview with the artistic director, Youngwoo Lee, on 7 September 2012); trips to key

contemporary art galleries in the capital of Seoul; the implementation of interviews with relevant artists and curators, including Sunjung Kim, who co-curated the 2012 Gwangju Biennial, as well as the ‘Real DMZ’ exhibition, and an interview with a North Korean Human Rights organization manager, Eunyong Kim (14 September 2014). The main focus of the visit, however, involved visiting the ground-breaking and now annually occurring ‘Real DMZ’ arts project, a curated exhibition installed within a visitable area of the DMZ, hosted by Seoul’s Samuso Art Space. The continuing aim of the ‘Imaging the DMZ’ research is to explore the visual appeal of DMZs to tourists and to discover why we want to look at them. (The research also encompasses a later visit to the moribund Vietnamese DMZ, but space does not permit this to be discussed here).

The art-historically engaged strand of debate within this article argues that digitalization, sometimes combined with diasporic movement, has enabled certain South Korean artists to engage constructively with divided Korea and with the presence of the DMZ. In addition to analyses of the ‘Real DMZ’ art project and online touristic images of the DMZ, I use case studies of two South Korean artists who have lived abroad and one diasporic North Korean artist to consider how transnational opportunities and challenges – working in relation to (post)digital forms of input and output – have contributed towards the global imaging of the DMZ. The world (apart from North Korea) is now able to engage with the space of the DMZ at least visually, via the Internet. What Korean artists provide is a more conceptual (even moral), metaphorical and historical interpretation of this border. Such artworks envision notions of ‘border’, ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘territory’ within a ‘global’, (post)digital domain.

Divided terrains amongst united domains: The digital DMZ

The topic of Korea's fraught, divided history is a far more sensitive issue for Korean citizens, as well as for potential Korean exhibition sponsors, than it is for overseas citizens and artists visiting from outside. Yet, increasingly the global public is interested in the DMZ and the political plight of the two Koreas, whether their access to it is remote, via media coverage from televisual and online news and entertainment sources, or through the visitation of art exhibitions about North Korea, South Korea or the DMZ. The fascination with the DMZ stems partly from its role as an imagined gateway to North Korea's isolated society with its horrific gulags and food shortages, as the last active example of Stalinist-style communism. At the same time, while South Korea has managed to uphold a 60-year ceasefire, the conditions that underpinned the Korean War have not been resolved. If anything, the threat of it resuming has intensified with the appointment of Kim Jung Un. The demilitarized zone that divides the two nations bubbles with these tensions. Arguably, this is what makes this non-place an attractive form of Border Tourism, a potential 'dark tourist' (Foley and Lennon 2000) destination and a site for artistic engagement.

Knowledge or second-hand experiences of the DMZ would have been limited prior to digitalization because of its lack of place-ness. Moreover, networks of artists, curators, researchers and the public would be less fluid, both virtually and physically. Our ability to engage with the DMZ, as art viewers or as tourists, is possible because of the digital, communicative conditions in which we now find ourselves. These conditions arguably work to promote – with the potential to also antagonize – not just cultural and international relations (Shim 2013) between individuals and organizations but also a heightened political awareness of the situation between North and South Korea.

Digitalization has become so endemic that we no longer *need* to classify the world as digital. Ascott (2000: 1) suggests that we are already living an 'edge-life' – an existence where the digital and the physical are constantly intersecting, obscuring our online and

offline actions and identities. Indeed, perhaps we are now post-digital actors. When modernism reached its zenith, many western thinkers began to use the notion of the postmodern. Like modernism, which became embedded in social, pedagogical and physical structures in the western – and to some extent the southern – world – digitalization underpins everything we do, from finding and booking a flight, to ordering food, and to talking to someone on a different continent. But as with the postmodern, does the idea of the ‘post-digital’ suggest that digitalization can achieve no more? Alternatively, does this term imply an irreversible omnipresence? Significantly, postmodernism, as a trope, is now usually dismissed as being the signifier for the end of originality. The relevance of the post-digital to art and art-making arises from its surreptitious ability to alter the ways we access images in our everyday lives, from photographs of current conflicts to captures of Picasso paintings at MOMA. Using key terms on search engines or electronic databases, curators can search for artists, but they can also communicate with these artists instantly. The casual art critic or tourist can also tell the world what they think *about* the world of art or travel, through blogging and social media.

As a nation that developed rapidly in the second half of the twentieth century, under a US-backed, accelerated capitalist system, South Korea has one of the largest online digital communities in the world. It also has a successful manufacturing industry for the production of digital goods through companies such as Daewoo, LG and Samsung. Ahonen and O’Reilly encapsulated South Korea’s aptitude towards getting online in their 2008 book on Digital Korea:

a country where every household Internet connection has already been upgraded to broadband; where 100 mbit/s speeds are already sold and gigabit speeds already

coming; where every phone sold is a cameraphone; where three out of every four mobile subscriptions is a 3G connection; where cars and PCs and mobile phones now ship with in-built digital TVs; where 42% of the population maintain a blogsite...

(2007, book description)

By contrast, the 'hermit' North Korea has limited and monitored Internet access, and its stringent communist government disables citizens' access to the World Wide Web for fear they may become indoctrinated by capitalist ideology and tempted by consumerism. South Korean artists are well connected to the art world through the Internet, whereas North Korean artists have little concept of what 'the world' itself constitutes and being online is not a part of their everyday lives. North Koreans cannot unite with their estranged South Korean relatives, nor with the more Liberal thinkers of the rest of the world. Yet, increasingly, the rest of the world gazes upon them, through limited media coverage in documentaries or through international sports events and by accessing websites and blogs with titles such as 'Kim Jong Un Looking at Things' (<http://kimjongunlookingatthings.tumblr.com/>).

Navigating the darkness: Post-conflict or pre-apocalypse?

Foley and Lennon (2000) and Stone (2006) cite global communication technology as a reason for the prevalence of 'dark tourism' and its dissemination for tourists, as it works to 'instantly report macabre and death-related events and, subsequently, repeat them *ad infinitum* (hence compression of time and space)' (Stone 2006: 149), while such technologies 'are inherent in both the events which are associated with a *dark tourism* product and are present in the representation of the events for visitors at the site itself' (Foley and Lennon 2000: 16).

Academic- and cult-based dialogues on niche tourist destinations have been activated and consolidated via online forums and websites, such as www.dark-tourism.org. Through outputs such as travel blogs we are able to sight-see UNESCO heritage attractions without taking a trip to the library, let alone to the destinations themselves. There are numerous blogs and social media sites containing photographs of soldiers, barbed wire fences and watchtowers taken from the southern side and sometimes the northern side of the demarcation line within the DMZ. Tourists book visits through tour operators online, then arrive at the sites to witness the space as a reality, although its very lack of everyday realness is one of the factors to which they are attracted. As Hunter's content analysis into 2202 online visual images of the Korean DMZ indicates, tourist visitors are as complicit as the tour suppliers in producing images of the DMZ as a place of dark tourism. This digital procedure of visual, public outputting is constantly evolving, and as Hunter explains '[r]epresentations are produced, uploaded or shared by any number of tourism stakeholders, including the visitors who are increasingly active in or responsible for the formation and manipulation of the online destination image' (Hunter 2013: 4).

Tourism is often associated with the visitation of historical sites or of thriving environments of amusement or pleasure. Visits to the DMZ may, on first consideration, appear not to satisfy either of these pull factors. Smith's term 'dark conflict sites' (1998) is used to refer to historical and memorial sites of death and tragedy, but as Thorpe (2012) recently suggested 'the DMZ is still not a historical site'. The site is not post-war because the Korean War never ended. There is a history of conflict inscribed within the place but its purpose – to keep an (un)military boundary between the two Koreas – is a current affair. When we visit this border we are also encouraged to contemplate the Cold War, the Korean

War and the traumas surrounding exiled and divided Korean citizens. But we cannot leave the site and just put away these considerations as fragments of history because they are contingent both on past actions and on those of the present and the future. It is also a future that could affect the rest of the globe, not just the two Koreas. It connects to what has been described as ‘fear and hope’ tourism, which has been associated with the Israel and Palestine borders (Hunter 2013: 3). For dark tourists, however, the fear element may be more of a pull than its associated element of hope. If the DMZ is a place of portent, its attractiveness becomes one of an impending apocalypse in not knowing where the two Koreas’ nuclear capacities might take us, but at the same time being aware that the heart of this potential apocalypse would likely be triggered in this precise place. In this sense, the DMZ is to war tourists what Mount Zion is to Christian Zionists who anticipate the second coming, only its portent has a more empirical potentiality. It is an imagined possibility.

Nevertheless, the potential for apocalyptic events also promises the possibility of a utopia. Thus, for some South (and North) Koreans, the DMZ signals the potential of a united Korea but also the imaginary enticement of a post-nuclear world. If tourists do desire a kind of post-apocalyptic naturalism this is also visually and physically corroborated by the DMZ’s special eco-system (see, e.g. Brady 2008), one that is comparable to Chernobyl’s. Where humans vacate, nature thrives. Then humans return, in tour buses.

Visualizing the DMZ for ‘Real’

The ‘Real DMZ’ project was curated by the Seoul-based Samuso art space under the Directorship of Sunjung Kim. In fact, eleven international artists were invited to offer site-specific installations. The exhibition project provided a rare opportunity for South Korean artists, as well as for other international artists and tourist visitors, to actively image the DMZ

in situ. Unlike North Korean propaganda artists, South Korea – post democratization – does not restrict or forbid artists from creating artworks that respond to the divided Korea. Nevertheless, in an interview in 2012, Kim revealed that few commercial sponsors or state funders were keen to fund the exhibition. Imaging the DMZ is not a particularly easy subject for the South Korean public to digest. In a globalized world, the longing to visit the dark attraction of the DMZ is being widely satisfied, but its target audience is largely non-Korean. Even so the DMZ remains an important site for the interrogation of historical and impending politics, especially for younger South Koreans who are only vaguely aware of the Korean War and its former effects on their families. No doubt this is why projects such as ‘The Real DMZ’ and the more recent, smaller-scale 14th DMZ International Art Festival, directed by Myung Hwan Lee, work to make visible this little seen geographical terrain and the obscure national history it represents.

Whether artist or tourist, and as an aspect of its ‘dark tourist’ character, visiting the DMZ offers both the familiar kinds of touristic experience as those discussed in Edensor’s (1998) ethnography of the Taj Mahal – the ‘gazing and walking’ – but also certain risks. For example, at both the Taj Majal and the DMZ, the tour guides ensure that all tourists see those attractions that have been deemed essential viewing within the allocated time frame. However, if a tourist misses a tour bus back to the hotel from the Taj Mahal they can find another means of transport or even a nearby place in which to stay. Neither is possible in the case of the DMZ. In addition, such a situation would place them in obvious danger of meeting some form of military trouble from either side of the demarcation line. Even more so if the tour guide held their passport and they were then identified as a defector or as a protester, although perhaps the threat of such a circumstance adds dark glamour to the tour.

A further example is private photography, the very activity of visualizing the ‘real’ DMZ. Taking photographs of key landmarks, which lie on the South Korean side of the

DMZ, is encouraged. However, aiming the camera towards the North Korean side is forbidden by certain laws in South Korea (see Games for Change 2014). Yet, if the visitor snaps the shutter before they are reprimanded by tour guides – as was the case when I took a photograph of the North Korean landscape visible from the Cheorwon Peace Observatory (see Figure 1) – the camera is unlikely to be confiscated. By contrast, tourists who take undirected photographs in North Korea are reportedly not met with such leniency (see Koryo Group n.d.), which provides visitors, who are inclined towards risk taking, a supplementary thrill. Photographs of North Korea – viewed from across the DMZ – posted on blogs and via social media sites are, therefore, not always legitimate ways of seeing the nation.

Insert Image 1:

Figure 1: View of North Korea from the Cherwon Peace Observatory, snapped before being asked to stop, 2012. Author's own photograph.

The motivations for tourist visits to the Korean, the Vietnamese and the Cypriot DMZs have been investigated recently by academics working in Tourism Studies (e.g., Çaykent [2010]; Thi Le and Pearce [2011]). It proves difficult to ascertain the point at which the visual pull of such places out-performs the other types of sensual experiences anticipated or experienced. However, as a product ripe for consuming, within a post-Fordist, post-digital and postmodern era, the DMZ is inevitably experienced as a virtual entity. Even the tourist destination itself is cordoned and signposted and the capacity of the construct to stimulate the imagination is image focused. Buzinde et al. – referencing Urry (1990) – propose that ‘Tourism is, therefore, a collection of idealized images, which circumscribe the boundaries of experience and essentially direct the tourist gaze’ (2006: 712). Yet, in the case of the DMZ, the idealization tends to be based upon notions, supported by images, of North Korea as a

negative inversion of South Korea (and the West), as a feared yet thrilling ‘other’. After studying the ideological impact of photographs that have been used in the media to represent North Korea, Shim and Nabers asserted that ‘[...] photos are emblematic of the often-stereotypical ways in which North Korea is looked at, thus establishing boundaries and difference... [sic]. The use of images marks North Korea in particular ways, which separate “them” from “us”’ (2011: 12).

Conspicuous images of the Korean DMZ by artists from both sides of the 38th Parallel and from the Diaspora Beyond: Yongbaek Lee, Sea Hyun Lee, The Real DMZ and Chun Hyök Kang

Prior to the ‘Real DMZ’ project of summer 2012, several internationally renowned Korean artists had pictured the DMZ in their artworks; these include Atta Kim’s ‘On Air DMZ’ series of extended exposure photographs of the lush region, Sang Youp Lee’s more dramatized photographic series and the aforementioned artworks by Sea-hyun Lee and Yongbaek Lee. Both the Lees – who exhibited together in 2010 at ‘Enormous Eyes Forbidden Fruit’ in Mumbai – work in mixed media, although Yongbaek Lee is particularly interested in the digital. They have both lived and exhibited in Europe and both were born in the late 1960s under South Korea’s military dictatorship, which inhibited freedom of thought and expression in relation to the North–South divide and its quest to realize capitalism. The Lees have seen the transition to a democratized, postmodern, late capitalist society in Korea, experiencing the benefits of global movement and digital art dissemination.

Yongbaek Lee – who represented the Korean pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale – explores the effects and fluidity of virtual reality in relation to the individual/ego in his artworks, drawing from Arthur Kroker’s concept of ‘liquid ego’. In his *Angel-Soldier* video

installation he creates what could be described as a simulated space where war and peace paradoxically unite; a soldier camouflaged in flower print uniform walks back and forth against a wall of flowers to the soundtrack of natural outdoor noises. The presence of the soldier is made visible by the movement because it is a time-based installation. The artwork uses metaphors of peace – flowers and natural sounds – counterposed against indices of war – a uniformed soldier, a camouflaged setting, invoking tension in the potential for conflict. The action of war is nearly always concerned with the ideology of territory (see, e.g., Cohen and Gilbert 2008; Senese and Vasquez 2008), of the desire to obtain an area where one intends to belong. Lee appears to capture the clash of interests that surround the DMZ. It is a place that only exists because two nations refuse to unite, though one day it has the potential to be subsumed into both as one. For now it is dormant. It is a place where soldiers inhibit movement and where wildlife excels. The two Korean societies evade its existence while the rest of the world wants to visit it. Lee manages to represent all this complexity. The precarity of Lee Yongbaek's piece is described thus by critic Lee Jinmyung: 'To the point that a hostile coexistence and the hiding of nature are the frames of their relationship, both nations exit with the camouflage of allomorphism, as angel and a soldier' (Lee 2011a, 2011b: 69).

Insert Image 2:

Figure 2: Yongbaek Lee, *Angel-Soldier*, 2011, C-print, 2300×1800mm (with permission of Yongbaek Lee).

Yongbaek Lee studied art in Stuttgart at time when the tensions between the East and the West were still fresh. It was perhaps his relocation to another nation – and one that had experienced a similar political division – that encouraged him to consider Korea's conflict. Case study research that I conducted into the topic of Korean migrant artists in Britain in the

mid-noughties suggested that the distancing process of relocation enables individuals to reflect upon their homeland more objectively. In part, this is because the concept of homeland is embedded in notions of longing but also because it becomes staged in a narrative of differences and similarities and of *here and there*. It seems that for Yongbaek Lee the parallels between the formerly divided Germany and the divided Korea were noticeable and impacted his artistic processes along the way.

For Sea-hyun Lee, the United Kingdom seemed like a very different terrain. While he lived and worked from studios on the outskirts of London, Lee began producing a series of paintings of North Korean and DMZ mountainscapes, entitled *Between Red* because of their consistent use of red and white. During an interview in November 2007 at Kingston Art Studio, Lee described how he felt a nostalgia for Korea, which was perhaps what prompted him to look at traditional Literati-style Korean paintings in books, alongside his interest in the way that British and Korean painters have approached perspectives of landscapes differently, as they ‘use lots of perspectives’ (28 November 2007, New Malden). Inspired by these traditional Korean paintings he began landscapes in the colour red, which – on a literal (though experiential) level – referenced his ophthalmic experiences of the DMZ when he was stationed there as a soldier, patrolling in red eye goggles at night time, looking for defectors from either side. More symbolically, the persistent redness signifies bloodshed, Communism and the danger inherent within the terrain. By relocating countries, traversing further geopolitical divides, and forming part of a temporary Korean diaspora in London, Lee seems to have confronted the traumas he associated with his time in the DMZ, as well as the tensions between North and South Korea.

Now living back in Seoul, Sea-hyun Lee continues to paint his *Between Red* scenes, adding watchtowers to his mountainscapes while making more specific reference to the scenery of the DMZ. Thus:

In his paintings, Seehyun Lee endlessly reconstructs and reconstitutes the landscape of the DMZ. Reworking fragments of terrain, blocks of land and water, he creates a world that functions according to the logic of its own terms. In this sense, it is a world that is entirely hermetic – appropriately so, considering that the territory Lee depicts is defined by the very impregnability of its borders. (Art News n.d.)

He has also begun a series of watchtower sculptures. Talking to him in September 2012 at Hakgojae Gallery in Seoul, it seemed that his reasons for depicting the DMZ had changed. Back in his studio in London (in 2006), he discussed reliving his memories of the area, in 2012. Now, and although he stated that his memories are still persistent, his studio is located in a rural village called Heyri near both Seoul and the DMZ. Watchtowers are visible from the roadside journey between the village and the capital. Moreover, Lee's paintings and watchtower sculptures receive a considerable amount of attention from international tourists who visit galleries in Seoul. Lee's own remembered gaze upon the DMZ is different from the tourists' gaze, but he now appears to use the one to fulfil the desires of the other. Tourists go to Korea to see the DMZ but they also visit Sea-hyun Lee's representative gallery (Hakgojae) in Seoul to see how Lee, as a Korean, sees the DMZ. Seeing the DMZ is all anyone can really do there, because it is difficult to be in a place that is on standstill. Even the soldiers are there mostly to watch.

In this sense, the DMZ is a manifestation of a non-war – a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1981) of referents to a conflict that may never happen. To image the DMZ, whether from sight or from a photograph on the Internet or through a painting in a gallery, is simultaneously to imagine and to watch. Both Lees work notions of this hyper-reality into

their imaging of this border zone, capture its slippery existential quality of being located somewhere between place and space, sitting between two halves of the same nation. It has a binary value as its demarcation line splits it into two: one half representing North Korean Communism and the other half representing its polar opposite – global Capitalism. Together, they simultaneously signal the last remnants of the Cold War alongside the potential trigger for an actual war.

Gelézeau et al. suggest that the DMZ has been represented by cultural producers as ‘bi-polar’ (2013: 8), and indeed, both Lees use a stark binarity in their works, not simply in terms of the real and the virtual but in terms of other signifiers, with Lee Yongbaek Lee’s indicators of war and peace and Sea-hyun Lee’s use of colour (red) and colour-absence. Both artists encapsulate not only the DMZ’s dividedness but also its unreality.

Insert Image 3:

Figure 3: Sea-hyun Lee, *Between Red-134*, 2011, Oil on linen, 200×200 mm (with permission of Sea-hyun Lee).

In the two Lees’ artworks and in those installed within the ‘Real DMZ’ project, art itself provides a space to image or imagine a border. Implicated within this border is a border crossing.

Artworks at the ‘Real DMZ’ project question the envisaging of the border and the gaze towards the other side, such as Suntag Noh’s photographic diptych, *To Survive vs. Once Arrived*. Noh, who also contributed an exhibition around South Korean protests and political history at the Gwangju Biennial in 2012, uses a binary pictorial format to present his

understanding of the DMZ. On one side of the diptych we see a photograph of a soldier, perhaps misplaced in the touristic Cheorwon Peace Observatory, despite its location beside the DMZ, looking out across the terrace. On the other side, there is a photograph showing a signpost stating ‘no photography’. The photographs are placed against a wall of the lookout point itself. The no-photography sign reminds us of the touristic semiotics of the space. Both the soldier on the photograph and the viewer of the photograph of the soldier are simultaneously misplaced and strategized within the construction of the place. Noh, who is interested in capturing ‘the desire of gazing’ (Kwon 2012) – through his photographic interventions within the space of the DMZ – draws attention to the spectatorship of the tourist and of the soldier and to the spectacle of tourism and the military. Noh’s intervention into the space is reflective and, in this sense, active, as compared to the tourist’s experience, whose interaction with the environment is largely voyeuristic, fleeting and passive.

The artists’ works within the ‘Real DMZ’ project, therefore, have the potential to disrupt the general tourist’s political and spatial (stereotypical) perceptions of the place and of North Korea, as outlined by Shim and Nabers (2011). In this sense the ‘Real DMZ’ is a politicized project, working to draw the visitor’s attention to its precarious geopolitical position between North and South Korea – something that might be side-tracked by standard South Korean tour operators.

Insert Image 4:

Figure 4: Suntag Noh, *To Survive vs. Once Arrived*, 2012, archival pigment print. Author’s own photograph.

Similarly, Francis Mazabraud’s *Hidden Landscape* telescope looks out to North Korea from the inside of the Cherwon Observatory, through the double glass filters of the telescope and of the window. The coin-operated telescopes are a permanent part of the

tourists' experience within the observatory, but inside one of them Mazabraud has installed a film of images, played on a loop, depicting the same landscape, so that the viewer/visitor only sees a simulated, not a 'real', image of the scene. Like many of the Real DMZ artworks, they express not only the artificiality of the place as a tourist construct or as a 'peaceful' zone but also its military unpredictability and the powerlessness of the visitor to realize its full potential as a place to dwell or even to roam.

Insert Image 5:

Figure 5: Visitors looking at François Mazabraud's *Hidden Landscape* telescope, 2012, colour, silent, loop, mimetic device, six min. 47 sec. Author's own photograph.

Few have crossed what is the most heavily militarized border in the world, unless under strict surveillance by the authorities on both sides. Successful North Korean defectors use the northern border with China to escape from North Korea, although once diasporic, few will reveal their identities. Chun Hyök Kang is the only internationally known North Korean diasporic artist to have revealed his identity and to have provided detailed visual accounts of his experiences of living in and escaping from North Korea, as illustrated in the biography, *This is Paradise* (Chun Hyök Kang and Philippe Grangereau, 2007). Sun Mu, another defected artist, who works in a propaganda pop style, is prominent in South Korea but he has not revealed his real name. North Korean refugees who publicize their real family names can potentially be traced by the North Korean government, which can put their families in danger of persecution or even execution. Although Kang never crossed the DMZ border, his images encapsulate the border crossing between North and South Korea more obliquely, referencing

not only the struggles he encounters with his traumatic memories of concentration camps, starvation and military interpolations into everyday life in the North but, also, his tumultuous escape across China, Cambodia and Laos to the safety of South Korea.

The crossing from the North Korean to the South Korean stage of his life highlights the stark differences between the routine experiences of citizens in the two Koreas. As a diasporic artist, now studying and working in South Korea, Kang is able to explore his literal, and symbolic, border crossings from being a North Korean to being a South Korean, reflecting on the ways identity is formed in both nations. Where other artists can only imagine the border of the DMZ itself, North Korean diasporic artists can experience and visualize the traversal of the North–South divide in terms of ideological and spatial re-locatedness.

The ways in which the DMZ has been imaged through art and other cultural forms, including the tourist industry, as with any picture, does not simply concern the way it looks on a formal level. As a photographed or simulated site it is heavily laden with latent, symbolic inferences around intra-national forms of territorialism, identity formations, post-Cold War palimpsests and subsequent, current political and military tensions. Gelézeau highlights the specifically political-historical character of these tensions when she describes the DMZ as a ‘fossilized meta-border of the Cold War’ (2011: 327). The demilitarized strip of land acts as a stubborn reminder of twentieth-century bilateral conflicts, while its continuation works to buffer the past from the future. The difference in relation to diasporic North Korean artists is that these symbolic issues have interfaced with their own corresponding and private realities. North Korean refugee artists are a valuable source of visual information regarding border crossings between North and South Korea. Yet, as

Eunyong Kim – Program Officer for Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights – observed during an interview in 2012, many refugees use art as therapy to deal with their traumatic experiences, the images of which are often very graphic and raw in their execution.

Conclusion

The DMZ stretches just 4 kilometres in height/girth. Yet artworks visualizing this tiny space and produced by successful Korean artists, including those discussed in this article, are fairly abundant within South Korean art galleries. As I have suggested, there are many obvious geopolitical and historical reasons for this curiosity and concern with the DMZ’s existence as a non-place or no man’s land and, not least, its existence as a site for biodiversity. Indeed, it is sufficiently empty to permit a range of symbolic or theoretical projections to be imaged creatively and effectively by artists. Not surprisingly, then, allusions to the hyper-real (Baudrillard’s postmodernism) are palpable in many of the artworks of the ‘Real DMZ’ project: in Atta Kim’s ultra-green extended exposures, in Yongbaek Lee’s floral DMZ and in Sea-hyun Lee’s reconstituted landscapes, among others.

I suggest that two themes stand out strongly from this discussion of the ‘Real DMZ’ project. First, the use of digital prints and videos that focus on watching or looking from within the DMZ space highlights the tourist’s craving to image the disputed landscape. While this is probably a comment on a visually saturated world it also points to the individual’s need to respond to, and negotiate with, the area’s impenetrability. Further, the DMZ acts as an unmistakable though mysterious signifier of the differences between the two nations despite the inactivity within the zone itself. This too presumably, attracts visitor attention. Second, despite the DMZ’s physical inaccessibility and divided terrain, it can be reached across digital platforms, through art, tourist photographs and online adverts and memes.

Through such media, the DMZ converts into a kind of visually unified, although ideologically divided and imagined, place, which can then be ‘shared’ culturally with the rest of the world. Thus, through accessing digital images of the DMZ, we watch the divide and then we visit it. In doing either or both, we envisage borders we cannot cross, engage with cultures we may never have known existed, and, in doing so, we create our own culture of imaging, thereby facilitating the cross-fertilization of artists, Internet users, tourists and academics.

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Contributor details

Dr Beccy Kennedy is Senior Lecturer in Art History, Curating and Visual Culture at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University, and Route Leader for the M.A. in Contemporary Visual Culture. She is Principal Investigator of the AHRC-funded research network – Culture, 'Capital and Communication: Visualising Chinese Borders in the 21st Century'. She has curated exhibitions for the Asia Triennial Manchester and has published on Contemporary Korean art, East Asian diasporic art and Biennialization.

Contact:

Department of Art G15, Grosvenor Building, Manchester Metropolitan University,
Cavendish St M15 6BR, UK.

E-mail: B.M.Kennedy@MMU.ac.uk

Principal investigator for AHRC-funded research network: ‘Visualising Chinese Borders in the 21st Century’: <http://visualisingchineseborders.wordpress.com/>.