

“In the age when the plaza and the chamber was one, people had nothing to worry about. In the age when there was only the plaza and no chamber, nothing happened in the world. When the plaza and the chamber separated, the agony began. When a person can not find the plaza to embed oneself in, what can he do?” - from the novel 'Plaza' by Inhoon Choi, 1960.

Today at Medialab-Prado Madrid, on the occasion of <Interactivos? Garage Science> seminar, I want to talk about a period of time in South Korea between two great fires within roughly in a year. In January 2008, Namdaemun, the southern gate to the old city and the landmark of Seoul for more than 600 years, was destroyed by a malicious fire by an unhappy man. In January 2009, five protesters and one riot policeman died in a fire caused from a violent evacuation at a squatted commercial building in Yongsan. Between two tragic events, the 'Candlelight protest (also known as the candlelight rally)' continued for more than 100 days, and brought more than 20 million citizens to the public spaces in Seoul at the peak moment, while the police estimates about 5 million. My interest in the protest began from personal anger about state terror and police brutality. I began to research on the topic, and found a broader interest on the cultural phenomenon of the protest, and creative use of technology, eventually examining the potential of new public spaces.

The core of my argument, reflecting the theme of 'Garage Science' symposium, is the potential of grassroots activism using D.I.Y new media technologies and open source art-culture practice, to create alternative space between existing public spaces. In Urban Protest 2.0, the boundary between physical and cyberspace is blurred, by citizens creatively appropriating mobile technologies. Low cost new media, specifically WIFI network and mobile device, can be used to protect citizen's rights, against the violence and fear imposed upon them from the state. The first part of the talk is background information on the political situation and culture of protest in South Korea. This chapter illustrates new kind of activism happening in the Internet and the physical space at the same time with comparable cultural phenomenon. The second chapter is documentations from a workshop on Urban Protest 2.0, which I conducted December of 2008 in Seoul.

The government interruption and D.I.Y intervention:

The complex struggle for civil justice and fairer trade with the USA, heightened by the controversies regarding import of US meat under suspicion of the mad cow disease, lead to 3 months long rally of protests. The protest is often called 'Candlelight protest', characterized by the thousands, and sometimes reaching over million, of people holding candlelight as sign of peaceful resistance. At the protest sites, a unique hybrid form of cultural and political event, anonymous public gathered in the city square willfully. They were not directed with a central leadership, but were mutually informed through the web forums. Every protester had different reason for participating, but they shared desire for democracy, citizen's rights for health, and anger at the government's policy.

Newly elected Neo-conservative government was harshly criticized for its pro-corporate, pro-US trade policy, and abuse of its power to take control of the mass media. In response to the government's abuse of surveillance and punishment, the active citizen finds subversive methods to protest. Teenage students found ways of protesting while walking on the cross road, the last public space near the Seoul Plaza free from police control. Candlelight protest continued to other public spaces in the nation, as well as private spaces. Various non-political online communities became the core participants of the protest, such as fashion trend community, cosmetic surgery community, rock

music fan clubs, and etc. This diversity of the protesters made the events much more culturally diverse and exciting. The traditional left and activists were relatively un-influential in the events. Instead, they were often criticized for being associated with the violent extremists.

The method of hacking, intervention of public space and building of grassroots news channel and distributed network share similarities with the web culture of South Korea. The active citizen became hyper critical of 'Cho-Jung-Dong', abbreviation for three major conservative press, and created their own flow of information. Web forum 'Media Daum' (<http://agora.daum.net>) was used excessively as a space for public debate and organizing on/offline events. Bloggers and journalists collaboratively contributed on the news source through 'Ohmynews' (<http://ohmynews.com>). News reporter and new media artists have dived in to the heart of the protest with a laptop and a video camera, sending live report via wifi network through out the protest through services such as 'Afreeca' (<http://afreeca.net>). The hand-held video documents became central evidence of police brutality on the civilian. Real time streaming videos from the protest scenes were edited and viewed on the Youtube, distributed via P2P, and some were later invited to a special screening section of the Seoul Independent Film Festival (<http://siff.or.kr>). The graphic document of an iconic 'Candlelight girl' image was released by the designer, distributed and recreated nation wide. The image became a symbol of grassroots resistance from teenager. Musician performed freely on the street, entertaining and cheering up the public and connecting generations by the sonic experience. Old songs favored by the student activists in the 1980s, were remixed by the younger musician.

As the protest continued to grow, the South Korean government strategically interrupted the public space. On June 5th, one of the largest protests was scheduled in the Seoul plaza. The plaza was, by a last minute change, occupied by memorial for the secret agents who passed away during their service, conveniently blocking out the protesters. There are some reasonable suspicions regarding the organization's connection with the president's office. On June 10th, a large fortress of containers was placed in Gwangwhamun, blocking protesters from approaching the presidential house. New government changed the law to enforce all protest after midnight to be considered illegal. These are only few cases of government control of the public space and citizen's right to protest.

The new government's interruption continued on to the cyberspace. Broadcasting and online information channels are tightly controlled. Two major TV networks have been under the influence of the government, and the pro-conservative press dominates the information channel. Following accounts are only few examples. Popular musician 'Yoon Dohyun' was put off from his regular program in the KBS national TV station, after publicly supporting the Candlelight protest. The CEO of 'Afreeca', the web service that hosted much of the online broadcasting of the Candlelight protest, is sentenced for an unrelated reason. KBS and YTN, the major news channels, are privatized and new CEO selected by the president's appointment replaces the previous one. 'Minaerba' a popular anonymous columnist, who wrote critical commentaries on the government's economic policy, was tracked down and imprisoned.

Those who are critical of the protest point at it's complex and potentially contradictory nature. Unlike the candlelight protests in 2002 for commemorating death of middle school students by the US military tank, the new candlelight protest is conceived of individual desires. Extreme disapproval of the newly elected President Lee Myung Bak and the collective hysteria regarding the US mad cow disease also received reasonable criticism. Some critics see that the 'playfulness' of the protest actually hides real important issues. Some people's hatred toward the conservatives, the wealthy ones, and the powerful are some times irrational. Also, the mob mentality and the excitement allow few bad seeds to take advantage of the protest and conduct violent actions. The president, the government websites, as well as the physical spaces of the power were subject to all sorts of cynical pranks by hackers, sometimes with childish behavior and irresponsible comments.

Success of the protest is still under controversial debate. General understanding among the liberal point of view is that the public learned ways of working cooperatively toward new democracy, long way since the violent student protest against militant dictatorship in the 1980s.

The Workshop

<Urban programming 201> was a week long workshop to explore issues regarding urban public space, digital technology and culture. The main objective was to understand the phenomenon of the candlelight protest. The participants collectively brainstormed ideas to make the protest more efficient and less violent. There were about 8 participants, mostly artists, activists, designers, and engineers. The workshop was hosted at the 'Laboratory: Social Intervention' event at Gallery Sangsangmadang in Seoul during 11.30~12.5. 2008.

On November 31st, the session began with an artist's presentation by myself. The talk was about my new works, theoretical references regarding urban space and power, and personal reasons behind organizing the workshop.

December 3rd session started with a lecture on various artist's intervention in urban space with new media technology. The session lead to in depth brainstorming by mapping out critical elements in the urban and media space during the candlelight protest.

December 4th session was co-conducted with the theater group 'Beerok'. Ji young Lee, director of the group, coordinated body exercises. The session was aimed to understand the relationship between human and the collective, and fragmentation of body elements. Following are some comments Lee raised during the session. "There is a flow of energy between human to human relationships. Inequality of the flow leads to violence. What is the mass of people composed of? Can the individuality of a person preserved in the mass? How is the mass shaped by the power? What is the 'urban power' and resistance to it?"

December 5th session started with a walking trip to Gwangwhamun, the central area where the largest Candlelight protest took place few months ago. The group drifted around, recording flow of the streets and analyzing how new media technology is used in each space. The group also gave special interest on the corporate headquarters in the area, and potential of using their cultural institutions, including concert halls and galleries, subversively for activist purpose.

December 6th, the final presentation was collaboratively edited on the workshop wiki page and the participants presented to the public. The group organized large amount of idea and information from previous brainstorming sessions, into three categories of potential projects. These ideas need to be understood as a critical commentary on the politics and the protest, a form of conceptual art that exists as an idea and plan, and possibility for further exploration by many others. Some projects are being developed into prototype.

1. *Micro-technologies* for short term intervention (1 day ~ 1 month event):

'*Micro-technologies*' are combination of common and inexpensive media tools for activist purpose. The production process is shared open source with information on local access to the supply. These simple projects can become a powerful tool, when many of them are accumulated over time.

A video clip of a police chief saying 'don't be seen or recorded when hitting the protesters!' and a footage of a police stepping on a woman, were powerful evidence that raised awareness of the general public. However, conventional one person broadcasting devices are vulnerable for damage, many cameras and laptops were destroyed by water-bomb and fire extinguisher used by the police. The following ideas are critique of the situation and suggestion for an enhancement.

'*The world's strongest one person broadcasting system*' is a concept of wireless video camera and streaming system that endures any physical and electronic shock. 'The world's strongest one person broadcasting system' will protect the gears from any harsh condition. It will also run on special battery that recharges itself, and stream video via independent wireless network.

'*Camera skin*' is a paper fold-out in shape of a typical video camera. It is used as a placebo to fool the police to think there are more video cameras recording the scene, a tool of visual intervention to minimize the violence.

'*One person green screen protest*' is an idea for a service that the online user can insert their messages on the picket of a person protesting in front of the president's office. The service will utilize green screen technology, and real time video streaming. Most violent accidents happened near Gyongbok palace, where protesters confronted with the police, marching toward the president's office. The project is taking advantage of the law that one person protest is allowed in any public spaces.

2. *Collaborative projects* for mid-term intervention (6 months~ 3 years plan):

Collaborative projects are geared toward initiating various activists and artists to create large community of practitioner.

'*Network concert in void space*' is a concert that each members of a popular band is playing music in void spaces, an area that is neither privately owned nor designated public space. Their sound is connected via wireless network, and audience around the world can enjoy the concert. It raises issues of citizen's rights to use of urban spaces freely and to gather in groups.

'*Candlelight video mash-up*', in collaboration with Seoul Independent Film Festival, the project explores new way of producing and screening activist media, as a collaborative mash-up of streamed video footages, live broadcasting and independent films. The project can potentially connect with international activists, artists, and venues.

3. Systematic change in the administration policy and the *Philosophy for the practitioner* (5~ 10 years agenda)

'*Conversations*' is mediation on the controversial law suit posed by shop owners in Gwangwhamun, against the citizens' right to protest in the streets near their shop. The proposed conversation session between two groups will discuss following issues. "Is there a win-win method for both groups? Large corporations contribute to society by providing cultural services. Is there a way that can be applied in benefit of small business owners and the public?"

'*Ethical guide for cultural practitioners*' is a philosophical advice for designers, policy makers, and corporate workers on their work ethics and potential violence created from their work. The government started vigorous urban development with an immediate deadline to accomplish by 2010 World Design Capital event in Seoul. The policy is affecting many lives and diminishing unique characteristics of the city, under the name of culture and design. For example, the street vendors are violently eliminated shop signs are homogenized in an extreme speed. Yongsan fire accident in January of 2009 is an example of the violence fostered by the administration, in the name of urban rejuvenation. Such violence is often hidden under the name of culture and development. The guide will help professionals working in the cultural industry, and all business regarding the policy, to reflect on the consequences of their work, and influence them to make wiser decisions.

'*Alternative news channel*' is a system for archiving data, independent publication, and also translating the under exposed news to foreign languages. It works to resist government control of

news media and on-line public spaces, and eventually toward creating sustainable form of activism.

End comment. .

Throughout the workshop, we debated over the definition of 'public space'. We realized that there are many types of public spaces, such as a common space shared by many people, a void space abandoned by all, and a fluid space between these spaces. As seen through the Candlelight protest, new public spaces are the dynamic 'flow' between physical and information space. For the activists and socially aware citizen, methods of decisive 'programming', not 'hacking' of public space is necessary to bring real changes. The workshop raised political issues and the ideas for art-culture projects, which will be conceptual machine to create new public spaces in the future.

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The article states “In June 1st, there were 2501 online personal broadcasting from the candlelight rally, 1,270,000 viewers through the day, and 100,000 online at the same time in the peak.

Image: http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/291176.html



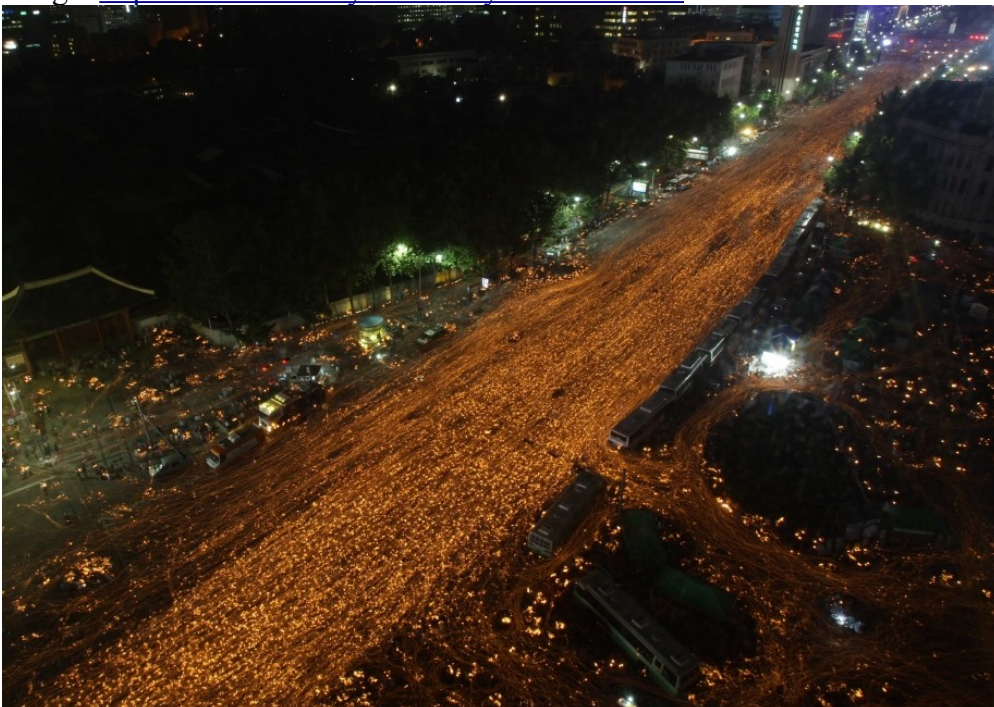
Indie rock band performing in the candlelight rally
Image: <http://cafe.naver.com/dm8866/6333>



A violent moment in June 28th around Gwangwhamun area.
Image: https://www.kukinews.com/special/gallery/gallery_view.asp?mCate=1&sCate=2&pNo=15953&page=25



Live streaming from the protest and real time chatting window. <http://www.ohmynews.com>
 Image: <http://hanawa.tistory.com/entry/20080602001>



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Urban Programming 201 workshop at Gallery Sangsangmadang, December 2008.