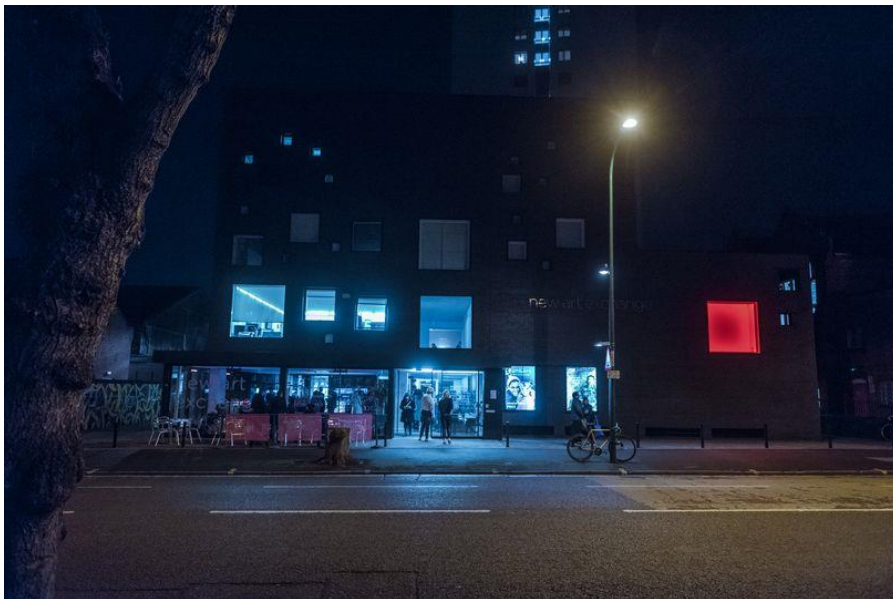


Why is there a red light flashing from a window in Hyson Green?

February 5, 2018 | Sarah Hyde

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Red light in the window at the New Art Exchange (Image: Sam Kirby)

A red light glows from a window on Gregory Boulevard. It flashes on and off, as if inviting visitors inside. Although it may well be making a playful reference to the area's former notoriety for prostitution, this is art.

It's called Signal and was created by So-young Chung, one of the rising stars of Korean art, whose work is currently on show as part of The Real DMZ at the New Art Exchange in Hyson Green. The idea is that the light, which can be turned off and on inside the gallery, sends out a signal into the dark across the wasteland of the imaginary DMZ to connect with the other side.

DMZ is the acronym for the Demilitarized Zone, the empty strip of land, literally and metaphorically a minefield, which separates North and South Korea. This no man's land, two-and-a-half miles wide and one-hundred-and-sixty miles long, acts as the starting point of a revelatory exhibition.

It is one of the most militarised areas in the world. Remarkably, it has become an unusual tourist attraction in its own right for those who want to explore this divided country. It is one of the last clear, dividing lines of political tension - in this case between communism and capitalism - still in existence.



(Image: Vitelleschi)

The Real DMZ is an invitation to explore this division, as interpreted by Chung. It's a complicated subject but, at the very least, you will leave with a new awareness, not only of the geopolitical reality but also of the sensitive and poetic human response to the situation. As you empathise with its reality, there is an opportunity to really explore the ideas of division, separation, communication, imagination and longing.

Ironically, although the DMZ is one of the most hotly contested pieces of land on the planet, the space has remained free from human interference for over fifty years, and has turned into a nature reserve. Park Chan-kyong's work, 'Child Soldier', plays on the physical reality of the space and how available and beautiful nature is: a young, whimsical, conscripted soldier is seen playing, creating artistic shapes and forms.

In another representation of the physical space, Hayoun Kwon enhances reality through her artfully created animations. However, it was when So-young Chung, the originator of Signal, and I talked about the partition, that the truth really sank in. Our conversation began quite simply when I asked her if her work was inspired by 'The Great Gatsby and the flashing

green light at Little Egg, on which Jay Gatsby fixed so much hope. "Not consciously, but perhaps it was in the ether as there was this real desire to communicate across that silent zone and reach out to the other side," she said.



Yeondoo Jung's Theatre of Communist Extinction

At that point, I felt a real sense of her longing. She was artist-in-residence at a propaganda village; just on the southern side of the zone, where she created a sculptural work: Light, Temperature and Wind.

The word propaganda must be everyday in Korea because it crops up so often in this exhibition. This sculptural work symbolises the opaque layers that stand between the two countries. As we talked more, I asked her if people were still related to each other despite the political divide? "Most of the people have died now", she replied. The split is not just physical: there is a deep sense of loss. I got the impression that to South Koreans, or to these artists at least, the North is a real place of wonder and perhaps a missing other half.

This could not be more true of the work of Seung-Woo Back, whose work, Utopia, sums up the dichotomy. The title is simultaneously descriptive and ironic. He has realised a photomontage from images of the stark, brutalist architecture of the North which he found in a shop in Japan.

Direct communication between the two countries is non-existent outside of state control. Seung-Woo created new towns from his imagination and the images he found. He uses bright colours to emulate the propaganda posters from the North to give further

plausibility to what he imagines the mysterious North is like.

Another artist, Kyungah Ham, illustrates the divide via tapestry-smuggling. She sends blueprints and money through a middleman in China into Northern Korea - where artisans literally take their life in their own hands to get the orders filled.

Kyungah includes words in English within the embroidery as a message from the West; those hidden messages are revealed to the stitcher as they create the work. Who knows if they even understand English?



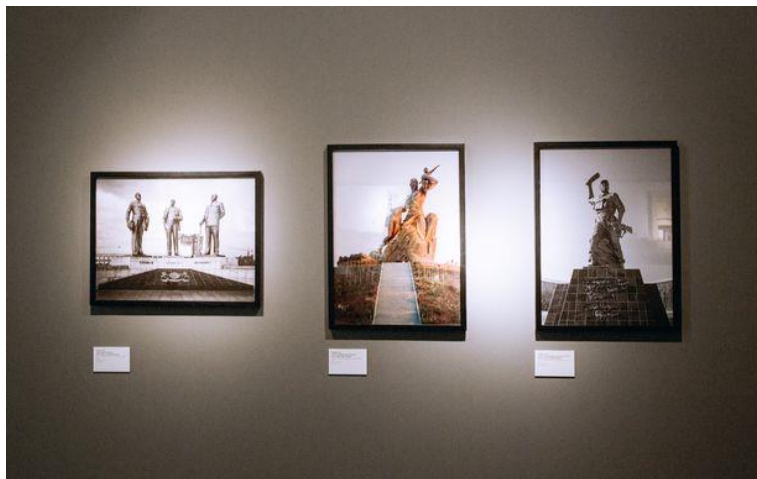
Embroidery by Kyungah Hamm as part of The Real DMZ at the New Art Exchange (Image: Vitelleschi)

Despite its overt political content, the show is not too didactic or conclusive. It allows the viewer to draw his/her own conclusions, although it is the work upstairs that is the most mind-expanding and definitely worth spending some time with. It is there that we may find a clue to the true nature of the exhibition: Onejoon Che's Mansudae Master Class.

It concerns the Mansudae factory in North Korea which, for three generations, has produced communist statues of monumental proportions, supplying them across the communist world and in particular to Africa. Essentially, this is now a go-to, one stop shop for dictators who are trying to buy their place in posterity.



The Real DMZ at the New Art Exchange (Image: Vitelleschi)



Onejoon Che's Mansudae Master Class (Image: Vitelleschi)

As the video installation shows, this industry stems from a time when North and South were engaged in diplomatic warfare, each side currying favour with various members of the UN to obtain their support.

To cut a long story short, after watching the footage carefully, you can't help but wonder if they still are.