

***Art Under Control in North Korea.* Jane Portal. London: Reaktion Books, 2005. 192 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Ken Vos

Except for a few small catalogues for temporary exhibitions, very little text can be found on North Korean art in the English language. Therefore, a book such as Jane Portal's *Art Under Control in North Korea* is already welcome by just being available. Well-illustrated and transparently written, it is a useful introduction to North Korea's peculiar art world.

In the last decade, North Korea seems to have discovered art as a commodity to be sold on the world market. Increasingly, exhibitions on various aspects of contemporary art of the Democratic People's Republic are being held in Europe. However, since the breaking up of the Soviet Union and Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, North Korean policies have become even less predictable than before. Kim Jong Il has always had a personal interest in the arts, and this is shown in his published interventions to improve the quality of art production in the DPRK. Whereas both traditional and contemporary art in South Korea are now thriving because of increased affluence and political openness, North Korean art seems mainly stuck in the late fifties. One of the most interesting aspects of the Korean peninsula is that it is now home to both the most democratic political system and the most authoritarian one in Asia. It is hard to imagine now, but both countries share a common history of art until 1945.

In the book's second chapter, "Historical Background," far more attention is given to developments in the political and social spheres than to those in art, almost implying that the production of art is wholly dependent upon factors outside of art. In fact, Portal devotes far more space to societal and political conditions than to the historical peculiarities of Korean art. Most thought-provoking to those who are somewhat informed about Korean history is the chapter "Archaeology and the Reshaping of History," which shows how transparently the regime tries to rewrite history for its own nationalistic purposes. Chinese influences are trivialized or ignored, as are those from the southern part of the peninsula in order to show that North Korea is the logical heir to over 2,000 years of Korean identity. Of course, (re)writing history for ideological purposes is common to almost all nations of all times, but the North Korean examples must be unique for their unashamedly naive directness.

The most important chapter must be "The Production and Consumption of Art" as it gives the reader some insight into the conditions under which artists are expected to work either as part of collectives or as individuals. Rightfully, a substantial part of this chapter is devoted to the production of monumental art, although we do not really get any insight into how proposals for such mostly collectively produced works are evaluated. Clearly, some individual artists play a central role in the coordination of institutions of art education and the running of studios. As all credit for crucial decision-making is always taken by the "Great Leader" (Kim Il Sung) or the "Dear Leader" (Kim Jong Il), we usually can only know informally who the most influential persons in North Korean art are. Art is, of course, produced for the state, but also for sale to foreigners and foreign countries such as Japan, although there are signs that the government has become more aware of it as a means of earning foreign currency.

There are a few weaknesses and distractions in this book, some of a technical nature, others are the result of a deliberate choice. First, there is the matter of transliteration of Korean. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* March 26, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.net/2007/03/26/mar2007-1-10/>. © 2007 Ken Vos.

author or the publishers have decided to use their own version of transliteration, thereby suggesting homophones that do not exist. Either the official national system of the DPRK, or the now widely used national system of the Republic of Korea, both perfectly logical systems with and without diacriticals, could have been chosen. To be sure, there are always strange exceptions, such as the names of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, which are never romanized according to the DPRK's own rules. Why this is confusing can be seen from the fact that the vowel in "sun" is exactly the same as the one in "jong," whilst they should have been written as "Sǒng" and "Jǒng" according to those rules. Personal names in North Korea are usually written unhyphenated and as separate words, but Portal chose to use a variant of the McCune-Reischauer romanization, but without the diacritics that are an integral part of it. In effect, this approach creates homophones where there are none, and makes the Korean language unnecessarily confusing.

Although the author takes much care in describing the political background of North Korean art, only a little attention is paid to stylistic developments in the decades prior to the establishment of the DPRK. This approach suggests that Korean art from the last quarter of the 19th century mainly developed under the influence of Western and Japanese art. The author is very reserved in her criticism of the North Korean system, no doubt conscious of the fact that she cannot embarrass those who helped her during her visit to the country. Although these influences should not be underestimated, the image that is created is that of an art world devoid of internal dynamism. Secondly, it now appears that art in North Korea developed in complete isolation from the period directly preceding it. Of course, socialist realism and "revolutionary" art were known in Japanese-occupied Korea well before the establishment of the Soviet zone in 1945. The graphic arts are given ample attention, but crafts or applied arts such as lacquer or ceramics are almost only mentioned in passing, and almost without any information on policy, development, or quality. It seems that as these media have only limited use for propaganda or education and they are suffering from relative neglect by the state. Compared to the South, there seems to be very little investment in conserving or developing traditional crafts. All in all, a personal note is missing from the business-like and straightforward writing of the author. Some insight into the personal lives of artists would have made the book emotionally more involving and maybe more of an invaluable reference to art life in North Korea. After reading the book, we still know very little of this isolated country's most influential artists, except for their names and a few of their works.

If some aspects of North Korean art remain underexposed, the book certainly succeeds in describing the fundamental characteristics underlying the production of art. Portal succeeds in keeping her political distance and avoiding the hyperboles and generalizations so often seen in publications on this country. Naturally, for an author relying on so much local help, it might be problematic to be too critical. Ironically, the production of art in the DPRK might be more demand-driven than it would be in a capitalist society—demand, of course, being not of the free market, but regulated by the Party. Also, although the regime is at least as nationalistic as it is socialist, nationalism is rarely seen in the artists' modes of expression. The nature of art production is certainly socialist in that the individual artist is always subordinate to the collective and almost always subservient to the state. A good illustration of this situation are the so-called creation companies (*changjaksas*), studios at which all official artists are employed, and in particular, the settings in which, the production of monumental art by artist collectives takes place. These creation companies and their employees are expected to produce fixed quota of works, so there seems to be very little room for individual creativity. Artistic qualities in the official media are almost always expressed in collective or general technical terms. It remains unclear how individual creativity is appreciated in

relationship to originality or authenticity, although when artists are singled out for official praise, this is always in terms of being a good example to be emulated by other artists. Artists are expected to share the responsibility of educating the people.

The book is well-illustrated with a wide range of subject matter in photographs. It is particularly strong on showing the contexts in which art functions. *Art Under Control in North Korea* is a very good introduction to the peculiar socio-economic situation of North Korean art and its recent history. It is anyone's guess what may happen in the field of arts as the relationship between the state ideology of *Juche* ("self-reliance") and policy decisions is becoming ever more opaque. A depressing illustration of the restrictive conditions under which artists are expected to work is Kim Jong Il's quote in an official publication from 1983 (p. 126). In fact, this would not sound out of place coming from an arbitrary populist politician elsewhere: "A picture must be painted in such a way that the viewer can understand its meaning. If the people who see a picture cannot grasp its meaning, no matter what a talented artist may have painted it, they cannot say it is a good picture."

*Ken Vos is curator of Japan and Korea at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, the Netherlands. He has written on Korean painting, ceramics, and other Korean and Japanese subjects. His latest publication is Intruders: Reflections on Art and the Ethnological Museum, (Waanders, 2004), edited with Gerard Drosterij and Toine Ooms.*