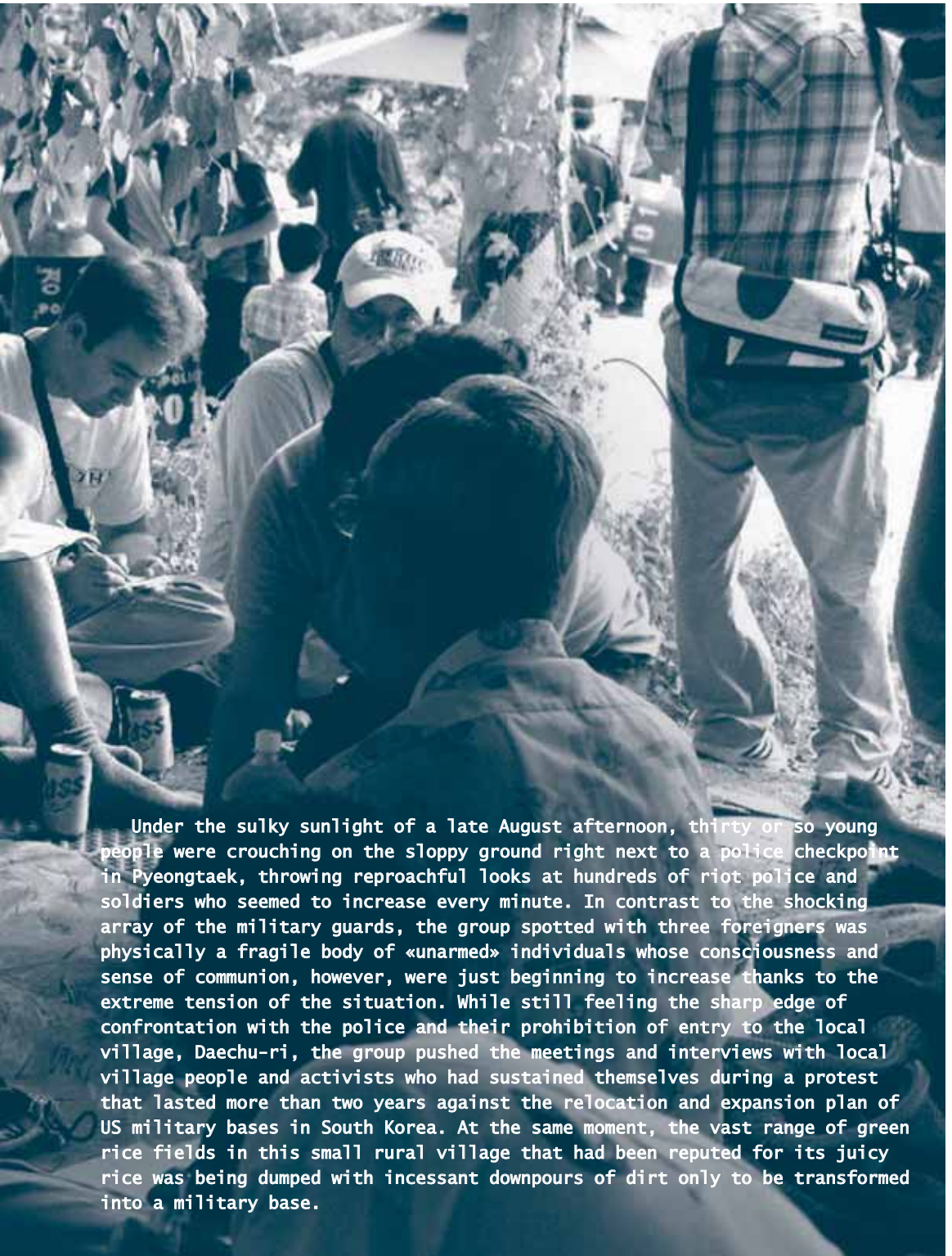


↑ 16 Beaver, *Between Us*, discussion at the checkpoint, Pyeongtaek, Korea, 2006 © Insa Art Space, ARKO.



Under the sulky sunlight of a late August afternoon, thirty or so young people were crouching on the sloppy ground right next to a police checkpoint in Pyeongtaek, throwing reproachful looks at hundreds of riot police and soldiers who seemed to increase every minute. In contrast to the shocking array of the military guards, the group spotted with three foreigners was physically a fragile body of «unarmed» individuals whose consciousness and sense of communion, however, were just beginning to increase thanks to the extreme tension of the situation. While still feeling the sharp edge of confrontation with the police and their prohibition of entry to the local village, Daechu-ri, the group pushed the meetings and interviews with local village people and activists who had sustained themselves during a protest that lasted more than two years against the relocation and expansion plan of US military bases in South Korea. At the same moment, the vast range of green rice fields in this small rural village that had been reputed for its juicy rice was being dumped with incessant downpours of dirt only to be transformed into a military base.

What happened on the third day of 16 Beaver's project in Korea, *Between Us*<sup>1</sup> also happened in Insa Art Space, Seoul, Korea for three months beginning with a preliminary research trip and including a series of activities with 42 Korean participants, whom we call, the «Beaver» community, including myself. The narrative that outlined the project was a rapid realignment and reemergence of national, social, political and economic borders, and the complicity of fringe areas around such borders with the new neoliberal world order. Albeit this subject and agenda itself has high contextuality and legitimacy in the contested sites of Korea we visited during this project, put in naked terms, the project was basically composed of mundane activities or daily routines such



<sup>1</sup> 16 Beaver, *Between Us*, view of Experimental Seminar, Mobile Workshop at Garibong-dong, Itaewon, DMZ, Korea, and final publication, *Map of New Order Lines*, 2006 © Insa Art Space, ARKO.

as walking, cooking, eating, observing, and talking with 16 Beaver, except for one night's heavy, discursive lecture by the artists. Giving a second thought to the anecdote in Pyeongtaek, however, I ask myself what we were doing, or attempting to do, at such a critical moment in the site where an actual decision had already been made by the invisible hand of macrostructure. Did we expect to make some serious political effect, or at least some political resonance, in Korea? Did we, through a single public art project-though it was literally an outreach project beyond an art zone-dare to make any political influence on the local community that had already led a lonely, two-year fight against the global power politics? Were we naïve, childish, idealistic, or even worse, pretending to be heroic? What was it that we were seeking in the public project in general as well as in such particular kinds of public projects as 16 Beaver's?

It would be all too easy to answer these questions within the framework of so-called community-based, process-oriented, dialogical public art practices that had a high rise in the 90s worldwide; however, I will try to answer these questions from practical knowledge I gained from my actual experience in this local scene.

Even situated at the periphery of the international art scene, the participants who volunteered for the project through pre-open call intuitively knew that contemporary public project was no longer entirely concerned with building a physical object in the public site, nor with developing a new pedagogical model for the public as a way to enlighten them politically or ethically. Even without borrowing an insight from J. Habermas' book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), the participants, through hands-on knowledge they achieved in their daily lives, were already realizing that essential keys of public projects today do not rely on one-sided discursive dialogues, nor on concrete political effects materialized in reality. They have already witnessed that the public «space», which is a term highlighting a *physical territory* especially allotted for a *common use*, is replaced by the public «sphere», whereas, is a concept denoting a *discursive space* at an abstract level



that intimately links *co-participants* in an inter-subjectively shared form of life. At the risk of oversimplifying, the essential nature of public project, since the 90s has been transformed from that of spatial and decorative to conceptual, empirical, participatory, practical, interfacial and dialogical. Along this line of thought, we might say that one firsthand achievement of public projects including hardcore projects like 16 Beaver's, is to induce participants to conduct empirical research on a specific agenda and, more profoundly, to be critically engaged in discursive encounters with other social subjects. What identifies the public sphere as «public» is an inter-subjective interface and mutual interrelationship among individuals who are equipped with self-will to pose themselves in the social context and build their own perspective nourished by critical consciousness and a lucid sense of reality.

At this conjecture, some factors of which I've recently become more convinced surface as determinants of new characteristics of public projects. The first would be a practically scaled-down notion of the «public», forsaking an alluring notion of «cultural democracy». In the next collaborative project with a Rotterdam-based artist duo, Bik van der Pol →[www.bikvanderpol.net](http://www.bikvanderpol.net), I again set up a group of Korean participants through an open call and cultivated them as «art public», so to speak, through brainstorming sessions. The backbone of the project was a participatory workshop that lasted more than one month until the collaborative production materialized into a publication, +82<sup>2</sup>. The medium of collaboration was a «Traveling Magazine Table», a physical archive of magazines and periodicals published non-commercially by artists, independent groups, public institutions and alternative spaces. By refusing mainstream distribution channels, authors and publishers of this collection chose to leave their works as open sources to the public as a gesture to defy against the capitalistic system of knowledge production and predominance of authorship. The archive thereby is a collection of hard-toothed ideas, opinions and articulation of values which are *unregistered* in circulation and distribution structure of mainstream art information.

The group of participants, which would more appropriately be called a «community» in its own right, started with 46 members and decreased to 12 as the expectations of the collective workshop intensified. It was the highly focused public itself that led a discussion on every detail of the final co-production, pushing the limits of shared vision and interpersonal provocation of ideas. The final realization was an assembly of multiple voices and independent ideas and thoughts, not a coerced body of a particular ideology. Each voice is taut with self-conviction of his/her own manifestation and also serious commitment to the communal endeavor. Had we opened the workshop and co-production to the «general public», this kind of collaboration on a chemical level would not have been possible.



To quote Alexander Kluger in his interview with Klaus Eder<sup>3</sup>, «It is just as important to *produce* a public sphere as it is to produce politics, affection, resistance and protest. This means that the place and the *placing* of the struggle are just as important as the struggle itself» (emphasis is mine). Selecting, defining, motivating a targeted public and thereby provoking them to self-identify as a «community» is a prerequisite to produce a «public sphere». The fertile ground of a healthy public sphere should be first and foremost self-critical awareness deeply explored by each individual, which could be only guaranteed in the strategic setting of a readily manageable target community. In this light, it would be more correct to use a term, «community project» at least within my curatorship.

Another element to be noted is the process of reflection, dissemination, fermentation, and evolution of ideas on the part of participants through intimate interpersonal exchange. This point has already been noted by artists, curators and critics on a theoretical level, but I would like to transpose its significance not as an unexpected emergency situation or a byproduct of a project, but as an «operational mechanism» capable of recharging an entire project. I am observing this phenomenon with interest in my current project *Dongdoocheon: A Walk to Remember, A Walk to Envision* that is being developed by four artists within the local region, Dongdoocheon, as a communal subject of their works. While Korea has been undergoing tremendous changes such as Japanese Colonialism through national division by Cold War ideology, a five-decade-long totalitarian military regime, modernization and industrialization, and today's globalization and capitalistic development, the city, located midway between Seoul and the North Korean border, has been a choice site for a foreign military presence: first Japanese and now that of the United States. Due to the sensitive geopolitical nature of the region, it has undergone collective negation, exclusion and manipulation of representation, thereby becoming a site of oblivion and invisibility in Korea, deprived of visual or verbal languages to articulate its contextual narratives<sup>4</sup>. Among the many unsolved problems in Dongdoocheon, the most critical and profound is a dissolved and displaced local identity. In order to help the locals of Dongdoocheon restore a local identity on their own, our community project team (in this case, composed of artists, local activists, social planners, art critics, a graphic designer and writers) aims to operate as an activator and facilitator of the process by which the locals identify critical consciousness and get excited about self-reflection and modes of resistance among themselves<sup>5</sup>.

Taking on such a challenging task, this project has to take a full gear combining all of the methodologies of community projects described above; a strategically pre-formed community project; collective engagement in empirical research, site-visits, in situ discussions, suggestion and exchange of ideas; impromptu interviews; sharing of the local life forms and concrete concerns; respect for individual artist and community member interests and queries; and so on. In this scenario, artists are supposed to play multiple roles: creative producers of their works, insightful catalysts of ideas, intelligent directors and active operators of participatory activities. Curators compliment the scene by orchestrating all of the human, social, aesthetic and archival resources.

Honestly speaking, however, this is something fairly common in this kind of community project, and, no matter how devoted we are, there is danger that this project operates within ourselves, outsiders, as opposed to within the real community and by its insiders. But, as the project arrives at its mid-point, we are noticing an interesting change occurring in a local insider. He is a local activist, actually the last person we would expect to make a huge contribution to this project, for his hands are already full of urgent political struggles he deals with everyday. With his personal background in a grassroots civic movement in the city for more than a decade, he was half-skeptical about cultural approach from outsiders to such a traumatic site as his native city. Motivated from something to which we ourselves cannot exactly ascribe, he is self-transformed from a simple collaborator to an active key player in this project pumping, it up with his *own version* of critical understanding of it. He not only grasped the idea of this project, but also pondered it, added his own ideas, and translated it into laymen's terms readily understood by local people, and thereby, is expanding its scope. With or without facilitators, he is mediating between us and the local residents, between us and the city officials, between us and diverse interest groups in the region. The work that illustrates this cross-fertilization, dissemination and evolution between us and the local community is a workshop entitled *Discoplan* by an artist, Sangdon Kim, who operates at the intersection of art and cultural activism. Alongside his video and text+photographs works, Kim is developing a workshop that engages local participants in fabricating flying objects out of everyday, recycled materials and performing «seed shedding ceremonies» in what were once the military base grounds, which are still blocked by a wire-fenced wall due to serious pollution. The flying objects are loaded with pods of seeds that pop up at landing and regenerate the polluted soil through its natural healing system. The activist has made a counter-suggestion that he would design the city's annual autumn festival centering around the artist's project due to the inspiration he found in it. This upcoming autumn festival will no doubt will be different from previous festivals that have been marked by the long, gloomy history of past fifty years.



Thinking about two years of interpersonal relationship between the artist and the activist, it would seem natural enough to expect such fermentation, evolution, and dissemination of ideas, but what thrills me most about this case is that we can envisage future development, variation, and transplantation of this project that would occur among the locals themselves after we finish here. What I am observing is green sprouts of resonance and reverberation among the locals which, I hope, will strengthen autonomous decisions to further a public sphere in their region.

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<sup>1</sup> More details of this project are at → [www.insaartspace.or.kr](http://www.insaartspace.or.kr) and → [www.16beavergroup.org/korea](http://www.16beavergroup.org/korea)  
For a background understanding of this region and agenda, please refer to → <http://antigizi.or.kr/english>

<sup>2</sup> 82 is an international calling code for South Korea. Extended description of this project can be also found at → [www.insaartspace.or.kr](http://www.insaartspace.or.kr)

<sup>3</sup> «The Public Sphere» in *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism, A Project by Martha Rosler*, Brian Wallis (ed.), The New Press, New York, 1991, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> General information on Dongdoocheon City is available at Dongdoocheon City Hall website, → [www.ddc21.net](http://www.ddc21.net). For local civil movement, please see → [www.ddcngo.org](http://www.ddcngo.org), the website of Dongdoocheon Citizen's Coalition. More progressed details of the project *A Walk to Remember, A Walk to Envision* will be introduced in the website currently being constructed by New Museum of Contemporary Art → [www.newmuseum.org](http://www.newmuseum.org) in New York which initiates this project as an part of 2-year long program, *Museum as HUB*.

<sup>5</sup> I owed this paraphrased sentence to Grant H. Kester's engaging book on community projects, *Conversation Pieces: Community+Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, p. 91.



↑ Sangdon Kim, *Discoplan*, performance, workshop, object, photograph, drawing, text, 2007 © Sangdon Kim.