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Reflections on *Selections from PROJECT 35 VOLUMES 1 & 2*

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How does a floorboard experience a city? Yukihiro Taguchi raises this question in *Moment* (2007–2008), one of three videos featured in *Selections from PROJECT 35 VOLUMES 1 & 2* at The College of Wooster Art Museum. In the video, floorboards detach themselves from the floor of Yukihiro's studio, form and reform into a variety of elegant arrangements, exit through the window, and then play their way across Berlin—clustering around street signs, passing through subway stations, even turning themselves into a volleyball court. At the end of the second section of this video, the boards return to their place on the studio floor. Filmed in stop motion, the boards are self-animated. In contrast to the human characters, flitting on and off the screen in frenetic and meaningless flashes, the boards form into geometric shapes, their movements playful but also legible. In the third section of the video, we see the artist as producer, using a crowbar to pry boards off the floor of his studio.

In traditional Japanese puppet theater, the puppeteer appeared on stage along with the puppets. Little effort was made to create the illusion that puppets were self-animated. The puppeteer and puppet moved in tandem. In China, in contrast, shadow puppets were more common. In a shadow puppet show, translucent two-dimensional puppets—their body parts cut from thin dyed leather—were held-up against a white sheet with long sticks. A light shining from behind the puppets illuminated the puppets while obscuring the puppeteers.

In the second video, Chen Zhou's *Morning!* (2011), a single actor sits behind a table set with his breakfast. A shaft of light on the wall next to the table is initially the only sign of a world beyond his room. The actor doesn't speak as he cuts and eats his egg, reads the newspaper, takes drags from a cigarette, and finally leaves for work. He mutters. His words are unintelligible except for the subtitles that translate the muttering into a text about predestination. Everything he is doing, he suspects, has been planned. In contrast to the expressive movements of shadow puppets, the actor is rigid, his hair a virtual helmet and his face blank. His inactivity, his lack of affect, and his murmuring convey a sense that he is both acting and not acting, embodying a sort of resistance to the conventions that an actor must speak, not mumble, that an actor must move naturally, that emotions must be transparent.

Yet, as the camera moves back from the table and the room is shown to be part of a stage construction, as the noise of applause and laughter filters in, the actor appears to have an appreciative audience. What do they appreciate? The way in which the actor does what he (we) all must do: act only up to a certain point, a point at which the role is minimally performed but before contradictions in the official script are allowed to emerge. This is, as a much-ridiculed slogan in China puts it, “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

In the last of the three videos, *Flying* (2005), artist and filmmaker Park Chan Kyung takes the viewer on a plane ride from South to North Korea. The video is shot with a shaky handheld camcorder through the window of a plane flying from Seoul to Pyongyang for the first direct flight since the Korean War. Park uses the legend of separated lovers Gyeonu and Jiknyeo—exiled by the King of Heaven to separate stars and able to reunite only once a year—as a metaphor for the separation of the North and South. But unlike the ritualized and joyful annual reunion of the lovers, the South encounters the North like a staggering drunk. As the plane flies over the North Korean landscape, the sky and earth change places, perspectives are skewed and distorted.

Do these videos say something about Japan, China, and Korea, or about East Asia more generally? Chen and Park seem to re-enact and emphasize the impossibility of meaningful political action. In their videos, art does not serve as a bridge between imagination and the possible. Movement and work are repetitive and purposeless. In contrast, Yukihiro creates a world in which movement is momentarily unconstrained, the mundane is dignified, and alienation is overcome. Of course, this all happens in Berlin, not Japan.