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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Globos | Prelaunch

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Tae Ok Hwang of Collective Magpie

Committee in charge:

Professor Kyong Park, Co-Chair
Professor Teddy Cruz, Co-Chair
Professor Mariana Wardwell
Professor Wayne Yang

2015

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Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all the participants of Globos who gave us the strength to continue to search for hope for our future. Because of your participation, the work lives beyond this publication and opens a path for a new notion of our border.

I would also like to acknowledge all the committee members for demonstrating and showing us their incredible dedication and determination to their own beliefs and ideas for the future.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Globos | Prelaunch

by

Tae Ok Hwang of Collective Magpie

Masters of Fine Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Kyong Park, Co-Chair
Professor Teddy Cruz, Co-Chair

Tae Hwang and MR Barnadas of Collective Magpie have been working collaboratively for almost 20 years creating public art works. On the evening of October 13th, 2015, they spent approximately eight hours discussing transnational project Globos. The entire conversation was digitally recorded. This is a selected excerpt from that recording.

Globos | Prelaunch

MR Barnadas and Tae Hwang met for the first time in September of 1996 in front of the School of The Art Institute of Chicago. They spent their first hours helping each other haul luggage into the art school. Over the following 19 years, they developed a collaborative arts practice and became the first artist duo to enter the MFA program in Visual Arts at the University of California San Diego. On Friday, October 13th, 2015 they sat down to discuss their project ‘Globos’. The entire conversation lasted approximately 8 hours. It was digitally recorded and this document, ‘A Rap on Balloons’, is a collection of excerpts from that recording.

T: When did I start thinking about hot air balloons?

I thought about balloons a lot as a child. But hot air balloons are a recent interest. Maybe the time I first saw the photo of the hot air balloon festival in New Mexico sparked this. Seeing balloons released up in the air always fascinated me as a child; to me, they carry the idea of freedom and mobility. The sky always feels so free, so open. I think also watching Hayao Miyazaki’s animation growing up had a lot to do with this developing fascination. Open sky- fascination and flight are two main themes in his work. Did you have this fascination with something that flies into the sky?

M: I did have an awe and curiosity with balloon flight that feels similar in spirit, but I never connected myself with flight until the late 90's in Chicago. I began thinking about hot air balloons as something I could build myself after spending time with the rare book collection librarian at the Field Museum. Initially, I went to see him for 19th century illustrations and technical drawings that related to the work I was doing then at the museum.

Around the same time, the entomologist I was working with made a comment that changed my life. I was helping her draw the organ of a spider. We labored months looking at clear spider guts from every conceivable angle. After a while, I just asked her, "Petra, what is this? What does this organ do?" Her reply? She had no idea. If this respected arachnologist who had spent 20 years with this species, did not know the basic functions of its anatomy, then clearly nobody does; and clearly we humans know less than I had imagined.

During my breaks, the librarian showed me 19th century newspaper clippings, broadsheets, and advertisements with a lot of the purported claims from research to products about things that we know now aren't possible. When I read these bold declarations from an actual 19th century piece of paper, it was impossible for me to separate them from similar sounding claims in the 21st century. I found a strange agency in this experience and among these papers, I came across an announcement about hot air balloon construction. From there I researched what

was needed to make a hot air balloon by late 19th century standards and filled a big binder with copies of these plans.

Without looking into any actual aviation regulations, I convinced myself that I could build a hot air balloon. When I left Chicago I had the ridiculous idea that I would go to Arcosanti and make a manned hot air balloon with help from the people who live there.

T: You would all make a balloon together?

M: Not as a shared project, but I felt there might be people who would be willing to help with this crazy idea.

T: I never really thought about making one.

M: How did *Globos* begin?

T: As a project, it began with the New Children's Museum.

M: They commissioned 5 artists for a year-long exhibit on the subject of California. One artist from Los Angeles, one from San Francisco, and three from San Diego were invited. You and I have had plenty of discussions leading up to this exhibit about trying to understand what it might be. "If we're *all* doing work

on the theme of “California”, what is it that we, as a group, are actually representing?” Through this process, we decided as non-native Californians that it was important to work with the region that we are living in right now. Here, we are in the borderlands.

T: To interject here, I remember our initial reaction when we first thought about the California exhibit was also thinking of the timing of the exhibit with the centennial of the Panama-California Exposition. We immediately were both thinking we needed a hot air balloon displayed like the Paris World’s Fair.

M: In thinking about this region, we were a little hesitant at first-- how do we go about creating work in part for, and with a country we’re not from?

T: Also, we’re not from California. That was another concern. We live here, but we knew very little about California.

M: Yes. The celebration of both things would seem semi-farcical. We’re here in California, we are residents but we are recent residents, and we are not staying. We are certainly not Mexican, and yet we were planning to produce work on the topic of California for people of the region and specifically with children. I remember our brief meeting with Antanas Mockus during this time. We shared our anxiety about being interlopers in foreign countries, making art for public

spaces and the people who live there. He was very reassuring and restated the obvious that we had forgotten. He reminded us “Give the work to the people and they will decide what to do with it.”

T: What do you think *Globos*, as a project attempts to do?

M: For me, *Globos* is a space that attempts to manifest the impossible, while not forgetting the terrible, the ignored, the separated, the conjoined, wars.. Through working with the imagination of children, the dreams of the dispossessed, the hopes of the privileged, the fantasies we share, the overwhelming endless blind spots we never see, the military.. we are all going to perform this work together and that theater becomes a type of reality.

T: When I think about the attempt in terms of the past, it’s already happened. What was the attempt? I think of it as history, as opposed to the present. All these parts that make the work, the labor, the participation, the workshop, the flight, the balloon, all this stuff, when it’s released, there’s a journey. My attempt is kind of like my hope. Miyazaki had this problem when once attempting to draw a plane, he was unable to figure out how to draw, “how he hoped for a plane to fly.”

Because this project is specifically thinking about this border, when the *Globos* balloons are released, people can imagine a new path of what the situation can be

around the border. When you see something go up and you don't know what it is or where it is going, it's uncertain, but anybody can imagine its uncertainty, and it allows for that. Everybody can interpret in different ways what had happened.

M: Yes, like you don't know where it's going to go, and there is the mystery of its arrival.

T: It's not so much that it's mysterious but that the only certain thing is its unknown path.

M: For me, that ... exactly what you're describing, the unknown path, is the same regardless of if a balloon is filled with hot air and then is immediately ripped to shreds, versus going up into the air and disappearing. To me, it also speaks to a destination as it's important *not* to know the destination. You know the form. You've seen it deflate and inflate, and there it goes. You launch it, and it can go so many different ways. No one is more likely than the other. The performance is the most uncertain, not the destination but the actual behavior. The biggest uncertainty is the unknown nature of the actual release.

T: Yeah, the minute it's lifted, there is uncertainty right there.

M: I'd like to think that all the people who are working on the project were

confronted by their memory of the border when they're making it. "It" being the balloon, the border, and its memory. Whether they are in the US or in Mexico, or even if they had never crossed the border or they've never considered the border before; when the balloon is released, they are all taken some place that they did not know.

T: Let's talk a little about the *Globos*' participants. I've never been one because we're always the makers of the system; the ones who design it. I can never get out of that space when I introduce it to another person.

M: You can never have the perspective of a fresh participant or access this critical perspective in the work.

T: And *Globos* is a bit different from our other projects. Notably, this is the first project where we have worked with many different communities around a particular region. It's also the longest-running project so far.

M: Our projects usually occur in a condensed period of time followed by an aftermath of reflection. In this case, there's the making, then the aftermath, making, aftermath, making, aftermath... It's a variation in pattern. You were talking about this earlier, how we create the work both through physical making and the reflection on the actions after it is gone.

- T: Yes. With this project, there are more periods of making, and then there is much more time to think about them; this is a significant shift in the work.
- M: This pattern changes the way we can understand the work while in the midst of making it. With the many different people we are working with on this project, it still becomes unavoidable to break the participants into groups of those who live in Mexico and the US. I would say, participants from both sides of the border seem equally engaged with the idea of producing something that will fly. Everyone is excited about that regardless of the differences in effort and labor they contribute. Once they learn the scale of what they are contributing to and the fact that it's being produced with hundreds of people essentially doing the *same* thing that they're doing, there is excitement. There seems to be shared universal appreciation.
- T: True, but nobody talks about the "other side". The people in TJ generally have lots of things to say about the border in very personal ways. Then the San Diego side is much more diverse in range with thoughts about the border with more than a few having never considered it. But then neither group talks about people on the other side working on this project. We present the idea to them, "Yes, both sides are working together to make the balloon" but they never actually talk about that part. I don't remember anybody asking, "So, who on the other side is working on this? Who's doing this?"

M: Because we tell them.

T: We do, but I get the sense that there isn't much-interest here in general.

M: There have been repeated participant questions about how to create lasting connections with people from both groups. Students in Mexico have wanted to connect with students in the United States. Students in the United States are aware they have more resources to connect with students in Mexico and both sides have asked, "How do we do that? How do we work together more?" But you're right, when it comes to the actual moments of production there isn't a lot of reflection about other people producing, regardless of country of residence, age, occupation etc. The conversation on the Mexico side tends to relate much to the possibility of dreams. There are a lot of jokes around "Can you fly us over the border?" That sentiment doesn't exist at all on the U.S. side. On the U.S. side, people aren't asking, "Can you fly us over the border?" if they did, the humor would also not be able to translate.

T: I think it is interesting how we know that each other's country, culture, and people exist, but still only with distance. Our interest in the other culture is very much removed from the interest of the actual people who create and live in the culture. It seems to be just about the idea. It's not like, "Who is making *this*?" You know?

This distance for me is a constant reminder of how close we are to the border and to each other. The distance is felt greater maybe because we are so close? It feels strange not wanting to know your neighbor but only to be curious about where they reside. This is what Homi Bhabha also implies... it's the border, that distance, it's so close and so far apart at the same time; and this polarity makes us realize that. "No distance is more awesome than a few feet across the borders or frontiers." And that's why I feel like this polarity also brings an awareness to a proximity of where we live. Where we are, here. The participants are doing that for us.

M: Yet, I have heard repeatedly by both sides that they do really like that this is a project that's being produced with people on both sides. Without further investigation, it is hard to understand what aspect of this is being recognized and appreciated.

T: Everybody knows and says that they like this idea of the binational project. They appreciate that, but it is still a distant comment.

M: Yes. I would agree that those two things exist simultaneously. You're describing this polarity that is being ingested on both sides, that both sides acknowledge the other side quite differently like they are contributing to one part of the other but at

the same time they can't relate and they're not really thinking about that much more beyond where they're at.

T: Yes, they seem to only relate in terms of the border and the effects of the border; ourselves, of course, included.

M: I think another one of the big differences in this project from anything else we have done is *what we are doing with the made*. In this case, we're giving it to the border. That's the thing that I want to accentuate. We've worked with all these people to construct our labor-intensive temporary forms and now we're going to give them to the border to see what happens. And I feel like this moment of an offering is unique to this piece.

There are two stages of unpredictability: One is with the work shoppers and the other unpredictability is the border itself. That unpredictability is a given to the region.

T: This is consciously constructed, yes.

M: I was thinking about *mediation* when you asked why here in San Diego? in TJ? Because we're here. To re-invent, a hot air balloon would need to make sense to

the place and us as resident outsiders. The word “mediation” has come up. While that was not explicitly in mind when creating the work, it makes sense to think of it now. There is a type of mediation in the work. Not to heal; I’ll just put in ‘the polarities’, but to somehow manage or confront what feels impossible: To make work of and for people and with the people of the region, using a type of heritage craft we’ve just learned, and inspired by designs we do not know the full implications of. This is the construction of a culture of the present, realized through the action of labor, creating ephemeral forms. The forms are needed as signs for only as long as it takes to construct and recognize them.

The craft that Miguel is working in is a kind of tradition that’s part of the conversation of paper lanterns that are found in different parts of the world. He’s in an interesting space with this because he’s both a guardian of an endangered craft tradition in Mexico and at the same time he participates in a competitive sport version of the craft that takes it to another level where it’s no longer a clear expression of the heritage craft. Alternatively, the presentation of these balloons has become a spectacle contest divorced of the ceremony associated with the traditional. While he gains his recognition from these international contests, he also produces regionally sought-after “iconic” and “typical” local lanterns that are used for the Day of the Dead, Christmas, etc. He also holds countless workshops for Mexicans to learn these paper traditions of Mexico. Building these ginormous balloons in festivals are another step out of that conversation. When he talks about

this craft tradition, I'm interested in that weird shifting place that he's taken it to - that he's now an important part of. We learned this craft from him for this project. When we hold our workshops, we use his language, "This is a traditional craft". We apply it to our own conversation of contemporary art that he's not a part of.

T: Yes, a construction of culture. This reminds me of how we are often confronted with one question about our work- is it process? is it object? I want to reiterate by saying it is both, but more importantly I think what we try to do is present a new logic out in the world. With *Globos*, we introduce a new system of making a balloon and through participation, this system gets used and experienced in space. This balloon is no longer only about hot air balloons but also about the border here. This is the point to have it out in the public. To make work that enters into and interacts with the public space. Like Miguel and his balloons, what is our work transforming, shifting, translating, and reconstructing?

We have been looking at many "border" works, works specifically of Jaar's *The Cloud*, ERRE's *Toy-an Horse*, Postcommodity's *Repellent Fence* and considering how our work is different from these. I think we are all unique in revealing notions of the border. When I think with Jaar, ERRE, and Postcommodity, there is an action of reflection on the border seen through the aftermath of what happened to the border and its impact--it's in the past tense. And our work, is not in the past

tense. *Globos* opens up a possibility of what a border can be because we are not talking about the past. We are informed by the past, but our work is not a response to the past. I like to think that we making a work for the *present*. Since *the present* is the only thing we can experience.

The big difference between ERRE or Postcommodity and us is hope. At least in my view, I'm not saying that there's no hope in their work.

M: No, but that's not the point of their work.

T: Our point is very different.

M: They're taking different stances in constructing the history of the border. ERRE's work has a type of political poetry that we can connect to. Also, his work is the closest in terms of navigating sites of the border and the New Children's Museum with a specificity to the crossing of the work that connects and merges with the border. All of those functions are similar to the intensions of our work.

With Postcommodity's piece, there's a re-appropriation of form that's interesting.

They chose to base their designs on commercially-produced bird scarecrow balloons and they claim a type of re-appropriation of indigenous symbolism that the balloons graphically present. For the *Repellent Fence*, they used enlarged

versions of these balloons. It was through the re-use of this reclaimed, commercially-produced balloon that they literally and symbolically reclaimed native land across the border. Simultaneously, they made a gesture of solidarity, a type of unity among immigrants across time.

M: What role does the NCM installation of *Globos* play in the larger project of *Globos*?

T: I see the museum as a vehicle for *Globos* to be read as a sculpture, mural, video as well as event. We designed the installation with various stages in mind for children of multiple ages to experience. From the entrance bridge to the building where children walk in between the border fence, something that is impossible in reality. There is a 20' x 20' mural with a merged silhouette of the states of California in the US and Mexico, suspended in a constellation re-representation with 700 "stars" cut in the shape of people. There is also a video with a basic introduction to the work and its various influences on how and why the work is being produced through classic gold mining animations from the Depression Era to Naval training footage from Operation Fu-go, culminating in participation during our *Globos* workshops (foreshadowing of the launch and collective action).

I would say that having a primary audience of children has been one of the most

challenging tasks so far. It was difficult to simplify and clarify through images and language, what would be the most effective ways of communicating our ideas with them. It is also interesting to find ways to communicate that this exhibit is a temporary home for *Globos*. I see this installation as a part fact and a part fantastical way of presenting fragmentation of the border region.

I know we talked about the form of *Globos* inspired by World's Fair. In thinking strictly about how the balloon functions in the museum, I see it as an architectural form made up of thousands of equilateral triangles that attempts to make the perfect image but which inevitably betrays this perfection because of the makers who are all human (who are all diverse in ages and occupation) and also because of the material itself. The internal net structure does somewhat hold the form together, but it ultimately cannot hold its own form without the dependence of air. Its dream-like fragility and delicacy are only achieved through the use of an incredible amount of resources from electricity to human labor. The value of the balloon is in fact in the collective making, as one sees the form come alive. However, as a static form, the personal value towards the balloon gets lost and becomes symbolism for another value - gold. What is the value we talk of?

M: Before we designed the specifics of the installation we talked about approaches to negotiating this. We both really liked the idea of approaching the space of World's Fair exhibitions. Our NCM installation marks the completion of the first

balloon and serves to function somewhat like a World's Fair exhibit. We are also presenting the technology of the future. The future being both the future of the project and the idea of the future to come.

T: I think that is the spirit.

M: Where and how do you make a World's Fair exhibit for kids? How do you construct an exhibition for the world stage with children? This is an abstract idea because our "World's Fair," exhibit places emphasis on imagination as the mechanism of technology. I don't know how effective the final exhibit is as an unguided experience, but this is the idea of our poor man's "World's Fair" exhibit.

T: These questions keep surfacing: What is your current "cultural identity"? How has this changed over time? Is this affected by who is in the room with you? How does authenticity play a role?

We have a lot of problems with this term, "cultural identity;" how it has been defined and used in US culture and how it has just become a box to check. It has not been the case with both of our lives growing up. We have both had to confront official paperwork without an appropriate box to check.

M: Or worse still, having the box checked “White” for us, or checked as any other race we don’t identify as in that moment. This forced confrontation to declare a cultural identity is something we constantly return to and at times feel the need to delineate the type of differences between us in our individual experiences.

T: Yes, I’d say that we have been impacted very differently during our time living in the U.S. We continue to experience more familiarity and more foreignness with each other’s experiences, which in turn creates this need to define these differences.

M: But to address the question directly, my Trinidadian mother raised me to be Black. My half-Spanish Peruvian father raised me to think I’m not. We moved to the US because of a job contract my father had. My family always planned on a permanent return to Canada and still do, to my knowledge. I have a green card and everything that comes with it.

T: You grew up from a place where you are constantly thinking about the idea of race and immigration. It is hard for me to completely separate the two - race and immigration. I never thought about race. My parents never taught me about differences of race. You know, there are Black people, there are White people, there are different kinds of people. That was pretty much it. Even when we immigrated here, there was never a conversation about race explicitly. It was more like, this is happening because we’re Korean or that’s happening because

they are Black. Whereas, I think your parents were a lot more aware of this idea of race, because of the way they grew up.

M: Because they're from different countries and different races.

T: So we have a very different understanding of race and the role race plays in culture. I'm not saying that's my assessment of what I believe immigrant experience is, but that's what I have learned here in the states. This is the immigrant experience. You come here, you don't speak the language. You are an alien. That's what I have learned. I'm not saying I agree with this, but it is what I have learned.

I think the similarity in our experiences is the displacement; we're never at a place that we can literally call home. We are defined by the culture, not defined by who we are. I can say this is my home. You know, I can say my family's home is my home. There are predominant cultural ideas that say "you are not home." This is not your home. And that's where we come in together, to make this type of work. It's a constant reminder of what our experiences were, how we grew up. We spent most of our lives here, yet we're still not home, and some people would never accept that. That's where the part of resistance comes from.

M: What resistance?

T: Making work that's based on transience and moving around, is made through non-hierarchical tasks giving people a type of collective action. I know we feel very strongly about the matters of immigration and race regardless of our differences growing up. This heavily informs our work. It is uncomfortable to not have people contained in a checked box. Acknowledging this transience of shifting cultural identities is extremely uncomfortable. Exactly where we stand needs to be identified because if you are kind of everywhere, if you are like this or that, we can't have that, because then you might be exactly where they stand if where you stand changes. This undermines the complexity of what a cultural identity can be. So, that's the problem. Unless we know exactly where you stand ... Are you on this side of the border? Are you on that side of the border? We can't have in between because that's just going to confuse everybody, and that's just going to screw up the system. You take a side, and if you can't take a side, we're going to make that decision for you. And if you and I resist, we resist that notion because it's not how we grew up.

M: Yes. I would also like to think about constructing these collective moments in our work, these instances where there's a group of people, up to thousands, a body of people working together on something we dreamed up. You and I decide we want to make something and in one way or another we convince people to work with us to help us manifest our projects, and we are all going to do it together. And while

a type of impulse towards non-hierarchy is certainly there, it is not the reality. The reality is we have come up with an idea. The hierarchy is that we are the main idea makers, and the type of agency we extend is basically presenting the opportunity to choose to participate at will. We start every project with ideas, maybe we'll tell the participants what the idea is, maybe we won't. There is always an idea behind what we're doing, but as a participant you can work on these parts, and you can come up with your ideas too.

And there's something about the construction of this ephemeral changing thing. It will just come together and it will pass through. It's temporary; whether it literally gets destroyed, doesn't really matter. Whether the form takes place or it takes another shape, and then comes together and comes apart, is not so important. The important thing is that all these people converge in on the construction.

T: There are tasks, it is work, labor and I am going back to this immigrant experience. This comes from the idea of the working class. We are all immigrants to this country in one way or another. Our labor process re-enforces this idea. And it's a type of collective identity. I have to work hard to claim a bigger part of this for this collective that I am involved in.

M: To go back to authenticity, in terms of a point of origin, I can't claim that I am coming from anyplace other than the psychic space of what you're describing. I

don't feel that I have a stronger claim, personally, more so to one race versus another race. I can make cases for race in different ways with myself that I can own, depending on the context, equally.

In the end, what is inseparable is that there is no home; there's nothing but this constant leaving and desire to, sort of return in another form of leaving. I find this repeated in our work, where each group of people have the potential for the destination of the object that we're creating and by participating, they enter that non-home. You were talking earlier about community, you were talking about worlds. I was asking you about Latour's world image. In speaking of our participants, this grouping of people, although everyone essentially gets the same opportunity to work, and there's no distinction among all the workers, they're not equal. They decide their differences.

T: They are not equal. We never give them an equal opportunity, but we never claim that either. Another thing is that there is no reward for participating except your contribution. The harder you work, there is more reward for you because the work itself is a collective activity and it goes to the collective ownership. That's also a type of immigrant headspace.

So, are we just inauthentic to make this work? Because we're obviously not from here. We didn't grow up here. You're not Mexican of TJ, I'm not Mexican of TJ.

You're not San Diegan. I don't claim to be San Diegan. What kind of authenticity can we have? What kind of information can we bring to the table? These people, if anything, the participants, bring regional authenticity as a group; not us.

M: The headspace we have with our different relationships to living in a place we are not from is the framework we bring. That psychic head space is always needing to negotiate between places, that is the authenticity that we bring to the project; that is just truly what our project is very much about - negotiating between places, as in not being from there or here. And we are never going to stay. There's never a place of arrival. When you talk about that final image in your mind, of the destination of the balloon to a place unknown, that is very much what the project is; and the participants bring the authenticity of sight, place and psyche of being here; of being residents, or at least home to, in one way or another the borderlands.

T: Okay, what happens after the "*Globos*" launch?

I think about it as a type of memory and how a memory can function. Your memory of the flight becomes part of the history of this particular place.

M: Creating the public imaginary.

T: Yes, and a new memory can create a whole new space.