

A Boundary between the Public and Individual Spaces under Asian Democracy

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I. Introduction

Asian countries such as Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea have modernized and developed their economics rapidly since the World War II, and the factors of their success have been examined. In scholars' studies, a controversial term, Asian value, was suggested and scholars found its cultural root in Confucianism. The aforementioned three countries once took Confucianism as a political ideology in their own history and, as the legacy of Confucianism, still respects a political leader's authority and give a priority more to the public good than to the human rights. Despite the persuading view that Asian value based on Confucianism leads Asian glory, a contrast view has been suggested. The powerful authority of a political leader and the sacrifice of the individual right in the East Asia are no less than the beautification of totalitarianism.

These two contrast views are well reflected in Korean artist, Do-Ho, Suh' works. He was born in South Korea, gained a bachelor degree from Seoul National University, and moved to the U.S. to continue his artistic studies. Suh's works after living in the U.S. have dealt with spaces which show an ambiguous boundary between the public and the individual. His recent work, *Some/One* (2001) (See Fig.1), shows a nine-foot tall, long, flowing robe made by approximately 100,000 military dog tags. While regular dog tags identify the wearer through name, birth date, and blood type, Suh's manufactured ones show randomly assorted letters and numbers as they represent a required individual anonymity in front of the authority of community. In addition, the viewer can enter inside of the robe and see their distorted reflections in mirrors which are installed in the robe.

As he mentioned, his individual experiences of space in Korea which has unconsciously conserved a strong legacy of Confucianism and in the U.S. which the private right takes precedence are contrast. His work makes a critical distance for the viewer to think about human rights and democracy in the East Asia.

This paper will look at Asian model of democracy in an ideological mechanism and in this process, examine how Asian value and Confucianism work. As a methodology of this project, Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology will be applied. In addition, his concepts of point de capture, fantasy, excess, and enjoyment will help to understand how ideology is worked through its mechanism.

II. The Discourse of Asian Value

The Asian value means a unique system of Asian cultural legacy advocated by political leaders in the cultural area of East Asia. Xiaoping Li, in her article "Dealing with Human rights: Asian and Western on the value of human rights," describes the Asian value in four categories. First, "rights are culturally specific." Arguing that the concept of human rights originated from the West, the Chinese government in China's 1991 White Paper, declared that because of the differences in historical background, social system, cultural tradition and economic development, countries differ in their understanding and practices of human rights. In addition, at the 1993 Asian regional preparatory meeting for the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, Bangkok government showed the same position that human rights must be considered in the national and regional peculiarities and various historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds (38). As the two cases show, East Asian countries avoid adjusting the Western concept of human right to them and insist their peculiar situations.

Second, “the community takes precedence over individuals.” The priority between the individual and the public is a main key to understand the difference between Asian and the Western cultures. The importance of the community in Asian cultures cannot be comparable to individualism in the West. Shared Values (1991), an official statement of the Singapore government, stated that the emphasis on the community is an important survival value for Singapore. According to Asian viewpoint, human rights and the rule of laws are basically selfish and destroy Asian social mechanism. The increases of violence, crime, fragmented family and drug abuse are clear evidence of the failure of the Western individualism.

Third, “social and economic rights take precedence over civil and political rights.” Asian countries have more considered the social, economical rights than the individual civic rights. In the Chinese White Paper (1991) state that to feel and dress the Chinese people who has long suffered cold and hunger was more urgent than to talk about political and civil rights. In addition, consisting of a labor union for worker is not as important as maintaining economic stability and increasing effective production. These two statements imply that if leaders are authorized to restrict individual’s civic and political rights to stabilize politics, they can achieve a more economic prosperity.

Fourth, “rights are a matter of national sovereignty.” A national sovereignty includes judicial power of a government over human rights. Human rights are a domestic issue of a nation, not one of foreign or international agencies. China, in its 1991 White paper, argues that the problem of human rights is a matter of national sovereignty. Furthermore, the West’s intention adjusting a universal standard of human rights to developing

countries is a disguise of cultural imperialism and an attempt to restrict the development of developing countries.

In relation to the Asian values, Li and advocates of Asian theory show opposite opinions. Li argues that the Asian values are a government rhetoric and official statement supported by Asian political leaders. She criticizes that they are confused a community into a state and a state as a current regime. Frequently citing traditional Confucian values of social harmony, they restrict the right to free association and expression and wields more pervasive control over unorganized individual workers and dissenters. On the other hand, in the position of the advocates of Asian theory, Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Chok Tong, Mahbubani, and Kausikan, have defended that since Western democracy brings out disorder and indulgency, it does not fit to Asian culture which respects authority and order. Thus, Asia has to develop its own a political model, Asian democracy, which continues to develop its culture, value, history, tradition, and custom. What they have in their minds is that the public order and the respect of authority are prior to individual liberty, and a good government is preferred to a democratic government. According to them, a good government achieves social justice with democratic responsibility and, as a guardian of the public, brings out the public order, welfare, and economic prosperity.

In these two opposite viewpoints on the Asian model of democracy, a complicate situation is the universal application of Confucianism to explain a model of democracy without liberty in the East Asia. For example, the advocates have applied Confucianism to justify their theoretical background such as a political leader's authorized power, the priority of the public over the individual, and harmony. However, Confucianism in the opposite site is used as propaganda for an Asian model of dictatorship which mixes the

patriarchal or communitarian system of Confucian tradition with the market principles of capitalism. Because of the interest relations of the two sites, the debates on the justification of Confucianism in the East Asian society can not be determined.

III. The political situation in Korea

Korea has typically followed the ambiguous Asian model of democracy in the name of the political stability and economical development. Suh's works, *Who Am We?* (1997) (See Fig.2) and *High School Uni-Form* (1996) (See Fig.3) reflect Korean situations in a democracy without liberty. In *Who Am We?*, Suh displays a wall paper showing nearly 40,000 portraits taken from his high school yearbooks. Each face reduces to the size of a matchstick. From a distance, the overall image looks like a collective pattern of dots. However, as the viewer comes close to the wall paper, they can recognize that a dot is an individual face of a teenage boy or girl. This work describes an anonymous individual living for the sake of the public in Korea. This requirement of the respect of order and authority in Korean society appears in his next work, *High School Uni-Form*. He installs 60 high school boy's uniform jackets which are similar to his uniform in a high school. He saws them together at the shoulders. These high school jackets are rigidly arranged in a row and hung to a metal framework with wheels such as a large transportable coat hanger. The assembled jackets can be wheel, and it looks like a march of a hierarchically structured group. The idiosyncrasy buried in the crowd in Suh's works questions a state of democracy in Korea.

Korea chose Confucianism as a political ideology during the Choson dynasty, from the fourteen to the eighteen centuries as most East Asian countries in a Chinese cultural area did. Mark L. Clifford suggests that Korean Confucianism shows a unique style of

Confucianism which accentuates “the purposefulness of Japanese approach” and “the elitist sense of virtue of the Chinese,” and this combined form has resulted in a bold, risk-taking style of action (58). After liberating from the colonial period of Japan in 1910-45, Korean government has experienced various political upheavals, the dictator regime of president SungMan Lee in 1948-61, the military dictatorship in 1961 and Revitalizing Reforms in the 1970s under general JungHee Park, the fifth and sixth Republics in the 1980s by two generals DooHwan Chun and TaeWoo Roh, and the first civilian government in 1993 by president YounSam Kim. During the period of the political confusion, the Korean asked to be patient in a name of political stability and an economic development. In appearance, Korean economic success and rapid modernization spoke for a model of Asian development and showed the possibility of Confucianism in a modern society.

However, Clifford argues that Confucianism has been misunderstood in Korea. He mentions that even though Confucius believed the doctrine that power and authority should cascade down a natural hierarchy, from fathers to sons, from husbands to wives, from elder to younger, it didn't mean the abuse of subordinates, the systematic stifling of workers, the sacrifice of dignity in the name of development or the chronic wife-beating for which Koreans are notorious. As the Asian values or Asian model of democracy show inconsistent double edges, Korea cannot avoid of lacking human rights and individual welfare, which is seen in everything from torture cases to Korea's horrible record on worker health and safety. Furthermore, harmony or consensus, a virtue of Confucianism, in Korea has been reached by coercion. Clifford points that the hierarchical legacy of

Confucianism was overlapped with a system of military authoritarianism in Korea. As a result, the classical Confucian ideal is barely found in Korea.

The doubt of the Korean style of democracy appeared in an economic crisis resulting in I.M.F. (International Monetary Fund) in 1997. SukChun Yu argues that I.M.F. came from the bad custom of Confucianism. Confucianism should be simply understood as a mixture of the system of mandarin with logrolling. Furthermore, according to him, even though Korean declared a civilian government in 1987, it was not more than a precedent condition to develop democracy. In fact, it needed more time for the public to understand the changes of social systems. Despite the political replacement toward democracy, each election in Korea has been controlled by logrolling, group selfishness, and particular academic factions. As a result, the supports and benefits accomplished by particularly connected groups brought out fatal corruptions in politics and administration. Yu finally criticizes that these bad customs from Confucianism led to IMF in 1997. In the same context, SungHwan Lee examines Asian value critically. Lee argues that Asian value is a rhetoric expression used by the West and the U.S. which want the political, economical, and cultural controls over the third world. Or, it is an ideological device for the politician of the developing totalitarian countries to maintain their vested rights.

Lee's second opinion of Asian value is very suggestive in Korean situation facing I.M.F. EunMee Kim, a specialist on the structure of Jaebols and Mark Clifford, a professional analyst on Korean economy argue that the main reason resulting in the economic crisis was the collusion between Korean government and Jaebols, a group of monopolistic enterprises. This alliance brought a new style of totalitarianism in Korea as Donald Kirk mentions that the confederation between Korean government and Jaebols

has ensured victory for the ruling party. It is irony that during the first civilian government, an authoritarian mood was spread again.

The current event in Korea reminds the Korean of the question of human rights again. The last President DaeJung Kim's regime, the first government led by an opposition party and so called a government of the public, was accused of an illegal wiretap scandal. The National Intelligence Service under Kim's administration taped cellular phones of politicians and journalists and reported their conversations to the Blue House. The related agents to this event mentioned what they did was for the nation's profit and the preservation of sovereignty. This current scandal makes it doubt that Korean government has worked on its democratic consolidation and questions to the extent the Korean should be patient in the name of the development of the country.

IV. Understanding an Confucianism in an ideological mechanism

As the Asian model of democracy and the Korean cases show, Confucianism have both faces: its spiritual legacy has helped the East Asia to make rapid economic success and modernization. On the other hand, its doctrine allows political leaders in the East Asia to have a totalitarian power. Ironically, as Confucianism has been criticized as a bad custom, it has been passionately supported. In this debatable issue, this paper looks at Slavoj Žižek's thought of mapping ideology to understand how the Asian values of Confucianism are conceded and work for establishing Asian democracy.

The Asian values of Confucianism cannot be defined. Žižek took an origin of ideological discourse from Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis. According to Lacan, a signifier does not have a signified in the system of the signifier, because a signifier continuously slides within its differential relations. Thus, the signifier needs "the point de

capition” to potentially have a signified to operate signification. Following Lacan’s concept of the point de capition, Žižek focuses how the point de capition of an ideology makes a whole entity in an ideological area. He uses a word “quilt” to depict the procedure of the point de capition. The intervention of the point de capition connects a floating signifier to a signified, and then a signification occurs. Similarly, the elements within ideological discourses can be identified through a net of the differential signifiers. The quilting makes ideological elements as a stable entity. Based on Žižek’s concept of quilting, the essence of the Asian values of Confucianism is not stably given, but effects produced by connections of signifiers in Asian discourses.

Confucianism, as a role of a spiritual prop, in the Asian value is a surplus X, what is in Confucianism more than Confucianism. Žižek argues that the operation of quilting is not circular-symmetrical because of a surplus X. In his famous example “America, this is Coke!”, Žižek focuses not what kind of ideological vision about America is contained in Coke, but a moment gaining a signifier which identifies the ideological vision of America with Coke. In “America, this is Coke!”, Coke first connotes the spirit of America, and this spirit of America is then condensed in Coke as its signifier, its signifying representative: what we gain from this simple inversion is precisely the surplus X, the object-cause of desire, that unattainable something which is in Coke more than Coke. This X surplus can be applied to Confucianism. As being a spiritual prop for the Asian value, Confucianism has been regarded as a common denominator for the East Asian culture and becomes a surplus which supports its identity existing beyond changing situations. It tells the most distinct character of the East Asia more than compared to the West and at the same time, exists an indescribable core.

Furthermore, Confucianism as a surplus or an indescribable can be defined not by its inherent, relational identity but by its opposition, its differential relation to the West. Based on Žižek's thought, there exists always an irreducible gap between the name and its rigid designator which aims at an "impossible real kernel," a surplus produced by the signifying operation. Because of this gap, he advocates anti-essentialism. "It is impossible to define any such essence, any cluster of positive properties which would remain the same in all possible worlds." As long as Confucianism is used as an effect of signifiers in the East Asia, it continuously slides in a net of its differential relations.

According to Žižek, this irreducible gap can be made up with a fantasy. In his discourse of mapping ideology, he mentions that the Other such as a nation, society, or organization knows its lack and tries to conceal it. Fantasy is not to give an individual vain satisfaction, but it consists of a kind of reality and teaches to the subject how, what he/she desires. As a fantasy acts in a level of individual, a fantasy acts in a social level being composed of a social reality and telling the subject how, what kind of desires he/she seeks to construct a perfect society. On the other hands, the fact that the Other consists of a fantasy means that it has also a fundamental impossibility. However, the subject needs a perfect, ideal Other and a social fantasy screens the lack of the Other. Then, the subject goes through this fantasy and misconceives as if his/her desires are harmoniously placed within the Other.

The fantasy is maintained by an excess. As the subject seeks an object of desire through a fantasy, the Other tries to make up a desire of a harmonious entity through a social fantasy. An ideological identity grasps the subject not when the subject becomes an ideological tool, but when the subject sympathizes with a transcend ideological surplus

such as a community's justification, unification, and bond. In other words, the Other prepares fantastic backgrounds for an ideology making the subject experience them with rapture. Laulau and Mouffe argue that society does not exist. "The social is always an inconsistent field structured around a constitutive impossibility, traversed by a central antagonism... Every process of identification conferring on us a fixed socio-symbolic identity is ultimately doomed to fail." Therefore, Zizek mentions that the function of ideological fantasy is to mask this inconsistency and the fact that society does not exist, and to compensate us for the failed identification.

Confucianism, in the fantastic frame of the Asian value, is used as a fetish which simultaneously denies and embodies Asian model of democracy, the structural impossibility of the Asian society. It acquires a positive and apparent existence by the symbolic order and delivers enjoyment in constructing the ideological frame of Asian democracy. Thus, the excess and enjoyment produced by a fantasy make the subject go through an ideological frame. And then, the subject believes a vision of society which does exist and which the relation between its parts is organic and complementary.

Do-ho Suh's work, *Floor* (1997-2000) (See Fig.4) Welcome (See Fig.5) consists of 40 glass plate, each measuring a little more than three feet square and 180,000 plastic figures of two inch tall men and women which are placed on the gallery floor and hold up the glass. The viewer can step on the glass and stare at the figures' miniature palms pressed against the glass. The gesture of the plastic crowd looks like resisting to an authority, but it is hard to find a rage on the figures' faces (See Fig.6). This paper, rather, regards them as the subject who fall into narcissism and misconceive the desire of the Other as his/her desire. According to Lacan, even though the subjects are split, when they fall in

narcissism which they misunderstand the desire of the Other as their desire, they establish an ideal ego.

Confucianism in the Asian value is a signifier but becomes a symbolic order in its operative mechanism. Even though the Asian model of democracy is criticized as new totalitarianism or soft authoritarianism, East Asian countries as the Other keep defending their policies using Asian values which can be only defined its identity in contrast to non-Asian values or the West. In addition, the East Asian countries endow the public with a fantasy such as the most idealist democracy combining the Eastern and the Western policies to conceal their social structural lack. Zizek mentions that beyond a fantasy, there is nothing. Rather we should maintain a fantasy in order to maintain a social order and to prevent a death drive, a dramatic desire to reveal a fantasy. In addition, he adds that it will be an ethical question how the symbolic order should be maintained. The Confucianism of the Asian value is a spiritual vein and can not be ignored to explain the East Asian development. However, since Confucianism as an ideology is supported extremely, its obscene and violent aspects or perversion, in Zizek's terminology, starts coming out as new totalitarianism. As Zizek advises, it should be maintained as a sublime object to secure social orders.

V. Conclusion

This paper has looked at the ideological discourse of democracy through Do-ho Suh's works. After Suh experienced two types of democracy, the East Asian democracy and the Western democracy, he questions a boundary between the private and the public. While the Western democracy has been developed based on individual liberalism, the East Asian democracy places a priority to order or authority over human rights. In the name of

economic development and political stability, the public has been required to be patient. In addition, the East Asia advocates Asian value to support their style of democracy, and during this process, Confucianism becomes an ethical doctrine and cultural background for the East Asia.

In stead of seeking for the justification of Asian value or whether Confucianism can be compatible with modern society, this paper examined how Confucianism revives and works as an ideology in the East Asia. Based on Zizek's theory of ideology, this paper looked at Confucianism as an avoid signifier being defined by the effect of ideological discourse. Confucianism in Asian value is something more than what Confucianism is. It is a surplus or is used as a fetish. As Zizek mention that if we push a surplus to one side dramatically, it shows perversion, the East Asian countries' passionate support of Confucianism rationalizes their authority and brings out new totalitarianism or soft authoritarianism. Like the Mobius strip, the two faces of Confucianism, maintaining traditional ethical orders and demolishing human rights, are connected each other.

The ambiguous space between the individual and the public dealt with in Do-ho, Sun's works is a moment which the Asian value of Confucianism gains ideological effect as a signifier. In addition, his works represent that a symbolic order, in fact an avoid signifier, gains its power in an ideological mechanism. Through Zizek's theory and Do-ho Suh's works, the mysticism of the Asian model of democracy is revealed in an ideological mechanism.

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Fig. 1) Some/One (2001)

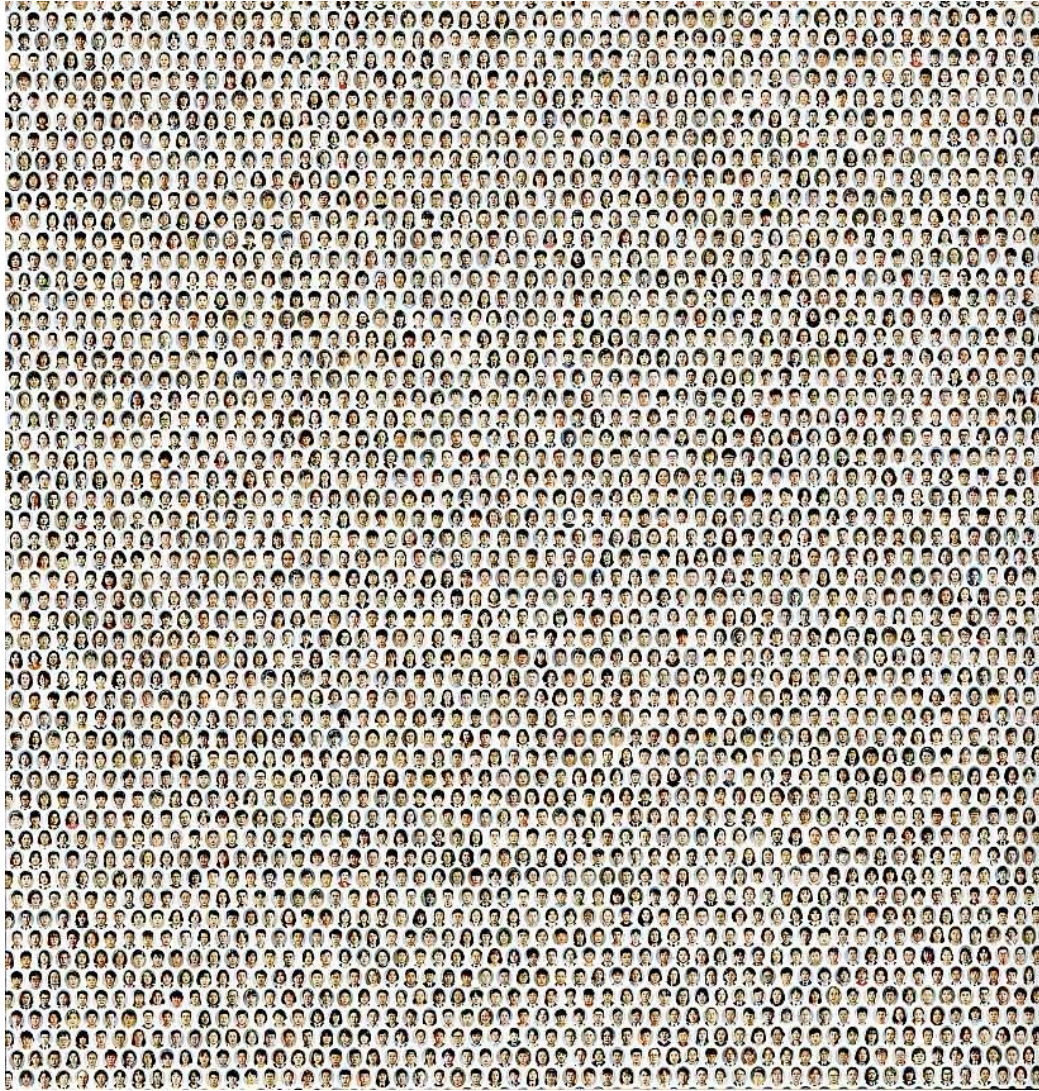


Fig. 2) Who Am We? (1997)



Fig. 3) High School Uni -Form (1996)



Fig. 4) Floor (1997-2000)



Fig. 5) Welcome (1998)

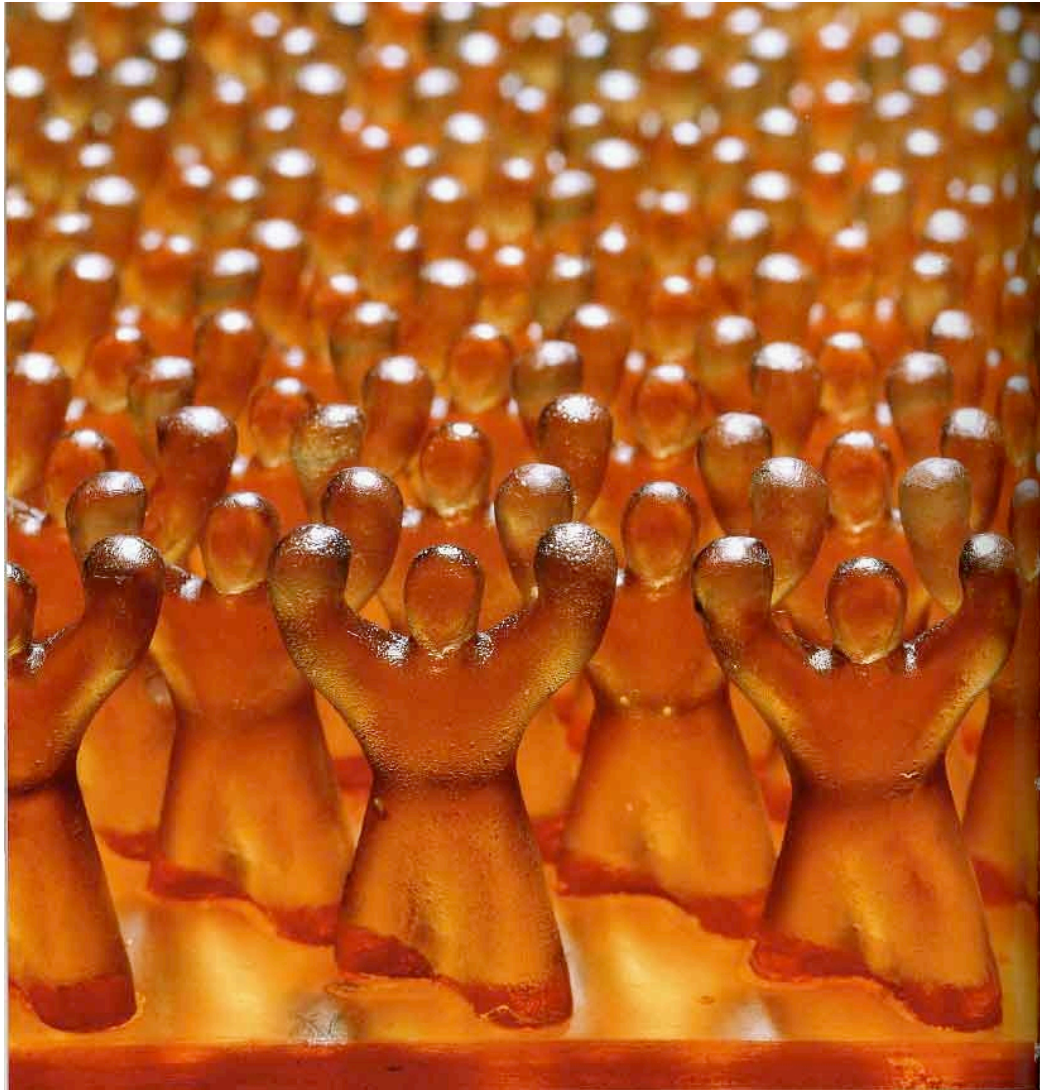


Fig. 6) The Detail of Welcome (1997-2000)