

# COVID-19, Local Cultural Ecosystem

What should the artists do  
at the local?



**March 31. 2020**  
**3-6pm.**

Host

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** (Director of Culture City)

Panels

**Yong-Taek Kim**

(Co-Chair of Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable)

**Sun-Ah Oh**

(Co-Chair of Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable)

**Young-Bong Yoo**

(Theater director,  
Co-manager of Chunjangsan Fable Theater)

**Won-Jae Lee**

(President of Civic Cultural Center)

**Hyun Lee**

(Seongbuk Cultural Foundation, Cultural Policies)

**Common Seongbuk  
Artist Roundtable**

**March meeting**

In order to prevent  
the spread of  
**COVID-19,**  
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youtu.be/4-5jnbrBpz8

**Structural access to super viruses  
and disasters**

**Socio-cultural attitude of fear and  
disgust in the event of a disaster**

**Problems in the structure  
of supporting cultural arts  
in the event of a disaster**

**What task did COVID-19 give us?**

Seoul Cultural Foundation

[Culture+Seoul] Truth or Talk \_May 2020

COVID-19 and Local Cultural Ecosystem

## What should the artists do at the local?

**Date\_** March 31, 2020, 3-6pm

**Place\_** Seongbuk Public Library

**Host\_ Ki-Hwang Jeong** Director of Culture City

**Panels\_**

**Yong-Taek Kim** Co-Chair of Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable

Seongbuk Culture & Arts Educator Cooperative 'Village on Art'

**Sun-Ah Oh** Co-Chair of Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable, Actress

**Young-Bong Yoo** Theater director, Co-manager of Chunjangsan Fable Theater

**Won-Jae Lee** President of Civic Cultural Center

**Hyun Lee** Seongbuk Cultural Foundation, Cultural Policies

**Organizer** Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable, Seongbuk Cultural Foundation



COVID-19 changed the atmosphere of the debate along with the social environment. C

Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable<sup>1</sup> hosted regular meeting and debate; broadcast live on Facebook and YouTube. The purpose of the debate was to discuss the role of cultural art and local artists during COVID-19 pandemic. Several arguments were made such as structural issues of the disaster, from the social problems arising in disaster state to the current value and direction of cultural art support, how artists deal with the calamity at local, and how the future after COVID-19.

\*Debate Video: <https://youtu.be/4-5jnbrBpz8>

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<sup>1</sup> Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable is a local culture based community located in Seongbuk region where artists, managers, and activists gathered to collaborate for community cultural rights, cultural diversity, commons, and cultural cooperation.

## Part 1. Socio-cultural attitudes during the disaster and the role of local culture and art

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** I think it's my first time to say "how do you do" with a heavy heart.

I would like to introduce you '11 Promises from the Press,' the recent article written by Katharine Viner, the editor-in-chief at The Guardian from the United Kingdom, because I thought her article meets with the purpose of the debate. She wrote, first, "we will bring the personal stories of the people most affected: looking not just at the powerful, but those whose voices are often unheard", second, "teams will continue to bring climate crisis and environment", and third, she wrote the "team will bring some hope in everyday life". I think the artists' role in the community is to create hope.

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) has sent a document about cultural activities related to COVID-19 in different regions and cities to Seongbuk. What they want to tell the most is that 'it's time to prepare for the future'. They wrote not only countries, but we also need more global solidarity and concern about how we can make the future. I thought this may be a more important task than surviving through COVID-19, and necessary to talk about climate crisis or system destruction.

**Won-Jae Lee** Many people related to cultural art industry are angry with many reasons. The industry is already in difficult terms, but I don't think proper public safety network isn't working as we are under survival threat after COVID-19. Korean society hasn't considered cultural art as a secondary or social value. Therefore, they understand it as just not having any cultural event. It's also a problem that cultural art is only focused on supporting current difficulties. Disaster capitalism or risk society is already cl

ose, and COVID-19 is also related to human greed and lifestyle. As the experts predicted, the current situation will get worse in the future, and many crises will exceed human power. I think cultural art is a human performance of viewing and expressing the situation in-depth, and debate, add social value, hope, comfort, or heal about the situation. However, at some point, cultural art seems to be taken as a policy or a product toward fragmentary actions. I believe that the role of artists who have insight, communicate and discuss society is more crucial than ever. There is a lot of work to do for artists themselves, and I think it will be great to discuss how the government should pay more attention to cultural art. We have to talk about not only financial support but how to change cultural art support system essentially that we have censured and criticized. Even if it wasn't COVID-19, many artists and performers didn't have any job from January to March. I think it's time to discuss our rights more actively at this time and discuss and act the social values and roles of cultural art together.

**Young-Bong Yoo** Representatives in the performance art industry are expressing their anger at the official announcement from Seoul on cooperation to pause everything. They are in a situation where with a disagreement against lopsided official announcement without any empathy for artists. They're very aware that they have to be careful because the theater is an enclosed space. They will take actions, but the end of the official announcement for cooperation ends with 'penalty.' We should discuss the consensus of the official announcement. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe, when 1/3 of people were dying due to the Black Death, clergies said people lack in faith. Yet, reverends and priests were dying too. In such a circumstance, the era of humanism and renaissance began after questioning the situation. It's important to discuss the support because

we are in a difficult time right now, but there's no choice but talk about what society is waiting in future and what to prepare when the pandemic is over.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** As you said, it's necessary to prepare for the future and search for a method to prevent and support if it occurs again. The whole world is having a common experience now. I think the experience itself is also significant, rather a great opportunity to be in solidarity with the world. Depends on how we make the future, the world, countries and regions will unfold completely different.

**Yong-Taek Kim** I also think there are many facts revealed in this disaster. As we watched how Europe or the United States, which are called developed countries, handle the disaster, we learned the fact that we haven't lived just like sprinting. There's one part to discuss how to overcome the current situation, and the other part, frequent meetings to seriously consider what to do in the future are required, and the artists should share their thoughts with these topics in mind. I desperately felt these movements are necessary for each region by genre and integration.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** I believe that the energy to overcome this disaster bases on the cultural assets and consensus within a region,

**Yong-Taek Kim** The school will open when everything is stable to some extent, but what I concern as a parent is that children will feel alienated if their friends find out that their family got infected with the coronavirus. Even if the school is fully prepared, another aspect can happen if this matter is not taken as a consideration. There is a

nother concern about who can compensate for a child's wound if a child gets infected and bullied.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** It must be hard for any household with children. The government should take a role, but it's also necessary to find a method to resolve these concerns within a community.

**Young-Bong Yoo** There was a recent incident where a man in 60s went to a pharmacy bring a sickle as a weapon. I would like to discuss social inequality for people who suffer in this time of disaster.

**Sun-Ah Oh** I got a text message from my friend who was taking care of her baby, on the dawn of the day before yesterday. She said, she thought suddenly 'Am I doing well, is this the right way to live?' and felt depressed. After I said, "Is this an aftereffect of COVID-19?" my friend and I comforted each other and moved on, but what will happen if this lasts longer?

**Won-Jae Lee** I think Korea is still a nationalist and powerful police state, so it's under well-prevention. The nation plainly signifies the symbolic system and the authority system; the nation and an outstanding president don't save us. We have to speak out our own stories, but we are stuck with frame about what the government does something us. Fundamentally, each citizens' perspective and action and solidarity between citizens in a disaster or dangerous society are important, thus the region is essential. If region communities and regions develop more, they can become more safety net and e

energy, but the central government still have to take all the lead. National interests and national safety nets are essential, but I think we need to take COVID-19 as an opportunity to create a space for our region and life together.

**Hyun Lee** This is why it's important to give an appropriate distance and objectively judge the government. Jeju was the most impressive example of a sustainable local community-centered lifestyle and a network connected to cultural art. Disposable masks are still insufficient, and it's difficult for elders or mobility-impaired people to go out to purchase them. Jeju has a low population density compared to the size of the city, and it costs a lot to travel around. I saw a case where the citizens devised a method to make masks voluntarily; they took photos and wrote about how to make a mask with some kitchen paper towels and two rubber bands, and shared to residents. I think it's close to self-efficiency and a good approach to continue to feel to the community in life.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** Elders might fear if they don't have any ability to interpret information about how to buy a mask. Their fear will disappear if the local community can provide some information.

**Yong-Taek Kim** In case of this disaster like COVID-19 occur again, it's important to create a manual so variety peoples gather shortly, discuss their each area, and give suggestion.

**Hyun Lee** It's a fact that Korea has gone through COVID-19 pandemic with openness



and transparency and provides information; it's necessary to give the information to alienated people and continue to include them.

**Sun-Ah Oh** When we have these conversations, I think "I'm an actress who has a connection with elders within a region, then what can I do for them?" As an artist, I thought I should think about the project for any disaster like now with fellow artists and make some time to discuss these matters.

**Won-Jae Lee** The biggest issue now is starting the school semester. People are only interested in starting semester and national entrance exam for university, not on new method of education. Students are in a crucial time where they need various forms of sensitivity education, such as one-on-one. That's the role for cultural art, but people don't consider them. It's completely wrong to think that you just have to do the canceled event later. We should not stand aside, but we have to actively fund artistic approaches and meaningful activities during this disaster. To support cultural art, I would like to suggest that we should actively discuss and execute for change the value, philosophy, and paradigm of the support system, which has repeatedly raised in cultural art.

**Yong-Bong Yoo** The essence of this topic may not match with the current crisis, but it should be assumed as some kind of vacation. You receive a vacation bonus during a vacation. Creativity comes from during a vacation, and it gets replenished. Artists should not lose this chance to get inspiration from the coronavirus. In Italia, a theater company suggested a performance by a window during the quarantine. To make that h

appen, minimum support must be done consistently. It will give some time to find an alternative.

**Yong-Taek Kim** When it comes to the Department of Education, which is related to arts education, are only focused on whether schools should start or not; they don't think about art education or art instructors. They might have decided to not discuss it because of their urgent situation, but I can only doubt if there was no time. I thought that the Department of Education is still lousy because there weren't any talk or consideration for anyone related for the past two months, and there weren't even any meetings.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** Are art instructors just on hold?

**Yong-Taek Kim** Everything is delayed. They were recently told to prepare for online class personally.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** Don't they count art instructors' waiting time as working hour?

**Yong-Taek Kim** So far, yes. People rather think that they have no interest because they don't make any time for a discussion nor route for a suggestion.

**Yong-Bong Yoo** What are the artists up to? Personally, I've been reading a lot of books and write. I wrote 3~4 years worth of writing in 2 months.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** We mainly talk about temporary jobs, and artists are part of them. I think the waiting time for school art instructors should be counted as their working hours.

**Yong-Taek Kim** We want to share our concern and discuss how to utilize those time to goodwill, and confirm if our plan is administrative. However, I think only complaints will remain if the government keep blocking us because of an emergency.

## **Part 2. Cultural arts support structure issues and future challenges**

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** Let's focus on cultural art and regions. Like Free E-Book Service, cultural art should take an important role to open and share what it can provide in this situation.

**Won-Jae Lee** I think it's time for a cultural approach towards disease or disaster above all. Like the role of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we should prepare a powerful structure to cope with the disaster in the culture field as well.

I believe good policies and supports will come out through a social debate process, rather than putting out support policies as if it's showing mercy.

Also, it's necessary to concern about support structure itself. Supports don't have to concentrate in a certain period. Ultimately, cultural art is most important in human life.

When people are in quarantine, most of them work on cultural art contents or related activities, and the importance of them is rising. Thus, the debate to transform the s

upport system with quality needs to implement in earnest. On the other hand, I would like to emphasize that the support to survive is required immediately, thus cultural artists can prepare for their future.

**Yong-Taek Kim** The reality is the schools think of art education as just a class and rely on instructors' competence. I think it's a good opportunity to look over the value and significance of art education. The unsolvable situation that needs discussion with the Office of Education or the Ministry of Education revealed again due to COVID-19. I hope that residents, artists, and educators who are members of the community will concern again and bring an opportunity to change the direction of policy.

**Hyun Lee** I think it's necessary to discuss openly how the support should provide at an overall level and how it should be divided by the type, instead of discussing each topic in each parts with setting the boundaries.

**Won-Jae Lee** The independence of art policies or art organizations is weak within our society. The metropolitan rather than the central government, the fundamental rather than the metropolitan, the privacy rather than the fundamental, and the individual rather than the privacy has more senses and dailiness. It's good to have a system that respects the senses of the field and the parties and supports the matching policies, but our cultural policy is the opposite. People in the field can barely speak out or have low authority. I think the most artificial boundary rather collapses in this period. You can see a lot of boundaries of art education, art therapy, living culture, and living art are collapsing. The cooperation between colleagues in the field is very important. A lot

of citizens and artists agonize human life and survival during this disaster period. I think people can actively prepare and solidify at a level where all problems and limitations reveal when it's not an everyday situation.

**Yong-Bong Yoo** There should be a declaration that we will establish and be responsible for the direction of cultural art support policies of Seongbuk-gu. We'll be able to do things you can do within a region after a declaration. The support policy during this time is under the hardship period. Due to COVID-19, the application for support is booming and the competition rate is increasing. At this point, artists should be the actual party, rather than at a position to be evaluated. First, you need to refuse in some way, but can the artists do this now? It's also a problem that support policy is focused on providers. They request to provide something with a certain amount of support under the logic of capitalism, but does art need to provide? We should also think about how can reset the position of the provider.

**Won-Jae Lee** The hardship period occur because of administrative expediency and outcome principle-centered budget execution. You just need to spread out the budget where it usually is given out during spring and fall. Who cares if people apply less? There are various forms of art. Good art doesn't need thousands of people. The process itself is not a difficult problem. To direct something, you need to write a proposal, plan a budget, and receive a fund to start working. Instead, if the project has well worth the work that has already verified, it should receive the support afterwards. This will give a better opportunity for better art. Also, it's to create multiple year support. The short year support can't set up a place. Artists sometimes fall apart or in good condition

on. For example, if you apply for 3-year support, it's either plan everything with rational evaluation, or stop the whole project if there are any problems. It's necessary to show what the administration couldn't imagine or thought it was impossible. I would like to rather suggest to try more aggressive experiment and imaginations. The collaborative system is only available within a region; the national unit is rather difficult. I hope this will be a turning point that actively creates conditions for sustainable work or life.

**Hyun Lee** The scariest situation right now is going back as if nothing ever happened when the coronavirus dies down. Most of the cultural businesses are either canceled or delayed during the first half of the year; I think there will be an assignment left as we go through an aftereffect on the second half of the year. Rather, I think a warning will alarm when you go back to the business.

**Yong-Bong Yoo** Korean don't think of the importance of artists in general. When the administration set a direction, they don't ask artists for advice. Younger generations are more passive state. They are evaluated again in society after learning at the school.

**Won-Jae Lee** Actually, it has been less than 20 years since most of cultural foundations were established. It has not been over 20 years since the Seoul Cultural Foundation was founded. It's necessary to make efforts to become a public institution that doesn't unilaterally support but as a cooperative public institution. Many people show their gratitude and thank towards the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Efforts to protect the medical system against privatization for the past 20 years have

finally produced great results in this disaster time. I believe that cultural art policies will work for citizens or social values during a disaster if such efforts build up.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** Most artists are in a precarious situation as a content provider and a citizen due to COVID-19. There's a possibility of going into an irreversible state if it collapses. Regions and local communities should provide recuperative powers; in that sense, they should support without any questions. Let's finish up with what the regions can do together.

**Yong-Taek Kim** There should be a structure where the artists and art instructors can utilize well without using the purpose and the principle of the budget in the region, and basic foundations should focus on administration and management and agonize together about activities and programs. I think it's time to openly discuss bank system for the artists or insurance for the artists to stand up.

**Yong-Taek Kim** It will be great if the budget spreads at the basic unit and discuss the plan, especially in education.

**Sun-Ah Oh** I've started a project called 'Feel Free to Call.' Actors will read and record novels and plays, add SD card in Hyodo Radio (a portable radio with pre-installed songs), and deliver them to local elders. I'm planning to start a project to give them a call for conversation and check how they are doing.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** I think loneliness may be a bigger disaster than COVID-19 for elders

. I think finding a new method of connecting seems to be a significant role for art.

**Yong-Bong Yoo** I think we should make a declaration and think of it in the artist's perspective. I also thought about collecting writings related to COVID-19. Artists come up with creativity as they make suggestions. I'm confident to make a performance with a new style such as opening and exhibition and have people enter one-by-one. Since there are regions, friends, and they are accessible, it will be good to start with a declaration and do concrete actions.

**Won-Jae Lee** There should be a plan to communicate and cure in cultural perspective. We should decide to have artists, cultural producers, and producers experience the financial management, and try the President Moon government's cultural vision, which emphasized a culture with people, by the second half of the year soon. We are all unstable and going through a difficulty; I think we should actively promote urgent support for artists' survival, such as expanding creative reserve fund. Also, we should pay all of the expenses for the finished parts in the canceled event businesses during the first half of the year; instead of delaying the events to the second half of the year, we should decide to cancel now to secure and circulate the reserve fund. As for the second half of the year, instead of maintaining an unstable waiting state by deciding to cancel mainly public ceremonies in advance as much as possible, we need to develop a transitional plan to support cultural art system itself and people at a possible level. Finally, I hope that collaborative governance setups that will enable cultural artists in the field to actively participate in plan establishment and decision-making will work more powerfully through the process. To do so, I hope there will be a table meeting su



ch as urgent countermeasure task forces with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and Seoul Metropolitan City that responds culturally by listening to the voice of the field during the disaster.

**Hyun Lee** The virus paradoxically seems to show us that we are all connected. I think we can overcome the scary situation of virus spread based on healthy interdependency.

**Ki-Hwang Jeong** I think it was an excellent opportunity to feel that we all live together in an individualized and fragmented society. I think we've shared a remarkably meaningful and thoughtful conversation.

Editor **Min-Jeong Jeon** (cultural policy research, planning)