

FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Mon Nov 23 | 8:30 pm |

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$11 [members \$8]

Soon-Mi Yoo ***Songs from the North***

<http://www.redcat.org/event/soon-mi-yoo-songs-north>

Honored as the Best First Feature in both Locarno and DocLisboa, *Songs From the North* is an original and intimate look at the enigma of North Korea. Bypassing and decoding the country's jingoistic propaganda, as well as derisive satire from the West, Soon-Mi Yoo interweaves footage from three visits to North Korea with songs, spectacle, popular cinema and archival footage. *Songs From The North* strives to understand, on their own terms, the psychology and popular imagery of the North Korean people and the political ideology of absolute love. Born in South Korea, Yoo teaches at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and has shown her essay films at major international film festivals.

Los Angeles Premiere

Golden Leopard for Best First Feature, Locarno International Film Festival 2014

Best First Feature Prize, DocLisboa 2014

In person: Soon-Mi Yoo

"While for some Yoo's film will evoke Andrei Ujica's *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu* in its deft use of found footage, the mystery and sensuality of Chris Marker, or the hybridic meanderings of author W.G. Sebald, *Songs from the North* is uniquely, powerfully personal as it unpacks this Korean-born, US-based filmmaker's intricate and conflicted feelings about her former neighbor to the north."

– Andréa Picard

"Expertly weaving her new footage with official documentation, Yoo creates the sense of drifting through her memories and contemporary experiences at once. Footage of Kim Il-sung proclaiming communist values and singing triumphant melodies takes on a haunting immediacy." – *Indiewire*

"Songs From the North derives energy and sustains interest because of the sheer range of footage on display. When gazing at such a cockeyed social-historical-cultural-anthropological landscape, jagged kaleidoscopes may sometimes yield 20-20 vision."
– *The Hollywood Reporter*

"Yoo's emphasis on capturing the everyday in this heavily censored state is so rare and extraordinary that her subjects can't help but comment on it: 'You really are filming everything!'... It's representative of Yoo's complex approach that a patently manipulative propaganda piece of children on a stage weeping and singing of their devotion ('Truly, my father, my mother, is my dear Marshal Kim Jong Un!') comes across as stunningly emotional, the performers' wailing voices — not to mention the waterworks in the audience — registering as profoundly strange, immediate, and real." – *The Village Voice*

Probably a film as fragile as *Songs from the North* will set a turning point in the way North Korea and the Juche Thinking are represented in cinema. The figure of Kim Jong-il –between the sinister and the extravagant– has made the North Korean regime a succulent dish for interpretations made from a distant Western cynicism. However, South Korean filmmaker Soon-Mi Yoo chooses a particular mix between a travel journal's intimacy and archive footage that follows the easily recognizable and consensual depiction. The clash of such materials sprouts this film, in which everything we see and was captured by the cameras is filtered through the director's emotions and her notes. A compassionate, familiar, contradictory piece that adjusts to the idea Cioran had about peoples as objects of both affection and aversion.
– Buenos Aires Festival International de Cine Independiente

Director's Notes

Our Deepest Wish is Reunification was a popular children's song when I was growing up in Seoul, South Korea. Reunification occupied a large part of public and private discourse. The separation between North and South was considered unnatural, as if a living being had been severed in half. The pain felt by Koreans was real, not imagined. Reunification was considered the only remedy, a destiny.

When I finally was able to travel to North Korea in December 2010, I crossed the Tumen River, the border with China, where a North Korean guide met me at customs and accompanied me in a state-run taxi. Night was falling as we crossed over a snowy mountain range. I remember my surprise to see people walking in the dark alongside the road, briefly glimpsed in the headlights as we drove past. I wondered how they were able to find their way in complete darkness. It was the coldest winter in thirty years on the Korean Peninsula. Some people carried bundles of kindling, gathered in wooden A-frames on their back. Another was dragging a tree trunk. The next morning I looked out my hotel window in Rajin City and saw people running from the cold. I wanted to ask them, "How do you manage to survive?"

Because of the tight control of the North Korean "guides" I was not able to travel or photograph freely. But I was able to film fleeting moments and encounters in between. I was deeply moved by the grace and dignity of the North Koreans I met during that trip and during my two subsequent visits in the summers of 2011 and 2012.

I was never able to ask my question to any North Koreans. Instead I had to look for answers in the footage I brought back and in the North Korean material- songs, cinema, spectacle, publications- that I researched. The longer I stared at the images, the longer I listened to their voices, I no longer saw the propaganda. What remained were the beauty of their faces, and the melodies of the songs which carried a genuine emotion that I found consoling. I began to understand that perhaps this is how they manage to survive. I also came to understand that these are people who would rather die than be humiliated and subjugated. And so they continue, walking in the dark, and maybe humming one of those patriotic songs that I heard everywhere throughout my travels in North Korea.

Director's Bio

Born in South Korea, **Soon-Mi Yoo** studied German Literature at Yonsei University before earning an MFA in Photography at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design where she is currently a member of the Film/Video faculty. Embracing and expanding avant-garde and essayistic modes of non-fiction cinema, Yoo's films reopen forgotten, often suppressed, chapters of modern history in order to explore the still unresolved conflicts and collective memories that continue to haunt and define the Korean Peninsula. In short works such as *DANGEROUS SUPPLEMENT* (2006) and *ssitkim: talking to the*

dead (2004), Yoo defines a lyrical mode of essay film that uses poetic forms to mine the deeper archaeological and emotional levels that standard histories are unable to engage. Her work has screened at the Rotterdam Film Festival, the Locarno International Film Festival, DocLisboa, BAFICI in Buenos Aires, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Harvard Film Archive, among others. *Songs from the North* is her first feature-length film.

Curated by Steve Anker and B er enice Reynaud. Presented as part of the Jack H. Skirball Series.