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'38th Parallel' Operates in a Void

'Life in the zone is a very full empty moment'

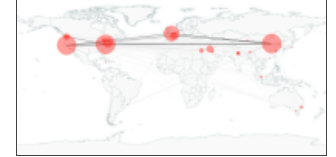
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▲Soldier on the border.
©2008 Katie Davies

There was a surprise awaiting British filmmaker Katie Davies when she entered the demilitarized zone between South and North Korea.

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Lieutenant Commander Christopher Dignan of the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission informed her, "We found out all about you."

A short but hugely atmospheric film of what Katie saw in the zone, "38th Parallel," is now a key "exhibit" in a major art exhibition in the prestigious Millennium Galleries in Sheffield, England.

Katie, who teaches at two universities in England, formally applied to visit and film in the DMZ last year. Her ambition to record on film the strictly regulated military rituals in the DMZ arose while she was an artist in residence at Kookmin University, Seoul, for eight months in 2005-06.

After applying to the appropriate authorities in Seoul for permission to visit the DMZ, she had to wait four months before permission was granted. Last December she flew to Seoul, and then was driven by American military personnel to the border.

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▲Art Sheffield 08 brochure.
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Lieutenant Commander Dignan, who welcomed her and accompanied her during the morning she spent filming, announced that extensive security checks had been carried out before she was allowed in. He knew that her father had served as an officer in the Royal Air Force, and one of her grandfathers had worked for GCHQ, the British government's center for signal intelligence activities.

"Life in the zone is a very full empty moment," says Katie. "What goes on there is designed to make sure that nothing happens -- and nothing much has happened for 57 years."



▲Looking north.
©2008 Katie Davies

She experienced one shaky moment in the relatively short time she spent in the border region. "When three North Korean guards saw that I was filming, they put their hands on their guns. It was just a gesture, but I was terrified."

Katie's four-minute film, which runs daylong in a continuous loop, is introduced in material publicizing the exhibition Art Sheffield 08 -- Yes No Other Options in the following words:

Filmed at the demilitarized zone on the border between North and South Korea, the work "38th Parallel" seeks to portray the particular reality of this contested site. It is a reality marked by an eerie sense of latency. Constantly alert, constantly inert, North and South face each other in a stalemate situation sealed by a cease-fire agreement 55 years ago.

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THAT'S FIT TO SHARE WITH YOU

Ever since then the heavy military presence on both sides of the demilitarized zone persists, turning the zone into a symbol for the irresolvable conflict between two political systems that splits the country and haunts its citizens. George Bush described it in dramatic words as "the line dividing freedom and oppression and one of the most dangerous places on earth."

In actuality, however, the demilitarized zone is a no-man's land where nothing happens, because it is there to prevent things from happening. The zone exists in a constant state of suspense. It is a geopolitical void.

In her video, Davies operates in this void. She shows how political reality manifests itself here in the ways space is structured and time is regimented in this militarized environment. Facing each other across the turnpike, for instance, border guards on both sides execute the silent ceremonies of authority prescribed by their military protocol.

It's a choreography of empty gestures enacted on the stage of a deserted strip of land and bleak interrogation rooms. Davies then shows the local epicenter of a conflict of global proportions to be a non-place where power manifests itself in ghostly acts of decorum performed in suspended time.



▲Looking south.
©2008 Katie Davies

Katie e-mailed a Christmas greeting to Lieutenant Commander Dignan last year, aware of his isolated and lonely task. He sleeps just 20 meters from the line of demarcation and is the first point of contact between the South and North. He's the man charged with the duty of ensuring that nothing happens.

In an interview with Katie, he said,

During armistice talks, North Korea desired a return of all territory north of the 38th parallel where they began the war. Since the battle line continued up and across the country, and due to continuing operations by the UN command, North Korea eventually accepted this blue line as the military demarcation line and that was roughly the center point for the forces that were engaged in fighting throughout that time period.

Once the line was agreed to, both parties had 72 hours to withdraw 2 kilometers either side of that line. When that was completed that set up the 4-kilometer wide, 241-kilometer long demilitarized zone, which runs from coast to coast.



▲Katie with friends.
©2008 Katie Davies

[Katie Davies](#) teaches fine arts students at both Sheffield Hallam and Huddersfield Universities. She also runs a design company, [crayon productions](#).

Her films have been exhibited throughout Europe and in Asia. She is eager that "38th Parallel" should be exhibited in Seoul, and looks forwards to returning to the city.

"I love the place," she says.



▲Katie in South Korea.
©2008 Katie Davies

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