

Media text, 25 March 2021

Let's Talk about Mountains.

A Filmic Approach to North Korea

Ends 3 July 2022

A film team from the Swiss Alpine Museum toured the mountainous Korean peninsula during the brief thaw in relations between the two Koreas (2018/19). The micro-stories captured on film and shown here in the exhibition "Let's Talk about Mountains" (until 3 July 2022) tell of an everyday existence as it hardly ever appears in the media.

"It was the most laborious and difficult project we've ever tackled, but it was worth it," says curator Beat Hächler (director/curator of the Swiss Alpine Museum) and Gian Suhner (filmmaker and director from Chur and Berlin), looking back on it all. North Korea is regarded as one of the most inaccessible countries in the world, and it has a poor reputation. Totalitarian dictatorship, human rights abuses, food crises, and aggressive military posturing – these are just some of the things that come to mind when we hear "North Korea". Yet we have less of an idea about what life is really like for the 25.5 million North Koreans, and what they think about the world.

Mountains open doors

"The fact that we in the West have such a glaring lack of knowledge about this country is partly our own fault, and partly due to the isolation that has been imposed on North Korea," says Rüdiger Frank, a distinguished North Korea expert and co-author of the magazine accompanying the exhibition. "Creative approaches are needed if we want to take a closer look. This attempt by the Alpine Museum to look at the theme of mountains is one such approach." And indeed, it's a very Swiss one: North Korea is three times the size of Switzerland and 80 percent of its territory consists of hills and mountains. A landscape like this shapes the people there as much

as it does here: mountains are part of their identity, culture, and economy. Mountains have multiple layers of meaning, which allows them to open doors in conversations and reveal just as many layers. “We went there in order to ask questions and to listen, without making snap judgements,” says Beat Hächler. This attitude enabled them to realize that alongside all the differences, there were also similarities, and alongside all the unsettling aspects, there was also beauty, adds Rüdiger Frank. “This teaches us a great deal about North Korea, but also about ourselves.”

Chaperoned travel

“The pace of the film’s visuals and interviews is slow. This gives the audience the opportunity to engage with individual encounters and discoveries,” says Gian Suhner, who shot over forty hours of film with his team (Katharina Schelling on camera and Denis Elmaci on sound), and then worked with Beat Hächler to condense it down to the “exhibition trail”. The journey went from the metropolis of Pyongyang, with its three million inhabitants, to Paektusan, the “sacred mountain of the revolution”, and from there on to the Kumgang mountain range near the demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas, before concluding at Hallasan, a mountain on the border. The interviews and large-scale projections open our eyes to the country’s schools, leisure activities, art, and tourism. The film team was able to acquire virtually all its planned footage – invariably accompanied by two guides from the state cultural committee, who organized the daily itinerary and translated everything from Korean to English.

Debate is explicitly welcome

“The images in the film don’t add their own comment, but of course we’re looking for people to go into greater depth and engage in active debate,” says Beat Hächler. In the final exhibition room, visitors can leave their comments and questions. These will be regularly published and discussed with experts. A 200-page lavishly illustrated magazine (in German) provides contextual information for visitors to read before, during, or after the exhibition. And for everyone aged 6 to 100 there is an audio track on which the travellers talk about their additional experiences that you don’t get to see on the film.

Order the magazine accompanying the exhibition (in german):

alpinesmuseum.ch/shop

Media professionals can receive a PDF of the magazine upon request.

Comprehensive programme of events:

alpinesmuseum.ch/veranstaltungen

In cooperation with Kunstmuseum Bern, Asia Society Switzerland, Polit-Forum Bern, Kino REX Bern.

Please note that due to the current situation, dates may change. You will always receive up-to-date information online.

Accompanying programme and special offer for tickets in conjunction with Kunstmuseum Bern

The accompanying programme to “Let’s Talk about Mountains” was developed in cooperation with Kunstmuseum Bern, which is presenting the exhibition “Border Crossings – North and South Korean Art from the Sigg Collection” from 30 April to 5 September 2021. **During this period, visiting “Let’s Talk about Mountains” at the Swiss Alpine Museum entitles you to reduced admission for the Korea exhibition at Kunstmuseum Bern. Vouchers are available at reception.**

Media text synopsis

Let’s Talk about Mountains

Ends 3 July 2022

Discovering North Korea in the Swiss Alpine Museum

A film team from the Swiss Alpine Museum toured the mountainous Korean peninsula during the brief thaw in relations between the two Koreas (2018/19). The micro-stories captured on film and shown here in the exhibition “Let’s Talk about Mountains” (until 3 July 2022) tell of an everyday existence that you won’t see on the TV news. The exhibition organizers selected the mountains as their theme for the film’s visuals and interviews. As Korea expert Rüdiger Frank comments, this was a creative solution revealing not just the unsettling aspects but also the beauty and the similarities with our own lives. “This teaches us a great deal about North Korea, but also about ourselves.” A magazine accompanying the exhibition provides contextual information. The accompanying programme was developed in cooperation with Kunstmuseum Bern, which is presenting the exhibition “Border Crossings – North and South Korean Art from the Sigg Collection” from 30 April to 5 September 2021 (vouchers for reduced admission are available at museum reception).

For more information:

Beatrice Häusler
Communication
Alpines Museum der Schweiz
beatrice.haeusler@alpinesmuseum.ch
0041 (0)31 350 04 48

**Short interview with
Gian Suhner,
director and film-
maker**

«The audience should ask their own questions, be open to surprises, and discover little stories.»

Gian Suhner, as the director and filmmaker of the “Let’s Talk about Mountains” project, you opted for a slow visual pace using a tableau style. Why was that?

When doing the research we quickly realized that North Korea is perceived in terms of multiple different narratives and images, and the same applies to its self-representation. Rather than focusing on our personal commentary, we thought it was important to take an approach that gives the audience enough time and space to watch closely and make their own discoveries. This was the case not only for the research and the filming in North Korea, but also for the films being shown in the exhibition. The idea is that the visitors should ask their own questions, be open to surprises, and be able to discover little stories. It’s intentional that you see and hear contradictory material. Where North Korea is concerned, there are no simple answers and no unambiguous images.

What do you mean by “different narratives”?

When we were talking to people it became repeatedly obvious that the discourse on political and social matters works differently there than it does with us. There’s an official narrative that determines the truth. One example of that: while we were filming in Masikryong, a luxury ski resort, we conducted interviews with the staff. We were interested in the everyday things, like, “How do you deal with skiing injuries?” One representative explained to us that there had not been a single injury in the first three years since the resort had started operating, because the ski slopes had been constructed under the supervision of Kim Jong-un, which had removed the danger of accidents. We realized that we had arrived at the boundaries of what was possible: we had to accept this statement as his narrative and his truth.

So in that case talking about mountains obviously had its limits. Did you also experience the opposite, that it facilitated communication?

The moments that connected us came about when the topics were as far removed from the political system as possible. In Morabong Park in Pyongyang, for example, one teacher told us about her childhood in a village a long way from the capital city. She described her yearning for the mountains and what happened to her when she visited her home village. Hiking, walking up the slope all alone, the air and the vegetation changing with every metre of ascent – she said she was happier there than anywhere else. Her words about her relationship to the mountains suddenly seemed completely universal – it could just as easily have been my mother in Grisons saying them.

For information on Gian Suhner, take a look at the short bios.

The team behind

“Let’s Talk about Mountains”

Beat Hächler, project head and concept designer

was born in Bern (Switzerland). While studying history, German literature, and media in Bern and Madrid he also worked as a journalist. He has been organizing exhibitions since 1992 – at Stapferhaus Lenzburg until 2010 and as director of the Swiss Alpine Museum in Bern since 2011. The museum won the national Prix Expo award in 2017 for its exhibition on climate change, “Our Water”. Since 2013 he has been responsible for numerous exhibitions on mountains in an intercultural context (Afghanistan, Argentina, Iran, Slovenia, Taiwan).

Gian Suhner, concept designer and director

was born in Savognin (Switzerland). After studying history and sociology in Basel und Madrid, he worked as an assistant and project manager on documentary films and exhibitions in Switzerland and Deutschland. Between 2013 and 2015 he managed the film exhibition project “The Enlargement of the Pupils on reaching the High Mountains” at the Swiss Alpine Museum. In 2015 he began to study directing at the German Film and Television Academy (DFFB) in Berlin. His short films have been shown at numerous festivals in Germany and elsewhere and have received multiple awards.

Yujoo Glarner-Go, project assistant

was born in Seoul (South Korea) and now lives in Bern. In 2014 she completed her studies in interior and furniture design at Induk University in Seoul. From November 2019 to February 2021 she was active as the project assistant for “Let’s Talk about Mountains”, mainly working on research, Korean correspondence and translations, marketing, scenography, and education.

Katharina Schelling, camera

was born in Bregenz (Austria). After graduating with a degree in journalism and Slavic Studies in Vienna and Moscow, she pursued her passion for film and studied cinematography at the German Film and Television Academy (DFFB). Her short and full-length films have been shown at various festivals such as the Berlinale Forum, Premiers Plans, and the Max Ophüls Festival. Katharina Schelling lives and works as a camerawoman in Berlin.

Denis Elmaci, sound

was born in Paderborn (Germany). He studied digital media at Hochschule Darmstadt and graduated with a bachelor’s degree as a sound engineer. During a subsequent diploma course at Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg, Denis Elmaci created a range of works for short films, documentaries, and feature films that have been shown at major festivals (Berlinale, Cannes Lions, DOK.fest München, Max Ophüls Preis). Denis Elmaci has been living in Berlin since 2016, working as an independent sound engineer and sound designer with his own sound studio.

Philipp Clemenz, scenography

was born in Stalden (Switzerland). After graduating from the Lucerne School of Art and Design, he helped to establish the Pakistan Design Institute in Karachi, Pakistan (working on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC) and then also taught there. In 1976 he lectured at Hong Kong Polytechnic, and from 1978 onwards he worked with Tino Steinemann in a graphics studio in Lucerne. Since 1991 he has been a freelance graphic designer, scenographer, and teacher; he has been involved with numerous exhibitions for Stapferhaus Lenzburg and the Swiss Alpine Museum. From 2001 to 2019 he was a business studies lecturer at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts.

The magazine for
the exhibition
(in german)

The magazine will be provided
as a PDF upon request.

산에 대하여
**LET'S TALK
ABOUT**



MOUNTAINS
이야기합니다

ALPINES MUSEUM DER SCHWEIZ



VORSPANN

**«ES GIBT KEINE
EINFACHEN
ANTWORTEN»**
DREI FILMEMACHER IM GESPRÄCH
62

HINTERGRUND

**SONDERFALL
NORDKOREA?**
VON RÜDIGER FRANK
79

**ASK A NORTH
KOREAN**
VON IN-HUA KIM, JE SON LEE
UND PARK UI-SUNG
101

**DEBATTE:
WIE WEITER
AUF DER
KOREANISCHEN
HALBINSEL?**
VON JI-YOUNG LEE, JOHN DELURY,
SANDRA FAHY UND STEVEN DENNEY
122

ABSPANN

HIVER/WINTER
VON ELISA SHUA DUSAPIN
133

61

ZOOM

**SONNTAGS
IM PARK**
VON PIERRE-OLIVIER FRANÇOIS
71

**DEN TRICHTER
FÜLLEN**
INTERVIEW MIT VIOLET KIM
89

**CECI N'EST
PAS UNE
MONTAGNE.**
VON KOEN DE GEUSTER
94

HOCH HINAUS
VON MATTHIAS MÜLLER
107

**DER HEILIGE
BERG DER
REVOLUTION**
VON JON MATHIEU
114

**EIN WEG IN
DIE ZUKUNFT**
VON NAM NAN-HEE
128

Inhalt

Authors featured **in the magazine** **accompanying the** **exhibition**

We are happy to facilitate contact with the authors.

Nick Bonner runs Koryo Tours – a travel agency in Beijing that specializes in North Korea – and has produced several documentaries on North Korea.

Sung-Hyung Cho is a filmmaker and professor of art films and the moving image at Hochschule der Bildenden Künste Saar in Saarbrücken, Germany. She was born and raised in South Korea and has made several documentaries about North Korea, most recently “Meine Brüder und Schwestern im Norden” (2016).

Koen De Ceuster has taught at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands since 1995. As an internationally recognized expert for North Korean art and (propagandistic) culture, he is currently writing up the results of his extensive field research among North Korean artists in a book entitled “From the Painter’s Perspective: Explorations into North Korean Art”.

John Delury is a professor of Chinese studies and chair of the International Cooperation Program at the Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies in Seoul, South Korea. He is an expert on modern China, Chinese–American relations, and the Korean peninsula.

Steven Denney is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Innovation Policy Lab of the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto, Canada and leading political analyst at the Brookfield Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

Elisa Shua Dusapin was born in 1992 as the child of a French father and South Korean mother. She is a graduate of the Swiss Literature Institute in Biel.

Sandra Fahy is an associate professor for anthropology in the humanities faculty at Sophia University in Tokyo, and she also teaches in the Global Studies graduate programme. She did her PhD at SOAS University of London and has written two books on human rights in North Korea, “Dying for Rights: Putting North Korea’s Human Rights Abuses on the Record” (2019) and “Marching through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea” (2015).

Pierre-Olivier François is a filmmaker and journalist who lives in Paris. He has made over fifteen documentaries, including the two-part film “Korea: the Hundred Year War” and “Have Fun in Pyongyang” about everyday life in North Korea.

Rüdiger Frank is a professor for East Asian economy and society at the University of Vienna and head of the Department of East Asian Studies. Since spending a semester in North Korea to study the language in 1991/92 he has researched the country in depth and is a regular visitor. He is the author of “Driving Forces of Socialist Transformation: North Korea and the

Experience of Europe and East Asia (2011)” and “Unterwegs in Nordkorea: Eine Gratwanderung”.

Beat Hächler is the curator of “Let’s Talk about Mountains” and director of the Swiss Alpine Museum, Bern. Since 2013 he has been responsible for numerous exhibitions on mountains in intercultural contexts (Afghanistan, Argentina, Iran, Slovenia, Taiwan).

Selina Hangartner is the co-editor-in-chief of “Filmbulletin”, and is currently doing a doctorate in film at the University of Zurich.

In-hua Kim is the pseudonym of an author who has flown North Korea (“Ask a North Korean”). She left North Korea in 2018 and now lives in South Korea.

Violet Kim holds a scholarship from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and conducts research at the University of Heidelberg as part of a comparative study into human rights education and education for refugees in South Korea and Germany. She has spent several years working with North Korean refugees and teaching them at schools for refugees and NGOs in Seoul.

Je Son Lee worked on “Ask a North Korean”. Now in her late twenties, she left North Korea in 2011.

Ji-Young Lee is associate professor of international relations and C.W. Lim and Korea Foundation professor for Korean Studies at the American University in Washington, D.C. Her research focuses on security policy issues in East Asia with respect to history, regional research, and international relations.

Jon Mathieu used to be a professor of history at the University of Lucerne, and is now retired. In 2015 his book “Die Alpen: Raum – Kultur – Geschichte” was published. He has also written widely on mountain regions beyond Europe, for instance in his book “Die dritte Dimension: Eine vergleichende Geschichte der Berge in der Neuzeit” (2011).

Matthias Müller has been the Asia correspondent of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung since 2015. A resident of Beijing, he visited North Korea in 2017 and 2019 and regularly reports on current events in the Korean peninsula.

Nam Nan-hee is the first Korean woman to hike the Baekdudaegan ridge alone in 1984. She is the director of the Jirisan Walking School in South Korea and heads the forest walking group of the Jiri Mountain School. In addition, she is president of the Baekdudaegan Peace Trail association.

She has written four books, including “It Would Be Lovely If You Walked Too” (2020).

Gian Suhner is a filmmaker who researched, co-devised, and directed the footage for the exhibition “Let’s Talk about Mountains”.

Credits

Overall management / concept / texts	Beat Hächler
Exhibition assistant	Yujoo Glarner-Go
Concept / director / editing	Gian Suhner
Cinematography / camera	Katharina Schelling
Sound / sound design	Denis Elmaci
Scenography / graphic design	Atelier Philipp Clemenz, Lucerne: Philipp Clemenz, Christian Stern
Education	Nathalie Lötscher
Communication	Beatrice Häusler
Magazine accompanying the exhibition:	
Concept and editing	Michael Fässler
Graphic design	DavidMirko, Zurich
Children's trail:	
Concept and implementation	Jasmin Wiesli
Accompanying programme	in cooperation with Kunstmuseum Bern
Patron	International Climbing and Mountaineering Association (UIAA)
Institutional partners	BAK, canton of Bern, Schweizer Alpen-Club, Burgergemeinde Bern
Project partners	Fondation Philanthropique Famille Sandoz, Jubiläumsstiftung Mobiliar, Paul Schiller Stiftung, Pro Helvetia, SWISSLOS/Kulturförderung canton of Graubünden, Stiftung Temperatio, Zwillenberg-Stiftung
Travel partner	Globetrotter Group/Background Tours, Bern
Cooperation partners	Asia Society Switzerland, Kino Rex, Bern, Kunstmuseum Bern, Polit-Forum Bern, Restaurant Chun Hee, Bern

Pictures

You can find all pictures for Download on alpinesmuseum.ch/medien

Films

You can get an insight into the exhibition films at rebrand.ly/vision-E
PW: alpsLTAMvision

We will be happy to provide excerpts on request.



Work brigade on the Paektusan, film still, ©Katharina-Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Hiking group, Kumgangsán, ©Gian Suhner / Swiss Alpine Museum



Summit Paektusan, ©Gian Suhner / Swiss Alpine Museum



Paektusan, Interview Lee Jin-ok, film still, ©Katharina-Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Pyongyang, bus stop, film still, ©Katharina Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Paektusan, photo scene with work brigade on the summit, film still ©Katharina Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Pyongyang, middle school, interview with O Su-yon, film still, ©Katharina-Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Masikryong ski resort, interview with Kim Jong-won, film still, ©Katharina Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Chonsam Agricultural Cooperative, interview with field worker, film still, ©Katharina Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Secret Camp, Paektusan-Milyoung, film still, ©Katharina Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Hiking group, Kumgangsan, ©Katharina Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum



Hiking group, Kumgangsan, ©Gian Suhner / Swiss Alpine Museum



Pyongyang, bus stop, film still, ©Katharina Schelling / Swiss Alpine Museum