

Between Admiration and Anxiety

— What Remained After a Brief Conversation, After Ten Years

by Minjun Shin, December 2025



I met TZUSOO again, after nearly ten years, when she came to the UK for Frieze.

The last time I'd seen her was in our third or fourth year of university, so it was quite a reunion. In the years since, she has become an artist many people admire. At a recent opening at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), some of my artist friends had attended and posted about it to their stories; when I asked whether they had any personal connection, one of them said, "No, but I went because I admire her."

She directed an animated music video for Cho Yong-pil; she installed work at Incheon International Airport; and this year she was selected as the inaugural artist for the MMCA × LG OLED commission series. Watching that trajectory, I felt envy, admiration, and a wish for her success all blend together naturally.

That feeling traces back to a small connection from our university days in South Korea. I happened to become the student council president for the entire College of Fine Arts—though, in truth, that role was originally meant to be hers. As the student council president of the printmaking department, she had worked to reform the department's misguided practices and had spoken up and organised demonstrations beyond the school; she was someone many people liked for her good character. The former president had wanted to recommend that she run as the next president, but because of a minor rule, she couldn't stand in the election. The offer then came to me, and although I declined several times at first, I eventually ran and was elected. That choice brought about a bigger change than I'd expected: afterward I stayed in the student movement, went on to serve as president of the entire student union, and devoted myself to social activism for some time even after graduating.

TZUSOO, by contrast, wrapped up her involvement in the student movement, finished her graduation exhibition, and soon left to study in Germany. After that, all we exchanged were a few comments on social media. In the period right after graduation, I considered studying abroad for a year or two myself, but amid my busy activism it never lasted more than a few days each time. As time passed and I heard news of her growing well-known, the thought naturally settled in: "What if I had made a different choice back then?" That, more or less, is the small history between us. I don't know how she remembers it.

So when she—now in the UK for an international art event—was the one to suggest we meet, it took me by surprise. Mixed together were gratitude that someone who had become famous hadn't forgotten me, the hope of seeing a familiar face in an unfamiliar city, and even a thin, slightly pathetic hope that I might find some new opportunity through our relationship.

But even in the UK, her time was tightly booked. It was her first visit, and her schedule was packed with touring the spaces she'd been invited to and meetings with the curators of the V&A and Tate Modern, and with Korean artists like Do Ho Suh and Haegue Yang. Along with the thought, "Of course, famous people are busy," I felt a pang of disappointment that we might not get to meet at all.

In the end, she made a little time in the morning before heading to the airport, and we managed about thirty minutes together. It was a short meeting, but the conversation stayed with me for a long time. She wanted to hear about the activism I had done; she expressed her regret at not having been able to continue her own involvement, and a respect for the life I had led as an activist after graduation—a life I had at times regretted. She also quietly shared how the experience of the student movement had come to shape her current work.

The conversation drifted naturally toward our dreams as artists. When I joked, "But you're a famous artist now," she said, "That kind of thing doesn't really matter. Give it enough time and anyone gets there. It's just that I've put in ten years now, so this is just about where I've come to." I replied, "It shows. You seem like a different kind of person. There seems to be something more important to you than exhibiting at museums and building an established career." She answered again, "Right—what matters most to me isn't that stuff, but how I can live my life with art." She's an extrovert who shares many of the stories she's tagged in on Instagram, and I'm a timid person who only wants attention once I feel ready; and yet, in that moment, I felt I'd found something we had in common.

At the time, I was in the grip of severe maladjustment. I had paid too high an opportunity cost to study abroad, and because my career as an artist felt thin for someone entering their mid-thirties, the pressure to "produce results quickly" weighed

heavily on me. But reality was different. English was hard, my work wavered, everyone else's work looked better, my second-semester tuition still wasn't secured, and the cost of living pressed on day by day. Moment to moment, the regret would wash over me: "Did I come here for nothing?"

Having saved little money from a life as an activist, asking for support to fund my dream was an experience of gratitude and great burden at once. Whenever criticism or misunderstanding arose, it felt as though my whole life were being negated. So each time the question "Was studying abroad really worth it?" came around again, I would often fall apart. I had thought that, now in my mid-thirties after passing through so many storms and accidents in my life, I had become a little more solid—but once I came here to study, I found that this was only my arrogant illusion. The mind that told me I had to run, and the body that kept buckling, were often at odds.

And then a single remark from TZUSOO loosened some of that pressure on my heart. It suddenly struck me again that my own ultimate dream, too, was not a career others would envy or a dazzling exhibition. The reason I chose to study abroad had less to do with a desire for one more degree than with an intellectual curiosity to see and understand a wider world, and a wish to break out of repetitive routine and create a turning point for growth. There was also the reason that I wanted to see firsthand in Britain—where cultural studies was born—its contemporary relevance, and to see how it connects to contemporary art. This choice was naturally continuous with the direction I had lived in and the direction I meant to keep living in. And realistically, too, when I considered language and my relationship with my partner, the UK was the only option.

Through that short conversation, I came to shift my thinking a little. Under pressure I am anxious every day, but if I change my perspective, today I am standing inside a scene I once dreamed of as a child. If so, shouldn't I be a little happy? It was a short meeting of barely thirty minutes, but that conversation made such a thought possible, and it gave me great courage.

I don't know when the two of us, reunited after ten years, will one day meet again.

But I had the feeling that even then, we'd be able to have a good conversation, looking much the same as we do today.