

“COVID Memorial Fragments, Part One”

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From COVIDCalls Episode #22, 14 April 2020

In the South Korean city of Ansan is one of the most extraordinary sites of disaster memory in the world. I was taken there by my friend and colleague Chihyung Jeon and that’s where we met Ms. Puja Chung—she is one of the parents of a child who died in the 2014 Sewol Ferry Disaster—killing 294, mostly teens on their way to a school trip at Jeju Island. The students left the classroom, and they never returned—but the classroom remained, and became a beautiful testament to the lives that were so painfully cut short. What is now called the “memory classroom”—they took the contents of many classrooms, moved everything to a building in the center of town—every chair, every blackboard, every locker, preserved as they were. The parents and friends have left notes and the favorite foods of the students. Ms. Chung pointed out to me a seat cushion she made—many parents made these—because she noticed later how hard the chairs were—a testament to a parents’ caring and grief, that goes on. Yes, it’s a sad place (what’s sadder than an empty classroom), but it’s also full of stories and photos and life—and it exists, while victim’s families wait for a formal memorial, something perhaps architecturally grand and ceremonial, to be built.

The memory classroom and Puja Chung have been on my mind these past months, as we consider the loves lost in this collective disaster, the COVID-19 pandemic. Will a memorial ever be built—where should it be, what design should be adopted? Or will it be smaller in scale, more distributed—maybe the memory classroom of COVID-19 is the emergency department of hospitals around the world.