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The Gwangju Biennale Hall

Report from Korea: Gwangju Biennale

from Sculpture Magazine, 2002

by Carolee Thea

With biennials having expanded into remote and global arenas, curators are exploring the cultural vitality inherent to these participating cities as well as addressing the modes, themes and sites that highlight the moment(um) of a newly created space-time paradigm.



Borges Libreria
Canton Mix Express
2002
in "Pause"

Recycling historic sites, illustrating the breath of history -- coalescing past, present and future as in a Borgesian text -- is one strategy. Visual productions fed by the internet, film, video, performance, fashion and other new media that depict new ways to engage, transmit and cross-fertilize can also spawn a platform for a new breed of events.

Globalization for the city of Gwangju came at an accelerated speed and in 1995, this regional city hosted its first international art exhibition. Serving as a bridge connecting contemporary art of the west and the art of what was once called the Third World, the biennial raised both the status of Korean art in the international art community while introducing the core art practices of various countries.

"Pause," the theme for the fourth **Gwangju Biennale**, Mar. 29-June 29, 2002, is a suggestion to stop the speed, linger and think, rest or change direction. The show is divided into four different sites, each with its own curator. The primary exhibition, installed in the 7,000-plus-square-meter exhibition hall, is the responsibility of **Charles Esche**, director of the **Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art** in Malmo, Sweden, and **Hou Hanru**, a freelance curator who was artistic director of the **2000 Shanghai Biennial** and co-organized the traveling European survey, "Cities on the Move" (1997-2000).



Bert Theis
It's a Hard Work to Be Idle
2002

Project 2 is titled "There: Sites of Korean Diaspora" and organized by **Yong Soon Min**, a professor of studio art at the University of California, Irvine. It focuses on artists who live in the five key cities of the contemporary Korean diaspora. Project 3, titled "Stay of Execution," was the work of **Wan-kyung Sung**, the biennale artistic director, and venues in Liberty Park, a reconstructed MP camp connected with the May 18th civil uprising. Last but not least, the fourth project, curated by **Guyon Chung**, professor of the Korean National University of the Arts, takes place at the railway station on the outskirts of the city.

Alternative and independent groups from several cities in Europe and Asia formed the backbone of Project 1, which featured 20 mini-pavilions, each organized by an artist-run group. The pavilions were designed by the artists in collaboration with architects **Yeong-jun Kim** and **Yong-ho Chang**. The ethic here is one of collaboration, community and experimentation. The artists also embody strategies of resistance to the overwhelming power of globalizing economic, political and cultural hegemony in their own communities.

The idea here is one of an open street market where basic business transactions are done and where everyone is potential trader -- a navigation tool of sorts. The projects also relating to



Joanna Billing

Project for a Revolution

2002



Paul Harrison & John Wood

Twenty-Six

Liew Kung Yu

The Arrival of Puteri Oriental

2002



Yeon-doo Jung

Borame Dance Hall

2002



Esra Ersen

time, long-term change, slowness and social spaces were developed by artists and with the flaneur in mind -- a strategy quite fitting for an Asian biennial, which attracts an audience of three quarters of a million in three months time.

The work of **Bert Theis**, an artist from Luxembourg, greeted visitors to the Biennale from the entrance roof of the hall. His terrace, he wrote, is an "architectural prosthesis" that invites a "pause" before entering, as well as referring to a dialogue about tropical climates and the willingness to be idle. It's titled *It's Hard Work to Be Idle*.

Once inside the hall, the viewer finds many works that invite participation, or are simply viewer-friendly. **Surosi Kusolwong's** *Relaxing Machine*, which won the UNESCO prize, was an open arena carpeted in moss green and containing a kind of hammock made from a gutted upside-down 1966 Volkswagen Beetle fitted with a mattress and a Harry Potter videotape. Surrounded by palm trees, soda machines, pillows and a computer, the work contained an implicit invitation to hang out, watch the video and talk with the artist.

From Indonesia was the *Museum of Personal/The Personal of Museum*, an installation and performance by **Andar Manik** and **Marintan Sirait**. With unusual choreography, a minimalist esthetic and few bright monochrome powders, the pair made an art piece using their palms, fingers and bodies, and invited visitors to join in. Bodies swaying and bending, painting, pouring and smearing sand on mounds of clay with yellow, white or black pigments, created an intriguing, rhythmic work.

Singapore artist **Matthew Gui's** contribution consisted of ordinary construction pipe, bundled and installed unobtrusively around ceilings and walls, linking the various artworks. One notable work is a video by Swedish artist **Johanna Billing**, titled *Project of a Not-Revolution*. It highlighted groups of people who appear condemned to wait idly without projects -- people paused, waiting, doing nothing. Yikes!

Project 1's curators took care to site the artworks with texture and rhythm. Two five-monitor video installations by the collaborative team of UK artists **John Wood** and **Paul Harrison** were placed at the foot of each of two ramps where the visitor paused to get bearings but lingered much longer. Since the two began collaborating in 1993, they have accumulated a series of playful video works, distinguished as much by their droll sense of humor as an unerring economy of execution. Attention getting and arresting, each video is played out against a minimalist, monochrome backdrop, or within the sealed off space of the monitor itself. Each of the works involves the presence of one of the artists, either as the butt of an extended sight gag or as the trigger for a spiraling, visual conceit.

Malaysian artist **Liew Kung Yu** designed a display titled *Puter Oriental*, an amusing and beautiful installation of hanging straw-hat chandeliers hovering above tables illuminating "knock off copies" of designer clothes. In this work, the "Princess of the Orient" brings her rich culture and heritage as an ambassador of her peoples.

Yeon-doo Jung's installation, *Borameae Dance Hall*, featured music of the '50s and '60s piped into the papered walls, which were covered with images of ordinary, middle-aged Korean couples dancing -- figures who were somehow transformed into native versions of Fred and Ginger. We were invited to dance, but more compelling was lingering with the reverie of the music and the images of the dancing people.

A solo artist, **Esra Ersen**, made an installation of meticulously stitched Turkish children's black uniforms with white collars called *I Am Turkish, I Am Honest, I Am Diligent*. Esren had Korean

I Am Turkish, I Am Honest, I Am Diligent
2002



Olaf Nicolai
Big Sneaker
2002

elementary school children wear these for a week and write down their emotional reactions, which were printed directly onto the uniforms. Ersen's work examines the ways that identity is formed and how meaning is created.

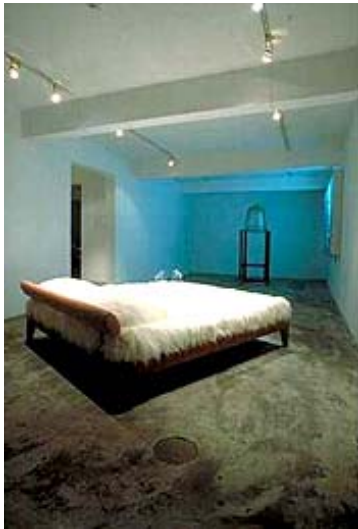
Another solo artist, the German **Olaf Nicolai**, made a *Big Sneaker*; a huge inflated replica of a tennis shoe that reminded me -- at first -- of an Oldenburg soft sculpture, until I read the yards' long narrative printed on the back wall. It not only slowed down my viewing, but also changed my assessment of the work. The narrative was about desire, consumerism and reflection on youth, rebellion and family. Inside the shoe was a couch where sat an old man and his grandchild, a serendipitous moment between language and art.

Dragset and Elmgreen's work outside, *Taking Place, Too*, commented on the destruction of the signification of the western art institution; the white box. They had previously destroyed the original site of the Kunsthalle, Zurich, in 1996, and rebirthed it here; the *white box* as rubble with huge blocks of concrete from the construction site -- a sincere break with a gallery space dominated by Western culture but also elucidating the boundary between the displayed object and the art space.



Project 304

The impetus for **Project 304**, a Thai group, was to create a meeting place where continuous film screenings, dancing, music, art, design, dialogue, architecture and narrative reverie takes place and as platform for sharing their art projects. Their modus operandi is to develop relationships between art and a disconnected society. One charismatic member, **Michael Shaowanasai**, presented his nostalgic film and a separate interactive performance. For his performance, Shaowanasai installed images of himself, pinned to the wall in layers, and invited viewers to draw on, adorn them or to otherwise alter them in some way.



IT Park
Display, Sample, Museum
1998-2001

Another Thai group, **IT Park**, which was founded in 1988, was billed as a "power conscious artistic movement," an important witness to Taiwan's transition and embracing a development and consciousness for contemporary art. This installation, like an apartment designer's showroom, contained art, design and activities.

AES, a group from Russia, constructed *Sheltered Sky*, a Bedouin tent made with Egyptian rugs and, customarily, by men only, contained a resting platform and many large and imaginary photomontages that mixed familiar big city monuments with Islamic mosques and pillars.

The second project, **Yong Soon Min's** exploration of the Korean diaspora, focused on five cities -- Los Angeles, S"o Paulo, Osaka, Amaty in Kazakhstan and Yanj in China. Meant to be a momentary rest from the endless discussion of a national identity and to offer a space of new possibility where Korean diaspora and division could be examined from a different perspective, the project featured works that were typical cross-cultural narratives of oppression or absorption. One show stopper was a video by the stand-up comedian **Jennifer Moon**, a Korean who lives in L.A. An architectural installation by **Wonu Lim**, *Elysian Fields*, was a miniature Plexiglas city set on the floor with lights and videos signifying dystopia and utopia.



AES Group
Sheltered Sky

For Project 3, "Stay of Execution," the goal was to reflect on how a society deals with the historical events and collective memory while investigating (new) possibilities for remembering the past. Most of the works installed in the 40-room barracks and on the lawn broke no new ground on the given issue, though works by **Jong-ku Kim**, **Seung-Young Kim** and **Jung-Min Kim** were more poetic than most.

Project 4 was installed at the railway station, a space from the past, overlapping with the present, that is like a keyhole to read Gwangju into a new time and space. The project was

2002



Jong-ku Kim

*How Can I Measure the Biggest and the
Smallest in the World*

2002

prepared to have the city meet public art and to probe the possibilities that will result in the birth of a truly "cultural city."

Clearly, the highlight of the biennial in Gwangju was Project 1, where instead of a conventional form, Esche and Hanru opted for an outlaw experiment -- a willfully chancy, pandemonious, full of surprise and challenge, win or lose exhibition. But along with this cutting the edge, the curators were laden with an intractable bureaucracy, poor lighting, a few unrealized artworks due to incompetent technical assistance -- and of their own making, an outmoded '80s identity politic that excluded U.S. artists and included some anti-U.S. works.

"The museum," said **Walker Art Center** director **Kathy Halbreich**, "should be a town square, not a temple." Gwangju is an expensive *laboratory* where a study of the city, a specialized knowledge of contemporary art, exhibition form and culture has the ability and mandate to mirror the texture of the city and the changing times.

Always transient and often sited on the edge of town, it is an experiment that can share the spectacle and charisma of Carnivals and World's Fairs -- and this one, in particular, had the beguiling impetus to join the party, to smile or to frown.

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