

# The Politics of Spectacle: The Gwangju Biennale and the Asian Century

Okwui Enwezor

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## 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY COSMOPOLITANISM

As can be expected, organizing a large international exhibition with global ambition requires some proximity to various scenes of artistic production scattered in near and far-flung corners of the globe. An important requirement for the curator or researcher working to know these artistic scenes, entails being equally alert to the dark murmurings in the cultural and political scenarios that are adjacent to the spaces where the activities of art occur. For example, to reach artists working in Havana from New York necessitated passing through Toronto, thus exposing one such political scenario, namely that artists and curators living on each side of the dividing walls of the U.S./Cuba ideological separation must constantly negotiate.

My several trips to Cuba for more than a decade have invariably involved the kind of triangulation that requires passing through way stations such as Montego Bay, Mexico City, the Bahamas, and Toronto. My recent visit was no different. In all these trips—from Havana to Caracas, Singapore to Berlin, Seoul to Beijing, Mexico City to New York, Cairo to Mumbai, Sydney to London, Kuala Lumpur to Istanbul, or taking the ferry from Tangier to Tarifa—one witnesses not so much a change of geocultural agendas, as much as witness, especially as the trip to Havana shows, the accelerating ideological irrelevance to which many of these diverse geopolitical spaces once subscribed. During this period, I spent most of the time preparing for the 7<sup>th</sup> *Gwangju Biennale* by visiting artists; speaking with writers and filmmakers; visiting galleries, art schools, and assorted cultural brokers. Otherwise, I lie awake in hotel rooms, many of which appear no different in design, ownership, and amenities than the ones in other cities. As with global hotel brands, the television channels come with their own packaging of global

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news, transmitting real-time reports on the latest disaster or political crisis; issuing communiqués from the floors of global trading exchanges on the state of the global economy; or tracking the latest trends in information technology. Across CNN International, BBC World News, Deutsche Welle, RAI, and a smattering of local channels that one hardly watches, these reports are leavened with analysis by commentators serving a variety of interests or with expertise on a range of issues and topics: for example on North Korean disarmament, or speculating on the shadowy trade in nuclear reactor designs to produce fissionable material by the Khan network.

The constancy of these global hotel brands and the media packaging that comes with them may, at first impression, provide the kind of comforting reassurance that we are indeed in the world, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century cosmopolitanism, no matter where our cultural adventures and curatorial research may lead us. That is, until we realize that instead, we may be cocooned in an ideological bubble whose ether of antiseptic familiarity provides only an ambiguous sense of levity over the sprawling cacophony, and the teeming sprawl once we venture outside our rooms.

## OPEN FOR BUSINESS

During the course of the nine months I and my colleagues spent traveling, my constant companions were the day-old “global” newspapers such as the *International Herald Tribune* and the *Financial Times*. Each of these are available, on the ready, along with the facsimile versions of the *New York Times*, the *London Guardian*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, on the way to the breakfast buffet or at the concierge desk. As usual, I availed myself of these snippets of news, and have used them, albeit superficially, as a measure by which to keep my internal global positioning system coordinated with those of other cosmopolitans doing business in hotel lobbies and moving between worlds. Navigating the worlds crisscrossed by the news and commentaries of the global media helps to provide a small window into the shrinking space once ruled by the imperial ambitions of the Western Alliance, a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century consortium comprising the nations of Western Europe and the United States. But as many commentaries now make clear, multiple changes and realignments are opening up huge cultural seams within traditional circuits of power to reveal the emergence of new ones. In

the past, artists from what was then known as the margins, were eager to enter what was then considered to be the center or mainstream, and the strategies of the artists were usually aligned to accomplish such an objective, namely to join the cosmopolitan sphere of artistic visibility, both in the art market and museums. However, as the idea of centers and mainstream become part of the anachronism of the cultural politics of the past, artists have oriented themselves not towards centers and mainstreams, but towards a more transversal process of linkages, networks, and diverse communities of practice. For example, if recent global events reveal anything about present cultural and artistic reorientations, they indicate that the changing stakes within a series of geopolitical spaces are now challenging the traditional American-led Western Alliance. If this is indeed the case, it would mark the end of a historical cycle of overwhelming influence, power, and prestige of the entire Western Alliance, its institutions, structures of legitimation and, with it, a worldview shaped by the constancy of the American brand.

The paradox of this evident decline of the American brand—which partly owes to the disastrous performance of the Bush administration and exacerbated by its foreign policy stances around the world—is that it has come about not through the old ideological wars and market-based competition, but in the global race for natural resources and consumer markets. While there remain firm ideological differences between the American/Western Alliance and countries like China, Russia, and Iran, it is not of the same ideological order as the one between the United States and the Soviet Union in the heyday of the Cold War. Rather, global politics have moved from a stance of mutual annihilation to one of mutual accommodation; in other words, the world is open for business and the potential for economic boom demands it. As the fervor of modernization propels the economies of China, India, and Russia into ever-increasing infrastructural investments, then the world is definitely open for business. This situation became even more prevalent in the last decade, as these emerging economies are now in direct competition with the U.S. and Europe for political and economic influence. They are, as well, competing for intellectual and natural resources in different parts of the world. This competition is noticeable across all areas, not least of which is the trade in symbolic goods, including the domains of art and culture.

Nowhere is this competition more pronounced than in the energy industry, of which Russia is greatly endowed, and in turn uses as a political lever to keep allies in line and frustrate competitors

like Europe and America. In addition to Russia's new position of power, the emergence of India in the outsourcing of services, and China in the manufacturing sector have created opportunities for a nascent great-powers race that is reminiscent of previous races, such as the Scramble for Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union from the mid-1950s to the early 1990s. If the two leading Asian powers, India and China—with a combined population pushing toward a third of the planet—are yet to tap their vast economic potential, when they do so, will this not only be a change of stakes, but also portend an ambition that can only be designated as the Asian century? And when one also considers that vast stretches of Russia are in Asia, we have a picture of the scope of the changes already taking place.

All these changes have contributed to a sense of an expanded global scene in which the traditional American guarantee of balance of power, with the United States at the top, no longer holds. The prominent American neo-conservative Robert Kagan, had it exactly right (though in a decidedly outmoded ideological manner) when he wrote that China and Russia's rising power is a threat to that of the United States. In a recent article he writes: "In a world of rising great powers, of which two happen to be autocracies, the United States needs its fellow democracies to be as strong as possible."<sup>1</sup>

## THE ASIAN CENTURY AND THE EMERGENCY OF A NEW CULTURAL POLITICS

While it is premature to announce the dawn of the Asian Century, might it be possible, nevertheless, to assume that we may be in a critical moment in which a new cultural politics is about to emerge? During my travels for the 7<sup>th</sup> *Gwangju Biennale*, I witnessed glimpses into the working methods of artists in different artistic contexts which suggest that these artists are seriously reflecting on the changing political landscape. What was immediately obvious was that artists are working less on ideological grounds. Of course, economic forces within the art world are paying some heed, but so far, none of the activities have made any credible attempt to organize their thinking and practices along the articulation of what may be the emerging cultural politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially one in which

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kagan, "Sliding Toward Irrelevance," in *International Herald Tribune* (June 27, 2008), 4.

the dominance of Western ideas would no longer be the norm, even as the West fights to maintain its cultural influence across the board.

Yet, in speculating on the possibility of a new cultural politics, the ground of the coming debates will be less focused on the idea of clash of civilizations, and more on a growing global cosmopolitanism devoid of margins or centers of cultural influence. This is already apparent with the expansion of the art market and the formidable role being played by new elites from Russia, China, India, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and South Korea. For instance, Beijing perhaps rivals New York in the growth of new art galleries. These are not simply Chinese only, but international galleries. Every month, yet another major gallery announces the opening of a branch somewhere between Shanghai and Beijing. In addition there are biennials, triennials, art fairs, and, according to a recent article by Barbara Pollack, 1,200 museums under construction in China alone.<sup>2</sup> If we move away from China and East Asia, and look toward the Middle East in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Bahrain, and Qatar, similar developments are occurring. What is fascinating is not the pace of these developments, but the staggering scale, the very ambition of their imagination.

What I am describing here is not the utopia of Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* simplification.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I am enunciating what global culture might mean after the cultural dominance of the European 19<sup>th</sup> century and American 20<sup>th</sup> century. Can the global moment currently unfolding, the scale of which would have been unimaginable just a generation ago, be possibly an intimation of a coming Asian Century? On one level, there can be no predictions of the future outcome of the power of Asia to shape our view of the world, let alone become an epistemological global reference; however, the circumstances of Asian global emergence are no longer a distant fantasy. Whether economically successful or not; politically influential or not; and culturally the reference point for the years to come, judging from the shape and turn of events, the clockwork convergence of Asia's polyglot cultures, the large and still-growing consumer society and middle class, and the rapidly changing technology that knits them together, it may not be premature to think that we are facing an Asian moment. This emergence of global Asia, in fact, does not benefit Asia alone; it creates a model for other

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<sup>2</sup> See: Barbara Pollack, "Making 1,200 Museums Bloom," in *ArtNews* (March 2008). [http://artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art\\_id=2456](http://artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=2456) (last accessed June 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Picador, 2007).

societies in transition, especially in Africa and Latin America. The United Nations is already considering the expansion, with strong American resistance, of the five permanent members of the Security Council, while the membership of G8—an international forum among the governments of the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Great Britain, and Japan—will surely change in less than a decade from now. All of these shifts reveal that the regimes put in place by the United States after the Second World War, alignments that created the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions—such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization—will be giving way to the postcolonial reality of new regional conglomerates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These changes are what I mean when I refer to the politics of spectacle. They include various notions of the idea of spectacle: from the spectacle of capitalism, to cosmopolitanism, culture, power, and identity. Such spectacles though, are not, as Debord's critique of spectacle suggested, only simply mediated realities. Rather, they are manifested within various scenes of struggle, and as such have moved from logics of mediation to what could be called visceral realities. These include sartorial decisions, grooming habits, religious expression, social modes of representing the self, among other visceral representations.

With this realization, and with scores of other non-Western societies undergoing structural, economic, political, and cultural transformations, it is certainly plausible to imagine that the far-reaching influence of Western ideas and the epistemological roots of modernity are being tested and reconsidered. This may not mean the decline of the influence of ideals such as democracy and free-market economy. But as new, credible players emerge regionally, and the power of the United States and Europe over the global polity wanes, necessary adjustments of these ideals will occur to match the complex geopolitical and cultural surroundings into which they are imported. In addition, the zealous proselytizing that characterizes the export of Western epistemological models and political institutions will be less effective in a global marketplace of competing models of modernity and governance. After the disastrous miscalculations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, there is no doubt that the West will, from now on, be responding in more nuanced fashion to conditions on the ground.

This means, then, that the cultural politics to come would not be a debate about the hegemony of Western epistemology alone. Nor will it exclusively focus on its exported cultural values, which have

been dominant since the early beginnings of globalization in the 15th century. Given the anxiety over the confident steps of political Islam—of which only a part is globally radicalized—and its transnational reach into the cultural spaces of Western societies, what is emerging is a reverse debate, in this case about the very survival of Western culture. Perhaps that may be overstating the case, and may also be part of the emergence of cultural xenophobia in Europe. Certainly, debates involving Muslim headscarves in France,<sup>4</sup> the Niqab in Britain, the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam,<sup>5</sup> the Danish cartoons pillorying the Prophet Mohammed, the railway bombings in London and Madrid, all add up to this tendency of cultural dispute.

It seems to me that artists, cultural critics, and institutions ought to devote greater attention to exploring the seams of these disputes and examining the productive critical tensions that lie beneath them. While museums may not always be the places for exploring these disputes, the transitional and temporary quality of biennales makes them natural spaces of thought and curatorial experiments capable of addressing them. From curators to intellectuals to artists to cities, the convergence of these forces of extra-Western epistemology, the evident decline of the cultural influence of the United States and its allies, along with the ascendancy of the economic power of China, have all inevitably

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<sup>4</sup> In 2004, a controversial legislation outlawed the wearing of headscarves by Muslim girls in all French schools, and also banned other traditional religious garb. Beards worn by Muslim men represent another point of cultural contention: Though having a beard is not governed by any French laws, doing so nevertheless tends to evoke discriminatory responses in non-Muslims, thereby targeting those who choose to wear them. At the time of this writing, a Muslim Moroccan woman who is a legal resident of France and is married to a French Muslim man had her application for French citizenship denied because she wears a Niqab (a traditional Muslim garment that covers the entire body, leaving only a horizontal slit around the eyes through which to see). This sartorial choice, which is a form of private religious expression, nevertheless was deemed incompatible with French values, which includes the *laïcité* law of radical secularism that governs French social compact. According to Fadela Amara, the French minister of Urban Affairs of Algerian descent who is herself a practicing Muslim, the Niqab was also deemed “a prison and straitjacket” and “an insignia of a totalitarian political project that promotes inequality between the sexes and is totally lacking in democracy.” Upon the Muslim woman’s appeal to the Council of State—the last judicial institution she could count on for reversal—the court affirmed the denial of citizenship, citing her wearing of the Niqab and her religious choice as representing “insufficient assimilation.” See: Katrin Bennhold, “A Veil Closes France’s Door to Citizenship,” in *New York Times* (July 19, 2008), A1, A8. Many European countries have recently wielded similar judicial decisions as tools of inclusion and exclusion and, more implicitly, as mechanisms of defense against the kinds of social transformation being wrought by the visceral realities that challenge traditional European notions of the self and of culture.

<sup>5</sup> For a treatment of the issues and the cultural debate in the Netherlands surrounding van Gogh’s killing, see: Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (London and New York: Penguin, 2006).

created a reaction. On one level is the anxiety that often accompanies the loss of influence by the powerful. On the other is the ripe overconfidence that comes with the rising self-realization of those formerly less powerful.

Already, China's ambiguous economic adventures in Africa, its lack of commitment to human rights in Darfur, and the recent reactions to its crackdown in Tibet are producing reactions of global magnitude. As China continues to grow immensely wealthy and powerful, will anti-China replace the old comforting anti-Americanism? The shock to Chinese sensibility regarding this possibility is registered in the wounded nationalistic responses to the widespread protests against its Tibet crackdown as the Olympic torch made its way through London, San Francisco, Seoul, and Paris. China is quickly realizing that to be powerful means to invite resistance, critique, resentment, envy, and of course fear in equal measure. At a time when a new Chinatown gate was recently erected in Ojota, Lagos, the first of its kind in Africa (though Johannesburg has had a Chinatown for at least forty years) it is no longer a figment of the imagination that the Chinese dragon is poised to roar, and its phoenix ready to unfold its resplendent wings. But will these two emblems of Chinese power, invested in the figure of the emperor and the empress, translate culturally in Lagos or Abidjan, African cities where Chinese merchants have alighted in recent years? Or will they make the local populations view China differently because of its increasing economic power and its thirst for natural resources to keep the machinery of modernization going?

Contained within these questions, and the quest for resources and influence of global China, is the seed of a potential cultural politics to come. As one can see, the axis of cultural politics is surely turning in multiple directions: Europe, Asia, Africa, the United States. The debates are at once directed internally, such as in the United States, with discussions involving immigration and the massive simultaneous marches by Hispanic communities across the country demanding recognition.<sup>6</sup> The rising Hispanic population in the United States is quickly redrawing the geocultural map of the country, and with it, the face of its political demographics. This is occurring, as well, in places like Lebanon and Iraq, in the sectarian battles being waged by different religious communities. Or in the

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<sup>6</sup> In March 2006, millions of protesters marched in cities large and small across the United States. From Los Angeles and San Francisco to Chicago, Washington, and New York, they demanded legal recognition of undocumented Latino immigrants.



secular movement of jurists and lawyers in Pakistan that eventually forced the government of President Pervez Musharraf into a minority in parliament. There are, equally, externally directed disputes between the United States and Iran, or Iran and Israel. If one adds the drawn-out disputes between India and Pakistan in Kashmir, and the muddle that is Afghanistan today, it is quite obvious that the world is in the midst of an unfolding of cultural politics. But why is the artistic sphere responding only to the economic potential of emerging Asia and not to some of the disputes besetting the global cultural sphere?

### **SOCIAL ICONOGRAPHIES: SCENES OF SPECTACLE AND CULTURAL POWER**

As the financial world reels from a still unfolding crisis precipitated by the meltdown of the U.S. economy, new political and cultural indicators in global networks and geopolitical arrangements foretell the emergence of new images and imaginaries that will affect, not only how the global economy will be rebuilt, but what the cultural sphere and its social iconographies will look like when the 21<sup>st</sup> century becomes a fully functioning global space. Judging from the manner in which these rapid changes have been occurring, whether in Moscow or Beijing, Dubai or Mumbai, Istanbul or Lagos it is already undeniable that new forms of cultural politics are on the horizon, alerting us to shifts in social iconographies across Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe. The dominant machinery of Hollywood cinema, for example, might no longer foreground the professional benchmark for the cultural worth of cinema. Nor is the European tradition of the auteur cinema adequate to satisfy the demand for new narratives, stories, images, and participants from outside the Western system of legitimation.

One prime example is the transformative effect of the Nigerian cinema industry, commonly known as Nollywood, on the entire apparatus of African filmmaking. Nollywood has introduced not only a viable alternative to Western filmmaking; it has also created an authentic African model that has been adapted by other African countries. Nollywood and its acolytes, sponsors, and investors have built from the ground up a new industry, narratives, and a robust and engaged transnational African public. In effect, Nollywood is deeply engaged in contemporary filmmaking, but with a decidedly geocultural and transnational perspective. In this cultural scenario,

not only will the coordinates of culture forge new connections, more significantly they will also admit new participants: producers, brokers, consumers, and decision-makers. This will happen such that, for instance, the habits and iconographies of say, the world of fashion will be less reliant on the same monocultural physiognomic aesthetic of Nordic, Teutonic, and Slavic body types. Therefore, with the increasing numbers of consumers of luxury fashion in Kuwait City, Dubai, Doha, Beijing, Seoul, Busan, Kuala Lumpur, and Mumbai, for example, it goes without saying that the new cultural politics will equally mean a new *body politics*.

In this global cultural and aesthetic sphere, what is being called into question is not the resilience of old models of institutional discourse and canons, but the utility of those models as the sole determining and methodological instruments by which to guide the reading, translation, and analysis of global cultural practice. In Asia, for instance, it is already clear that the growing economy is not only creating a new class of wealth, it is also creating new audiences, participants, creative systems, and an awareness of cultural confidence that cannot be taken for granted. Throughout Asia, social imaginaries and cultural iconographies are emerging from the meshing of local classical traditions with global trends. These look nothing like what they were at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when predictions of the end of history were pointing us to a long 21<sup>st</sup> century of American triumphalism.

## **POLITICS OF FORM**

It seems obvious, from the perspective of cultural analysis, to reflect more concisely, especially as biennials, exhibitions, and museums press their claims for global relevance, to note how the spaces of contemporary art in different localities are as diverse as the works that are made and shown there. Though the works of individual artists I encountered during my research in these localities have distinct grammars that are personal, varying according to each place, to its concerns and to social preoccupations, one constant impression that emerged in encounters with these artists is the diversity of their approaches. But what is even clearer is their engagement with the unruly present and the persistence of personal and social narratives. In Seoul, for example, I was struck by the commitment and critical confidence of a generation of younger artists, whose ideas and the

resulting works have a kind of radical modesty. Because many of these artists have found no strong support in the market, this modesty, however, seems to suggest not the cliché of Asia, but rather reflects strongly and powerfully a choice against inflated gestures, against overwrought, grandiose rhetoric; it is a stance against the imperatives of the hyper production that is the basis of much of the contemporary art admired by the market.

Rather than a mere reduction of scale, the many different modes of working, the ways of using materials, and the life of those materials in the social milieu of different cities contest some of the assumptions of the nature of modesty as a strategy. In fact, from the many works one encounters among contemporary artists working in Seoul, Lagos, Dakar, Havana, Caracas, and even in Eastern Europe, scale and the repurposing of material is not just about the “unmonumental,” at least not in the same way suggested by the New Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition, *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.<sup>7</sup>

What I noticed is both a play with materials and scale, narrative and gesture. But these are not meant as mere reactions to markets and formalist grandiosity, rather the artists seem at once to veer away from the consistency of what is found in the marketplace and, through their work, articulate a distillation of how their ideas fit the immediate aesthetic cultures surrounding the works. These works are marked by stripping down the work to its basic anatomy, to the bare components of what becomes a work. Surprisingly, the strategies have tended toward drawing, or delicate filmic exposés, the fabrication and referencing of everyday objects, the recording of the dry facts of social anomie. All these methods and positions are as much cultural as artistic processes for building relationships between ideas, concepts, forms, materials and socio-cultural paradigms. For instance, drawing is now not simply used as shorthand for an elusive formalism, but as a vernacular device to develop a more consistent language. In this way, what becomes evident is the raw quality of the work as a means of achieving a voice. An artist like Seoyoung Chung, in her highly personal stripped down aesthetic, exemplifies this quality of rigor, while Jewyo Rhii transforms hers into a field of play,

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<sup>7</sup> See: Richard Flood, Laura Hoptman, and Massimiliano Gioni, *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York and London: New Museum and Phaidon Press, 2007).

as notations of an ever unfolding and unfinished narrative between past and new work. At the same time, artists like Matthew Monahan and Lothar Hempel work more with a sense of theatricality and stage-like setting.

Though quite heterogeneous, at the same time, the overarching energy of these individual works can best be described as being engaged with what I will refer to as the politics of form. This politics is concerned with how artists manage the aesthetic demands of their artistic principles and the social necessity of discovering new terms of production. The politics of form also addresses how artists organize their aesthetic criteria and their conceptual principles, how they constitute the critical parameters for the reception and experience of the work of art, but, more fundamentally, how the artists' work resists formal orthodoxies. Time and again I found that these artists were concerned with the performative, with deconstructing complex conceptual problems between form and content, between material and skill, between the social and the cultural. In the background, there is always the political, but not simplistic politics, rather such politics as are affiliated with questions of power and social repression, with violence. Then there are works that range across cognitive borders in the kind of spaces of negation carved out by geopolitical violence—say, violence against women or ethnic and religious minorities, against the disempowered and the dispossessed, across transnational sites of production—to insist that contemporary art is not so much a shared language across the de-territorialized global flow of ideas, but both an individual and collective ethic, as well.

While all these modes of working may not all appear at the 7<sup>th</sup> *Gwangju Biennale*, they do offer a sense of the lively discursive environment that the exhibition would be initiating. *Annual Report*, with its related projects, circles around a constellation of forms and ideas, artistic economies and modes of production, all of which, I hope, will enliven the dynamics of the audience's experience in the movement toward being the staging ground for a new "politics of form."

Part of the preparation of this project also involves engagement with the exhibitions and the curatorial premises of colleagues, thinking through divergent proposals in different localities and how historical experiences shape the reception and historicization of art. As already mentioned, the question of radical modesty and politics of

form surely have different historical purchase depending on the locality being investigated or analyzed. This, for me, was dramatized by the schism in historical judgment evidenced in how such a concept was interpreted by The New Museum in its exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In this series of exhibitions that occurred over several months, serving as the inaugural mission statement of the museum's view of contemporary art in its supremely new, pristine, but non-luxurious architecture, the idea of modesty was explored more as an aesthetic tendency. The overarching idea of these exhibitions was stated as a series of essays on alternative modes of production by contemporary artists who eschew the highly finished, sleek productions that have elevated contemporary art to the status of luxury goods. To my mind, this topic is both timely and necessary. *Unmonumental* seemed to make a virtue of degraded, low materials, yet in many instances, in reifying the objects and materials, the exhibitions inadvertently seemed to create the terms for the potential commodification of the very same objects' sense of critique. In tracking the history of the object, what was largely absent and undiscussed and, more importantly, undeclared was any discussion of the socioeconomic politics of using recycled material as also directly tied to the politics of resources and their scarcity, between the developed and underdeveloped parts of the world. In a global economy where a mountain of garbage in Manila, Lagos, or Mumbai is not merely garbage, but a site for economic survival, how does one read the idea of modesty in assemblage? What perhaps could be derived by a possible revisiting of the political and anthropological reading of, say, bricolage, in the sense used by Claude Lévi-Strauss to expand the present reception of collage or to advance a critique against the modernist tendency toward reification that marks the formal systems of collage?<sup>8</sup> These are questions, though not directly explored in *Unmonumental*, do have resonances within the exhibition. And as the terms of the object and the material fissures in which such objects function in the production of contemporary art, thinking about the range of ideas that artists traverse in building their forms necessitates further reflection, especially if one is to properly locate the status of the object in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the exhibition seems to suggest.

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<sup>8</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

## USES OF SPECTACLE

With these issues in mind, how does one react to two separate anniversaries that each seeks to make general political claims on the nature of cultural and social processes after an uprising instigated by disaffection with the institutional status quo? I point to two recent anniversaries that occurred in May 2008. With the first, the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the student protests and general strike in Paris, May 1968, we are bewildered by the mythology that has accompanied the retrospective recollection of what the students set out to accomplish. But did not the Paris *Spring* end in the ignominy of defeat, as well as signaled the end of the optimism of leftist politics and the utopian dream of radical social realignment in Western society? Though the tendency for latter generations who embrace May '68's utopian dream is to devise a retrogressive notion of its universal cast of actors and as a global moment in history when the world spoke with one voice, it is far from clear how the event of May '68 was ever the epochal global moment that it has been so designated. Here again, we have to revisit the evident schism in historical experience between how events in the West are historicized and how similar events outside the West are received. But in its writing, the indelible mark of May '68 could be felt—in a kind of chain letter to the dispossessed and dispirited of the earth—from the instance the battle cry of French students issued from the Sorbonne and was heard on the streets of Paris. The idea, even if not directly articulated as such, was that the Paris *Spring* was both the harbinger of, and catalyst for, a global reaction which, in every corner of the earth, had its own little May '68. And so it is, forty years after the fact, that this tale of the universal dimension of that gloomy period when it seemed as if Western society was teetering on the edge of crisis, has been retailed so often, that its legend has become transformed into a historical fact. We know this from the flurry of events, symposia, books, recollections, exhibitions, and gatherings that have marked this anniversary.

But in the midst of all the celebration, it might be necessary to recall, as well, that May '68, far from being the triumphant event of leftist-inspired change, may be written paradoxically as the historic moment of defeat for progressive politics and the rise of the right in Western politics. The rightist ascendancy is partly borne out by the

particular form of neoliberalism exemplified in conservative politics, including the Republican party dominance in the United States, beginning with Richard Nixon through Ronald Reagan; Margaret Thatcher in Britain; and Helmut Kohl in Germany. The key exception is the socialist led government of François Mitterrand. Mitterrand, however, came to office after a long Gaullist occupancy of the Elysée Palace. May '68 should also be seen alongside a number of parallel events that preceded it: for example, the escalation of the Vietnam War, a long trajectory reaching its farcical apotheosis with the Bush regime and its brutal, merciless prosecution of the Iraq War. By the same token, at the time May '68 came to claim the pride of place as a watershed event of the global cry of the oppressed—again wielding the force of Western de-politicization and de-historicization of other historical emblems of radical resistance—Che Guevara was already dead in the jungles of Bolivia; Martin Luther King had been assassinated in Memphis; Malcolm X had been killed in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom; Frantz Fanon was dead of leukemia in a Washington hospital; Nelson Mandela was imprisoned in Robben Island; Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah had been deposed in a military coup; Biafra was engulfed by a genocidal war, and C.I.A.-sponsored military juntas were running amok in Latin America. But perhaps most striking of all in that year was the launch of the massive Tet Offensive by the armies of the Communist National Liberation Front, the Vietcong, and those of North Vietnam's Peoples Army of Vietnam, in a bold attempt to inspire widespread uprising against U.S. forces and the South Vietnamese government. Though the offensive by the communists took American forces by surprise, it was ultimately beaten back. But the net effect was that it forced the withdrawal of President Lyndon Johnson from the American presidential campaign and the ultimate defeat of the democrats by the Republican candidate Richard Nixon in the general elections of November 1968. In recalling some of these historic moments, many of which lie completely outside the frame of reference for the riots fomented by Western bourgeois students in Paris, the question to ask is, on what basis does May '68 claim the signal place it has allotted itself in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century global insurrection against oppression, imperialism, and colonialism?

This question is important, in light of the second anniversary. This one is far more relevant to the project of the 7<sup>th</sup> *Gwangju Biennale*, for its commemoration was the very basis for the founding of *Gwangju Biennale* in 1995. In 1980, May 18, as it is today famously

known, began in Gwangju, when the citizens of the city took to the streets in a concerted oppositional resistance against the military junta led by General Chun Doo Hwan, who had seized power after the assassination of the authoritarian President Park Chung Hee.<sup>9</sup> The Gwangju uprising, however, should be seen in the context of the history of Korean popular resistance, both to colonial powers and to dictatorships. May 18, along with the subsequent June 1987 uprising, laid the groundwork that finally eroded and peacefully overthrew the entrenched powers of previous dictatorships. This event finally led to a representative democracy in 1993. Given such a history, May 18 was not one singular, convulsive event out of which newness was born. It was part of a gradual trajectory, lasting many years and decades, in which social movement organizations (SMOs) mobilized and gained the participation of a broad coalition of publics focused on the emancipatory struggle.<sup>10</sup> The gradualness of the SMOs' success in Korea is contradicted by the kind of grand narrative that often accompanies the retelling of May '68, which hardly acknowledges the importance of the successful rebellious movements of previous decades against European colonialism. Even the recent memory of the French defeat in Algeria in 1962 was not seen as central to the events of May '68.

These two events, then—in May 1968 and May 1980—provide a study in contrasts in the uses and the politics of spectacle. While the spectacle of May '68 is today a totem of leftist nostalgia, the May 18 spectacle has a different sociopolitical purchase. I would argue that the continuous cultural uses of these instances of political spectacle demonstrate two divergent relationships to the social motivations of spectacle. May '68 is often read in the tradition of Western avant-garde practices of instantaneous shock, rupture, and attack on the legitimacy of prevailing political orders, social norms, and aesthetic logics.<sup>11</sup> For May 18, the kernel of its radical reform is not embedded in the tradition of an aesthetic renewal of decayed traditions; rather,

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<sup>9</sup> For an important retrospective of the history of the Gwangju uprising of May 18, 1980, along with recollections by participants and scholarly analyses, see the excellent collection edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Kyung Moon Hwang, *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present* (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> See: Gi-Wook Shin, "Introduction," in *Contentious Kwangju*, xxi–xxii.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion in which the events of May '68 are linked to the legacy of European historical avant-gardes and their subsequent re-articulation in the strategies of 1950s and 1960s neo-avant-gardes, see the analysis of the Situationist concept of *détournement* as it pertains to, and in relation to May '68, in Tom McDonough, *"The Beautiful Language of My Century": Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945–1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 13–50.



it was motivated by a tradition of postcolonial cultural resistance, and the collectivized vision of a common politics. The configuration of this collectivized vision has been described by the political theorist Choi Jungwoon, as the formation of an absolute community.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, it could also be allowed that May '68 and May 18, 1980, present a set of ideological proposals whose operative symbols of resistance and triumph read like lines taken from propaganda manuals. The difference is that while May '68's effect is now largely seen as historical, thus only inspiring in the past, and as such will always be nostalgically recollected, the events of resistance that began on May 18 are still marked on the present. For example, two years after the election of the democratic government in 1993, the *Gwangju Biennale* was born, as a signal to the forces of civil assembly that coalesced on the streets of Korean cities that their actions actually did have a serious critical purchase in relation to cultural production. Of course, with this constant reminder of the heroic nature of the May 18 uprising, Gwangju is also manipulated, to various political ends, in creating its own myth of heroes and antiheroes.

I do not so much wish to read the *Gwangju Spring* against that of Paris, however, as much as to draw some important contrasts between their respective narratives. May 18, in Gwangju and, by extension, in South Korea as a whole, is justifiably commemorated as a specific localized and national event founded on Korean experience and responses against oppression. It did not aim for anything so grandiose and pompous as the liberation of humanity or overthrowing the bourgeoisie. It in no way assumed any overarching or universal meaning that is not supported by the Korean experience and experimentation with democratic and popular mobilization of social will. May '68, on the other hand, was as grandiose as it was inflated in its assumptions of changing the world order. Thus that event is often narrated under universal rather than local, or even continental principles.

As is so often the case with Western universalism, the narrative of the events of the Paris *Spring* is positioned as an historic moment when the fate of Western liberalism finally converged with the illiberal gestures of forces seeking relief from the superstructures of modern totalization. Forty years after that moment, it has become

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<sup>12</sup> See: Choi Jungwoon, "The Kwangju People's Uprising: Formation of The 'Absolute Community,'" in *Korea Journal* 39:2 (Summer 1999), 3–10.

axiomatic to treat those events as the sort of mystical convergence of forms of revolutionary spectacle whose mediated description now lends to its image an aura of the sacred. Popular sentiments about May '68 have tended to share the view that "everything" changed, claiming that it helped bring about a change in the political and social orientation of many Western democracies and, therefore, the world. This manifests a delusion that is found in a mocking joke in Senegal, that "when it rains in Paris, they bring out their umbrellas in Dakar." However, the question to pose is whether these changes, as important and as welcome as their effects may be, can necessarily be understood in the proper sense as world-changing?

The benefit of retrospection is not simply to look back in reminiscence and nostalgia. Nor is it to mourn the so-called last Utopia of that moment. But to question "why such a frenzy of nostalgia?" as the writer Jean-Claude Guillebaud did in a recent reflection on the tendency of the French to universalize the meaning of May '68. Guillebaud suggested that the reason may lie in what he describes as the ambiguous character of the moment.<sup>13</sup> Looking back at that ambiguity provides us the means of reappraisal. The act of looking back or, as Chris Marker would have it, *Staring Back* (which does not have a retrospective aspect to it whatsoever, but more a quality of confrontation) is not so much for pure retrospection but of reconsideration, and possibly about social and cultural demystification of historical plots that tend to thicken into the hard mica of delusion and propaganda.<sup>14</sup> In the fortieth year since May '68, we can look back together and observe both the moment and its aftermath.

But can we indeed insist that the world changed during those brief three days of confusion on the streets of Paris? Were the changes that occurred truly long-lasting? Can their effects be traced beyond the boundaries of Western self-conceptions of the destiny of the social democracies that emerged in postwar Europe after the illiberal years

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<sup>13</sup> See the essay by Jean-Claude Guillebaud, "Remembrance of Hopes Past," in *International Herald Tribune* (May 25, 2008), 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Staring Back* is the title of a large collection of black-and-white photographs taken by the great documentary essayist and filmmaker Chris Marker over a period of more than forty years of documenting revolutions and social upheavals across the world. The images range from street skirmishes around the Algerian War to the massive march in France against discrimination organized by minorities, immigrants, and those in solidarity with them. These photographs are images of faces looking directly at the viewer not in retrospection, but in a direct challenge against the machinery of opacity that destroys vision. See: Chris Marker, *Staring Back*, essays by Bill Horrigan and Molly Nesbit, ed. Bill Horrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

of Fascism and Nazism? Or, as having penetrated the core of other historical moments and therefore marginalizing the achievements of other regions? Did everything truly change? And for whom did it change and in what ways? Or posed in reverse, what were the consequences for Western societies, and the world at large of historical events occurring in Africa, Asia, and Latin America? Are those places marginal to the West's conception of its own historical destiny? Posing these questions is not necessarily meant to repudiate the outlandish claims that have been made about May '68; rather, it is to enable us to place it in historical context. In so doing, our retrospection will not lapse into reminiscences or nostalgia. Neither will our recollection be based on the longing gaze with which some may peruse searchingly, in the faded sepia of countless news accounts and film reels of that period, for the heroes and antiheroes who inaugurated what is today considered a seminal moment.

As we begin exploring the various registers of the effects of that entire historical period, at the moment when the 'sixties were coming to an end, and what seemed in the beginning of that decade as the onset of postcolonial utopia, slowly turned into the world of postcolonial reality, we will find it necessary not to universalize, nor give in to the nostalgia of propaganda. Rather, by way of some counter-historical signposts and examples, we are required to ask whether we can view other anniversaries that litter the field of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity as capable of commanding the same aura as world-changing events. For instance, can the years 1947, 1949, 1955, 1956, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1965, 1979, or any other date mean much to us beyond their localized and administered historicizing functions, as do the dates "1945," "May '68," or "1989"? Writing specifically about French nostalgia towards May '68, Guillebaud suggests that though the French (nay the entire West) may have managed to convince themselves and to enact "May '68" . . . as a sort of Parisian exception . . . it was part of an effervescence that touched all the industrialized countries and even a good number of those of the Southern Hemisphere. Comparable uprisings took place in Japan, Latin America, Germany, Britain, and Africa. Today we mention those foreign examples, but only in passing, without making them part of our collective memory."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See: Guillebaud, "Remembrance of Hopes Past."

## ADVENTURE-TIME, EVERYDAY-TIME

Our questions are not simply meant to seek redress for myopic and hegemonic manipulation of historical symbols or to demand universal recognition for other paradigmatic events of social transformation, as much as they are designed as chronotopic (time-space) devices which reflect not simply a chronology but a space or locality necessary to avoid any claims to universality. In his book of essays, *The Dialogic Imagination*, the Russian philologist and literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin reflected on the idea of the chronotope, by suggesting that it is “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships.”<sup>16</sup> In further reflection, he observed about the chronotope (from the Greek *chronos topos*, or time-space): “what strikes us is the mix of adventure-time and everyday-time” in order to suggest the inseparable nature of event from its context.<sup>17</sup> This is to say then, that events such as May '68, despite all claims to the contrary, are essentially local and, therefore, the adventure-time on the streets is precisely a part of the everyday-time of lived experience on the ground. That is where their powers of importance lie. The locality of May 18, 1980, in Gwangju is justly recalled as one of local and national significance, as an instance of self-empowerment and liberation. However, in contrast to Paris, part of the lesson of the Gwangju uprising is the fact that it is not an exception within Korean national formation, but one of the moments, among other exemplary historical moments, in Korea's path towards democracy and democratization.<sup>18</sup> Such recognition gives us pause and therefore moderates the all-too-understandable enthusiasm to cast our own histories as an exception to other historical trajectories, and thus infuse it with a uniqueness of universal quality.

To do so is important, because in the simplified reflections offered by the epigones, or distant followers, of the events of May '68,

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<sup>16</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>18</sup> Gi-wook Shin makes the point that the uprising in Gwangju is bound up with a more complex history of resistance in Korea that goes back to the Tonghak peasant uprisings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and to those of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century postcolonial resistance to Japanese colonialism, especially the anti-Japanese student movements of 1929. Citing these histories and other contemporary examples across the country, Shin argues that “Kwangju was no exception to this national trend; rather, it was the culmination of this broad democratic movement.” See: Gi-Wook Shin and Kyung Moon Hwang, *Contentious Kwangju*, xviii.

the reading of the street manifestations, strikes, labor protests, barricades, placards, pamphlets, manifestoes, and campaigns of social insurrection have been packaged as the narrative of avant-garde renewal. The reading also tends towards the implicit promotion of the idea reflecting the West's rescue of the promise to bring not only revolutionary modernity that would free both social and economic classes from within, but also would bring along with it the emancipation of women, minorities, and the colonized, and all those others on the margins of the national allegory of modernity. The irony of this tendentious display of historical narcissism, is not only that it is historically flawed, especially, in the leading role that the acolytes of May '68 assigned themselves on the historical stage, but that the narrative itself manifests the very form of blindness to other historical developments that have often plagued the West's historical constructions of modernity.

Moreover, to put it in the starkest terms, the narratives of May '68, in bypassing or assigning minor roles to the many other great social and liberation movements occurring outside the Euro-American orbit (Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, China, Egypt, Ghana, Bolivia, etc.) during the entire postwar period up to the 1960s, and seeing the *petit récit* of the Paris students' protests as the earth-shaking moment of global reckoning betrays the same form of imperial hubris usually displayed by the dominant sociopolitical institutions that the protests were reacting against in the first place. Thus, fittingly, the spasmodic activities of a few days in Paris and the spontaneous solidarity the students gained in other European cities were transformed, not simply into world-making, but also world-changing events.

## **USES OF SPECTACLE: GWANGJU BIENNALE AND THE ASIAN CENTURY**

I have suggested the possible uses to which the politics of spectacle have been put in relation to aesthetic and cultural practice. The Paris model typifies the common agenda of the Western avant-garde which is how May '68 has been consistently read. This version of spectacle is deeply rooted in the Marxist critique of capitalism and the postmodern analysis of consumer culture, and in modern forms of technological dissemination of desire, in the form of mass media. Some of these critiques of spectacle are indebted to Guy Debord's

theoretical work and the strategies of *détournement*, against which he and his colleagues in the Situationist International tested their critical models. This critique was developed and formed out of the unique insight of Western capitalism, electronic media, and consumer culture. Part of the challenge of the Western avant-garde was to bury and terminate the death-hold of the spectacle on modern subjectivity. This critique of modern capitalism is consistent not only with the activities and tactics of avant-garde groups such as Situationist International, of which Debord was a founder, but have since become reified as the very model of neo-avant-garde artistic strategy. It is in the spirit of this reification, that the tattered remnants and faded images of forty years ago have been recovered in a fascinating but fundamentally flawed sense of historical remembrance.

If we examine events like the Gwangju uprising, however, events happening in socio-politico-economical circumstances where neither capitalism nor consumer culture, nor technological capability, were developed to any tertiary degree until late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the strategies are far from being driven by an avant-garde aesthetic legacy. Rather, these events mobilize what may be called an anthropophagic or carnivalesque display of massive shock through modes of coalition-building and the establishment of absolute communities that are based on a shared and longstanding impulse of resistance to colonial power.<sup>19</sup>

This contrast, between May '68's identification with Western historical avant-gardes and May 18's rootedness in colonial resistance is what sets the social recollection of the Gwangju uprising apart from the student uprising in Paris. The cultural outcomes of the two events can also be understood to move in different directions, in terms of social relevance. While the Paris *Spring* ended as a defeat of models of progressive politics (a defeat yet to be acknowledged by the multitude of celebrants who utter scant words on the return of reactionary political forces after the failure of the students on the streets of Western democracies) the Gwangju *Spring* emerged as the

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<sup>19</sup> The cannibalizing of other cultural practices as a mode of social and political resistance acquired critical resonance with José Oswald de Andrade's 1928 *Manifesto Antropófago*. A poet, literary critic, and one of the founding members of the Brazilian modernist movement, Andrade strategically embraced long-running European fears about native cannibalism, calling for the unapologetic re-appropriation of Western culture. Seminal to a broader history of Brazilian post-colonial cultural and aesthetic practice, the *Manifesto Antropófago* profoundly influenced many members of the Brazilian visual and musical avant-garde, including the *Poesia Concreta* poets and members of the *Tropicália* movement of the 1960s. In the 1998 *São Paulo Biennial*, Paulo Herkenhoff, the artistic director, based his seminal, and highly provocative, exhibition project around anthropophagia.

triumph of *Minjung* as a fundamental part of people's power, which helped to usher in democracy in South Korea.<sup>20</sup> This recognition led to *Minjung* art, a popular style of socially committed art which dominated the artistic scene in South Korea in the late eighties and early nineties. *Minjung* art combined both a tinge of progressive aesthetic strategy of representation, à la social realism, and a strange type of nationalism in which images of the massive street protests of the late 1970s and the 1980s were set in relief. *Minjung* art though, had a series of internal contradictions, for while it sought identification with broad-based social movements, it can also be accused of over-identification with ideologies of nationalist nostalgia, a type of South Korean exception. This, strangely, is the moment when the images and concepts underpinning the Gwangju and Paris *Spring* tend to converge, through the aesthetic deployment and identification with the spectacle of mass mobilization. Yet there is a difference between Gwangju and Paris to the extent that in Korea, May 18 is a designated national holiday. Another difference is perhaps best explained by the structures through which both events are remembered and how the recollections function as part of the past and present. Paris tends to be focused almost exclusively in the past, while Gwangju is caught up in a ritual of annual passion over the meaning and symbolism of May 18. At the same time, representations of the two tend to associate with two distinct historical legacies: the modernist avant-garde on the one hand and the peasant and anti-colonial resistance on the other. Yet, whatever the distinct differences between Paris and Gwangju, or the modes in which they are commemorated, what is indisputable is how they each set in motion a fervent belief in the politics of spectacle.

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<sup>20</sup> As a form of counter-cultural political expression, the *Minjung* (literally, "people" or "folk") movement of the 1970s and 1980s is central to the Gwangju uprising and the broader formation of political subjectivity in postwar South Korea. The very model of *People's Power* has been a constant in the politics of mass spectacle and street mobilization in Asia for at least the past thirty years. But it also underscores the commitment of a multiplicity of civil society initiatives, and social movement organizations in reshaping not only the political, but equally the social and cultural landscape. At the same time, one of the fundamental reasons for the unleashing of protests on the street owe much to the fact that the scenarios that have been the occasions for mass mobilization are often in societies undergoing transition. Recent expressions of *People's Power* have been as much about acquiring the tools of governance as they are about the invention of new discursive spheres of everyday practice. If we compared the much lauded events of May '68 to some well-known recent examples, which include the students' movement during the Iranian revolution in 1979, the South Korean student movement throughout the 1980s, the massive street protests and uprising in Manila and throughout Philippines that drove Ferdinand Marcos to exile in Hawaii in 1985, and the Tiananmen protests of 1989, we notice striking differences not only in the scale of mobilization and in what the students sacrificed, but also in the concreteness of what was accomplished.

As I have argued throughout, Asia is undergoing a period of unprecedented change. Across both geopolitical and geoeconomic indices, the 21<sup>st</sup> century can only be properly apprehended as the coming of the Asian Century. What makes fascinating observation as Asia grows is not only the pace, but also the scale of that transformation. Whether in the deserts of Western Asia in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, or Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, or in China, Malaysia, India, or South Korea, where new cities emerge overnight, the building of Asia is today, disproportionately absorbing natural resources at an alarming pace. Regardless of this unusual circumstance, there is a boundless idealism and sense of confidence among both old and young that the time of Asia is at hand. The *Gwangju Biennale* and the slew of other biennials, triennials, museums, theaters, cultural centers, universities, schools, etc., that have been established in Asia in the last two decades, gives only the slightest indication of what is to come.

In keeping with the recognition that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is emerging as an Asian-dominated one, the challenge of establishing a major international biennial exhibition in Gwangju coincided with the rising impact of globalization at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the prosperity that has profoundly redefined Asia's economic and political role at a global level. Propelled by technology, modernization, and the rapidly expanding role of economic and cultural networks in the global system, the triumph of the Four Asian Tigers (Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore) and the Asian economic miracle have profoundly shaped the growth of cultural and artistic perspectives. Economic liberalization and cultural expansion have provided a horizon of new possibilities for reflection within emerging spheres of technology, politics, society, and knowledge. In South Korea this new horizon first became visible through a commitment to industrialization, and then the paradigmatic political transformation that brought democracy to the country and the entrenchment of new forums of civil society.

The first steps toward claiming the political importance of open civil and cultural forums as indicators of a stable democratic sphere were made, with the support of the government in Seoul, by launching the first *Gwangju Biennale* in 1995. The inaugural exhibition was presented to more than one million visitors as part of a festival commemorating the courageous Gwangju citizens. Over the past decade, the *Gwangju Biennale's* critical experiment in the field of contemporary art has worked in tandem with the image of the city as a site of human rights and civil society. While the biennale has had an



impact in Asia—not the least of which is the attempt by other projects in South Korea and neighboring countries to replicate some of its curatorial ambitions and to emulate its example—its unique brand is its alone. Perhaps the *Gwangju Biennale* is unique only in the manner that it ties its brand: not to the growth of Asia in the future, but by way of the link it makes to the uprising by using the spectacle of street protests as a symbol for establishing an open structure of cultural interaction.

The city is equally sanguine about the growth of Asia, however, and is positioning itself to play a cultural role within that growth. This can be seen in the investments the national government in Seoul and Gwangju are making in cultural infrastructure and in buildings that accommodate mass meetings or conventions. A new major project attached to this cultural master plan—part of a larger economic development agenda directed to the underdeveloped Southwest Korea—is the massive Asian Cultural Center currently under construction in downtown Gwangju, located on ten acres of land that lie adjacent to the same municipal government building where the uprising ended in 1980. The importance of the *Gwangju Biennale* to the city's idea of its role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century globalization of Asia is, at least, twofold: on the one hand, it is one of the key international cultural institutions to emerge from Korea's unique modern, national, and historical experience; and second, Gwangju city is now linked, in its second phase, to the dynamism of Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The significance of using the biennial as a model for historical reflection is further underscored when one considers Korea's postcolonial status and Gwangju's marginal economic position in South Korean industrialization. At the same time, the *Gwangju Biennale* has evolved into one of the few pioneering international exhibitions to engage in the task of analyzing the impact of globalization on the field of contemporary art, and to challenge an older system of international exhibitions based on the outmoded system of national pavilions. It is perhaps due to the history of its own marginalization that the *Gwangju Biennale* has provided the space in which to explore the changing nature of international artistic networks and to examine new modes of artistic subjectivity and the conditions of contemporary cultural production that extend beyond national borders or focus on regional identification. Yet as part of the cultural initiatives of the city, the *Gwangju Biennale* is simultaneously linked to the network of the global exhibition system and is situated at the geopolitical nexus of the cultural policies of the nation state.

These links have allowed the institution to constantly rethink its biennial exhibitions around experimental praxis and innovative curatorial ideas.

In providing such a reflexive site for the presentation of contemporary art, the *Gwangju Biennale* has today assumed a dialectical position in debates focused on the task of reorienting the role of cultural and institutional networks of contemporary art, both in national debates and in the development of its own civic forums. The *Gwangju Biennale* deliberately positions itself as a resolutely global, open-ended exhibition model, as a discursive site for both exhibition-making and cultural debate. However, it is not only to the network of global culture at large that this biennial seeks connection, but to a diverse cultural infrastructure in South Korea organized on local, regional, and national levels.

These local and regional emphases include projects and institutions such as the *Gwangju Biennale* in the JeollaNam-do province; the *Busan Biennale* in GyeongsangNam-do province; the *Anyang Sculpture* project, located just outside of Seoul in GyeongGi-do province; the *Seoul Media Biennial* (formerly *Seoul Media City*); and a network of national and city museums spread across the different provinces. At another level is the role played by the national government through Art Council Korea, which serves as an international broker for the export of South Korean contemporary art to international venues such as the *Venice Biennale*, *São Paulo Biennale*, and other similar global art fairs. Art Council Korea also provides funding to alternative galleries and directly manages two institutions, Insa Art Space, and Arko Art Center, both based in Seoul. These two institutions, modeled after an alternative art exhibition space and archive and a *kunsthalle*, or arts center, are oriented in their programming to what could be called experimental art practices and curatorial models. In the case of Insa, the focus tends to be on emerging artists and experimental practices, while Arko is focused on more evolved practices. These cultural strategies have been further bolstered by a strong commercial gallery system, a number of which are expanding internationally. At another level are private museums sponsored or directly overseen by private patrons led by large, family-controlled multinational businesses (the so-called *chaebols*, or business oligarchies). It is not unusual for such *chaebols* from Samsung, Daewoo, or Kumho to build museums, collect and exhibit art, organize exhibitions, and offer educational programs

devoted either to Korean antiquity or to modern and contemporary art.<sup>21</sup>

All these activities are fairly recent, no more than two decades old, and in many instances are newer than that. Due to the relatively small size of South Korea, in comparison to its larger neighbors—China and Japan—international culture plays a key strategic role in helping South Korea compensate for its lack of political and economic influence in Asia. Fundamentally, South Korea is built on an export economy. The country's high gross national product derives from the manufacture and exportation of technology, electronics, semi-conductors, shipbuilding, refineries, containerized trade, financial services, automobile manufacturing, and telecommunications—areas in which it is a global leader. Much of South Korea's industrialization occurred between the early 1960s and 1980s, a period that completely transformed the South Korean economy and led to unprecedented increases in income and personal wealth, bringing them to the level of other advanced economies. At the same time, the prosperity of South Korea is built on a highly controlled national economy that tends to bestow privilege on local, albeit giant, global multinationals such as LG, Samsung, Hyundai, Daewoo, POSCO, etc., over foreign competitors. Doing business in South Korea, whether on the pragmatic side or cultural sphere, involves a delicately balance of many forces, the negotiation of national and global logics, and the articulation of a view that is open to the rest of the world, but fundamentally Korean-centered.

In the course of organizing this biennale, the questions posed, the issues raised, the observations made, have each contributed to the sense I have in organizing an exhibition of this scale at a time when the role of Asia in the global world is indisputable. Yet I have also found that the strongest sense and growing importance of contemporary art is not properly captured only through the lens of globalizing forces, as the very resolute localized conditions of production vividly remind us. It is, also, the case that contemporary art continues to elude the universalizing frames to which forces of the market tend to fix it, and therefore continuously rejuvenates our interest in its multiple temporalities and scenarios by offering not a set of homogenizing principles or world views. To fashion a space to articulate the shifting borders of artmaking and contemporary art's multiple audiences, curators cannot eternally confine themselves to

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<sup>21</sup> These include Leeum Samsung Museum, Kumho Museum, Rodin Gallery, Artsonje Center, and Art Center Nabi, to name a few of the largest.

the judgment seat of authority, but must readapt their modes of analysis towards unraveling the intricacies of cultural situations that do not produce only one type of contemporary art. The very structure of *Gwangju Biennale* and the curatorial models it has adopted from the very beginning employ these two tracks and logics, balancing the local and global and vice versa. From its inception in 1995, the biennale has engaged in a wide-ranging global collaboration and dialogue with curators and artists from Europe, North and South America, Asia, Africa, and Australia. In fact, it is perhaps, the most international of all biennales in this regard. From the very first biennale in 1995, a significant number of artists who have been invited to participate in the biennale have been from the global south. This accords with South Korea's identification as both a postcolonial nation and a developed one, and provides it with a sense of levity with regards to its global ambition. The importation of innovative curatorial models and exhibitions—interfaces in which new artistic models and cultural production could be tested—is part of a strategy of expanding both the global visibility and the influence of the South Korean development model, the so-called “miracle on the Han River.” Today, the *Gwangju Biennale*, along with a number of biennales that emerged in the 1990s, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can rightfully claim the mantle of being, from the outset, pioneers of an inclusive global exhibition model, in which the curatorial imperative is not narrow but expansive, not regional but global, always with consideration of the present. Therefore, a remarkable legacy of the *Gwangju Biennale's* accomplishments is borne out by the fact that it has enlarged its critical mandate while remaining fundamentally an institution based in an artistically underdeveloped region of South Korea. The biennale has therefore continuously fashioned itself as a critical force in the disruption of those traditional networks of cultural authority that have been centered in the metropolis.