

**GATE**  
Foundation

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# Let's Pause & Talk, Let's Pause & Drink

The theme of this year's Korea Gwangju (Kwangju) Biennale is 'Pause'. The fourth such event, this Biennale started on 29 March and will run until 29 June. At the time of writing, with the start of the 2002 FIFA World Cup at the end of May and with this Biennale, Gwangju is in a state of great excitement to greet its guests. Artistic director Sung Wan Kyung, Korea's art critic, and China's Hou Hanru, art director for the last Shanghai Biennale, and Charles Esche, the director of Rooseum Center for Contemporary art in Malmo, Sweden, co-curated this biennale with about 230 artists participating from all over the world.

Review >  
Korea

By Youngna Kim

Structured around four different projects this Biennale's focal point rests with its attempt to discover young and unknown artists or alternative art groups, thereby deliberately excluding annually participating artists and well-known US artists. Asian artists are impressively well represented: 94 are from Korea, 36 from China, 14 from Taiwan, Indonesia and Hong Kong each, 11 from Malaysia, and 13 both from Singapore and Japan.

In the exhibition, pavilions were installed between the art works, and the second floor was also used for the exhibition so that the audience could go up the stairs to view the works from above. Unfortunately as the works involved in this kind of display and most of these installations were site specific,

more than 50 per cent of the installations and works were incomplete at the time of opening, causing some complaints from the participating artists.

With countless Biennales opening all over the world, besides the Gwangju Biennale, there has been a flood of Biennales with six to seven more of these art shows slated to open this year. Due to this Biennale phenomenon, the critics are quick to say that the Biennales are becoming less of an 'arts issue' and more of a cultural showcase for the hosting city. Therefore the hosting city's biggest concern is now how to differentiate themselves from the others. In this line of reasoning, the Gwangju Biennale's theme of 'Pause' has succeeded in getting the necessary attention. The theme has a clear Eastern philosophy and meaning imbued in its title where 'Pause' means taking a short rest from our breathless and hectic daily lives in this modern society. The artists themselves tried to stay true to, and to sincerely interpret this year's Biennale theme in their works. Many of the artists' works connected 'Pause' to spaces, where to rest and recharge energy, making these spaces lively and involving audience participation. With an abundance of ideas this exhibition, when compared to the works, which were rather difficult to comprehend in the past biennales, added an element of 'fun'. The visitor could sit in Germany's Olaf Nicolai's *Big Sneaker* in the form of a shoe, or read a comic book chosen from a bookcase in Atelier Bowwow's *Manga Pod*. Thailand's Surasi Kusolwong's *Relaxing Machine* turned a 1965 Volkswagen upside down and put cushions in there to watch a Harry Potter movie!

Korean artists who are more experienced at producing art works with a political or social theme appeared to weakly interpret these themes. The most notable Korean artist was Hahm Jin. The audience could find his fantastic one or two inch insects made from small medicine capsules, anchovies or feathers resting on exhibition ceilings, corner switches or lights, and had a delightful experience discovering these works.

'THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora', is the title of Project 2. This was curated by Min Young Soon, a Korean-American artist and professor at the University of California, Irvine, focusing on works of artists living in Los Angeles, USA, Sao Paulo, Brazil, Almaty, Kazakhstan, Yanbian, China and

Osaka, Japan. Koreans living abroad and the identity problems shared by the second and third generations, the reception and denial of the different culture and how this cultural conflict is manifested in the visual language are the main themes of this project.

About 30 minutes by car took us from the Biennale exhibition to the 5.18 Liberty Park located in the middle of Gwangju City, where Project 3, 'Stay in Execution', was showing. To understand this project, one should know why Korea's Biennale is held in Gwangju.

## The Scars of Gwangju

During the military government, Gwangju, a city that sacrificed many of its citizens in the 18 May 1980 citizen uprising and the brutal repression by soldiers under marshal law, earned a reputation as a city of political persecution and martyrdom in Korea. With the civilian government coming to power in the 1990s, Gwangju was able to reinstate its honour as a city spearheading the spread of democracy, hence the Gwangju biennale, first held in 1995, with astronomical funding support in comparison to other biennales overseas, was to reinvigorate the city which had been neglected and culturally ostracized for so long.

However, despite overwhelmingly positive reviews from foreign critics, Gwangju (the city) and the Gwangju Biennale's raison d'être and identity have continued to be the centre of an internal debate. Should the Gwangju Biennale continue its connection to the city with such political persecution and wounds or should it pursue the line of political reconciliation and take a forward-looking approach? This is an issue with no easy solution. One opinion is that over-politicization of Gwangju will only distance other artists but the other opinion is for maximizing the special characteristics of the city since it is the only way to make the Gwangju Biennale different from other biennales.

Artistic director, Sung Wan Kyung, seems to have decided on maintaining Gwangju's political identity. He chose exhibition sites with historical significance, for example the Court House where the soldiers were stationed to imprison and torture civilians, military police barracks, the stockade, the watchtower, and the main office of the military police.

At various spots at the sites of the exhibition, there are placards reading: 'We are looking for a witness' - the work of Yun Dong-chon. Together with Rhie Joong-jae's video work, *Gap, No one can come between Us*, where a nose-holding game escalates into mutual hatred and violence, this leaves a strong impression. Both works are about memorial or memories, and about individuals and institutions. But not everyone is sympathetic or receptive towards painful events of twenty-odd years ago being replayed at the Gwangju Biennale. In fact, a large number of the audience only views Projects 1 and 2 and bypasses the latter two, making them less crowded.

The Gwangju Biennale is now facing new competition in Korea such as 'Media City Seoul', a technology art showcase in Seoul, or the Busan Biennale, both of which started two years ago. These major exhibitions aside, as regional autonomy is taking root in Korea, regional cities are also eager to host cultural events including fine arts, movies, and ballets that are representative of the image of the hosting cities. However, it cannot be said that genuine art lovers interested in contemporary art predominate. It is expected that about 600,000 will visit the Gwangju Biennale, but most of these visitors are primary and high schools groups taking tours. The success of the Gwangju Biennale in the future seems to depend on how to expand the infrastructure to the general public. <

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Lina Kim. 'Per Visibilia, ad Invisibilia', Installation, 2002

Courtesy of the Gwangju Biennale 2002 organization.

## > Asian Art Online

With the continuing expansion of connections to the Internet, the Art Agenda has started in early 2001 to follow on this development in true multimedia style. Opening hours were replaced by links to the e-mail addresses and websites of the various institutes listed in the Asian Art Agenda. Now anyone with access to a server can have log on to continuous information on Asian Art in cyberspace: 'Link yourselves...'

<http://www.archivesandwarehouse.com>

'In memory of Hans van Dijk'. On 29 April 2002, one of the most outstanding figures in the study and promotion of modern and contemporary Chinese art, Hans van Dijk, passed away. In memory of this great man, whose important work will never be forgotten, his colleagues at the China Art Archives and Warehouse in Beijing set up a website link, featuring a biography, a poem and a large series of photographs made by Hans van Dijk whilst living in the Netherlands, and from 1986 in China.

<http://www.clzoo.com>

Century Online China Art Networks. This is an extensive website containing information on modern and contemporary art in China today, including written information and images on many artists and art projects in China. During its initial setup, the organizers invited many important art critics and art theorists who helped to create the website, including Shao Dazhen, Fan Di'an, Zhu Qingsheng, and Zhu Qi, among others.

[http://www.taisei.co.jp/museum/index\\_e.html](http://www.taisei.co.jp/museum/index_e.html)

Welcome to the John Lennon Museum in Japan. For those readers that did not know before, Japan has an official John Lennon Museum, located in Saitama. According to the online information, the John Lennon Museum has been formally approved by MsYoko Ono, and is the first such museum in the world. Perhaps it would therefore be worthwhile visiting the '9 zones' of exhibition spaces in the museum, ranging from: Zone 1, 'Childhood Memories' to Zone 9, 'House Husband'.

<http://www.dnp.co.jp/museum/jicc-e.html>

Museum information Japan. Situate yourself to any region in Japan and you can find out which museums you could visit. This site provides information about museums in any region of Japan. This portal is sponsored by the Dai Nippon Printing Cooperation (DNP) group in Japan and also has a link to international museum information.