

Yishu: 'Contradictions, Violence, and Multiplicity in the Globalization of Culture: the Gwangju Biennale' By Sohl Lee, 2008

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Contradictions, Violence, and Multiplicity in the Globalization of Culture: The Gwangju Biennale



Yee Sookyoung, *Translated Vases*, 2006, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

Since its inception in 1995, the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea has presented an exhibition every two years, and its 2008 edition opened this past September.¹ Included in the recent 2006 Gwangju Biennale, Yee Sookyoung's installation *Translated Vases* visually represents the combination of forces that gave birth to Korea's first Biennale in Gwangju, a Southern provincial city located three hundred kilometers away from the capital, Seoul. Before establishing its iconic status as the Biennale's venue, Gwangju was already a symbol of another internationally known event—the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. When the memories of a state-sponsored massacre and the presence of an international art festival coexist, contradictions seem unavoidable. In *Translated Vases*, found fragments of contemporary renditions of Joseon Dynasty porcelain embodied violence in the act of destruction. Yee's reconstruction of vases from this material guarantees neither tranquility nor purity that the unbroken whole sought to manifest; Yee reinvents the vases into unrecognizable irregular shapes. The evidence of gluing the shards together is not hidden, but, rather, explicitly demonstrated by the use of gold (a symbol of preciousness, prosperity, and vanity) as an adhesive. A broken tradition and forgotten past have been transformed into a new, aesthetically pleasing present with an exaggerated commodity value. With *Translated Vases*, then, begins a metaphorical discussion on exhibiting the "local" art and culture in the international setting, especially when considering that the curators of the 2006 Biennale presented Asia as the theme by defining an "Asian perspective" on contemporary art.²

The first half of this essay illustrates the often overlooked geopolitical history of South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s to reveal how the Biennale has compulsorily embraced globalism within its identity and how this very will to globalism is imposed upon the local memories of Gwangju. The second part attempts to defy observation of the site as a "locale" that is simply affected by the "global" through analysis of globalization as a composite of fluid forces—multiple scales of influences that cannot be categorized as either global or local—as well as by identifying the multiple actors



Yee Sookyoung, *Translated Vases* (detail), 2006, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

who participate in producing and transforming the Biennale. As a palpable site of irreconcilable contradictions and a product of this particular geopolitical city and country of Northeast Asia, the Gwangju Biennale becomes both an object of study and a framework for interpreting the globalization of a culture full of fragmentations, incongruity, and “refractions of violence.”³

In modern Korean history, Gwangju is often considered a synonym for the 1980 Gwangju Uprising—a protest *for* democracy and *against* the military government, which was eventually suppressed by the state army force that slaughtered as few as several hundred and as many as two thousand civilians.⁴ Opening remarks published in recent Gwangju Biennale catalogues mention the 1980 Uprising as a motivation for the artistic transcendence of the painful past and an inspiration for visualization of a counter-hegemonic spirit, yet these remarks are made only in passing, as if organizing the Biennale itself in Gwangju is sufficient recognition of the protest and its consequences for the victims and their families.⁵ At first glance, the history of a political scar arising from violence on its own people are at odds with the presence of an international art festival closely linked with cultural tourism. The social and political contexts of the 1990s illuminate the reasons behind the art event’s highly visible disjunction.

Korea’s first civilian government was inaugurated in 1993, after over four decades of military regimes. This new administration actively pursued *seggyehwa*, a Korean term roughly translated as globalization but lacking globalization’s emphasis on de-territorialization.⁶ Government-initiated, nationalistic *seggyehwa* underscores, according to historian Samuel Kim, “a state-enhancing, top-down strategic plan.”⁷ The idea of international art exhibitions fit the central government’s desire for openness through culture. When the central government needed a biennial within South Korea to complete the *seggyehwa* project,⁸ Gwangju’s geopolitical history of the 1980s compelled it to assign the first biennial, a cultural and economic opportunity, to this particular site. An international art



View of monument in the new National Cemetery in 2008. Courtesy of the author.

exhibition thus became compensation for the political trauma of the prior decade and a marker of the central government's ambition.

Linking the 2008 Gwangju Biennale with the Johannesburg Biennale⁹ and documenta, renowned global curator Okwui Enwezor categorizes the three as "responses to events connected to traumatic historical ruptures."¹⁰ Of the Gwangju Biennale specifically, Enwezor said, "[for] South Korea, it was the turn to democracy after repressive military dictatorships . . . that gave impetus to signify to the rest of the world that the ground for the work of imagination . . . is an important part of the transition [towards democracy]."¹¹ Enwezor correctly points out that it is "the work of imagination" that is at play in Gwangju; but, more importantly, what Enwezor's account does not elaborate on is this very imagination's potential to

visualize the illusion of a transition instead of assisting the transition. Similarly, the imagined transition to *seggyehwa* in the Gwangju Biennale becomes a reified image, perhaps substituting the possibility to facilitate that eventuality.

If Enwezor's analysis dangerously leaves room for misunderstanding what the Gwangju Biennale represents, historian Martin Jay's observation of Gwangju in 1997 elucidates the contradictions and violence still present at the site. In Jay's words, the Biennale manifests "a refraction of violence."¹² Rather than leading to a transition towards democracy, the 1980 massacre led to a biennial. Jay recalls his two visits to Gwangju, first to the "old cemetery," the gravesite where victims were hastily buried in 1980 and to which their families still return to pay homage, and second to the "new cemetery," the state-sponsored mammoth, symbolic monument where victims' bodies were re-buried in 1997. Those who considered the construction of the new site as "the act of official closure" of the democratic movement protested against the move of the bodies to the new cemetery.¹³ The vast, overwhelming scale of this political trophy, a project of the newly instituted civilian government, indeed creates a tragic juxtaposition in which "the actual victims are dwarfed by the monument to their memory."¹⁴ The bodies are there, yet not there; their stories and agency are suppressed only to reinforce the instant spectacularization and consecration of the victims. The chronological simultaneity in the planning of both the new cemetery and the Gwangju Biennale in the early 1990s suggests the visual reification of democracy and globalization in a country where these two meta-concepts are far from immediate realization.

The new cemetery's political use and architectural design share uncanny similarities with the Korean art scene of the 1990s, as described by art historian and critic Young Chul Lee. Lee suggests: "the sheer quantity of big art events tends to render them empty of all art. The energy of Korean contemporary art emanates from a deep desire to be merely demonstrative, an energy that is

not truly artistic but governmental, both on a national and a regional level.”¹⁵ According to Lee’s compelling remark, political interests create a disparity between the Biennale’s structure (politicians’ ambitions and grand curatorial claims) and its content (the artworks themselves). With the Gwangju Biennale, the 80s—a time marked by political strife—becomes a forgotten past replaced by the 90s, “a decade of mass culture, instant gratification, [and] body politics.”¹⁶ This abrupt shift embodies



View of old graveyard in 1980. Courtesy of Nam Kyungtaek.

inherent contradictions that stem from “the desire itself to meet change and make a profit from it rather than to solve real problems that won’t go away.”¹⁷ In the very internationalism sought by enlarging the scale of the event, the Gwangju Biennale may also have turned itself into an artwork that reflects contradictions embedded in Korean society, while simultaneously functioning as a proxy for the professed progress.

To pose the question of visual representation within and outside of the Gwangju Biennale, I will closely examine Yee Sookyung’s *Translated Vases*. Yee’s mutilated, incoherent vases share similarities with the 1980 Uprising victims re-buried in the new cemetery. The sense of disorder within the making of the vases themselves is juxtaposed with the control exercised in their arrangement, looking not unlike the new cemetery with its evenly lined up gravestones. The function of memory in both cases adds an interpretative layer: the victims’ haunted personal memories were utilized to falsely profess the central government’s will to democracy and globalization, while the broken ceramic pieces were transformed into artwork that supposedly represents “an Asian perspective” in a mega-scale international exhibition. Upon closer observation of the viewers’ bodily experience with *Translated Vases*, yet another parallel between the cemetery and the installation is revealed. Multiple fluorescent-light cylinders are placed at the visitors’ waist level. In order to see the intriguing vases closer, the viewers need to kneel, bending their knees in and hunching their backs. As if paying homage to the political victims before their gravestones, the viewers are paying homage to artworks suffocated by the institutional weight of one of today’s largest biennials.

The burden of an institutional framework not merely overshadows the artworks but also creates internal contradictions within the Biennale. Understanding the combination of political, social, and economic circumstances provides a discursive ground from which to re-examine the work of cultural globalization: multiple forces arising from the capital Seoul, the Asia-Pacific region, and the globe constitute multi-directional influences that cannot be grouped together under the impact of the mega-global; Gwangju is also an unstable and un-locatable entity that constantly transforms and thus cannot be defined within a peripheral-local designation.

Domestic concerns and political conflicts between Gwangju and Seoul create a centre/periphery dynamic that is invisible within the global/local dichotomy. Noting the hidden tension between the two cities, New York based art critic Eleanor Heartney writes in her review of the first Gwangju Biennale that “in ways that were not always obvious to outside visitors, the Biennale’s form and location were greatly shaped by internal concerns.”¹⁸ Seoul, rising as one of the largest global cities in the world, has distanced itself from other Korean cities during the last two decades.¹⁹ Seoul is also a metonym for the central government against which the dissident Gwangju people struggled in 1980. During the preparation process for the first Biennale, the central and the local governments argued over whether to give the decision-making authority to the Ministry of Culture based in Seoul or the city of Gwangju.²⁰ Although the initial conflict ended with Gwangju’s



View of gravestones in the new National Cemetery in 2008. Courtesy of the author.

victory,²¹ there continued to be conflicts as Gwangju is still dependent on the central government for a portion of the Biennale's funding.²² In planning the Biennale, Gwangju lacks self-sufficiency as it, unlike Seoul, does not have the infrastructure to educate and support art professionals. Gwangju's bureaucratic officials often have dissonant relationships with curators outsourced from Seoul, resulting in turf wars.²³ Both the motivation for the Biennale's creation and the continued political conflicts resonate in its structure, often outweighing artworks on display.

Asia's regional changes since the mid 1990s add another dynamic element to the picture, as the establishment of other biennials in the vicinity²⁴ triggers insecurity within Gwangju. Gwangju has its own reasons to claim itself as the foremost Asian biennial: its average budget between 1990 and 2006 was the highest in the world,²⁵ and its audience figures are equally impressive: in 1995 the Gwangju audience numbered 1.6 million and in 1997 close to a million, while the 1997 Venice Biennale received around 60,000 visitors.²⁶ Even when noting the ambiguous relevance of these statistics to the level of criticality in the exhibit's artistic discourse, the sheer vastness of the Biennale's scale tells of a relativist logic behind its institutional identity. Gwangju's insecurity in fact stems from its geopolitical location as a provincial city in Korea—in addition to its distance from the capital city, it is also not Shanghai or Beijing, the world-recognized centres of the exploding Chinese contemporary arts scene. The 1997 Gwangju Biennale catalogue indicates an awareness of its organizers to the external competition and pressure, and the focus of their attention on the issue of survival among—and differentiation from—other biennials.²⁷ The 2000 Biennale artistic director Oh Kwangsu, contemplating the issue of the Biennale's international identity, decided to include more artists from Asia, rather than from other parts of the world.²⁸ As seen previously, the 2006 Biennale embodied neither Gwangju nor Korea, but the larger region of Asia as its theme and inspiration. It seems that keeping to the theme of "local" in Gwangju—its "dissident spirit," political trauma, and historical marginality within Korea—cannot differentiate the Biennale *enough* to guarantee its survival within the global arts community.

As the site of a mega-international exhibition, the Biennale becomes a crossroads for diverse groups of participants: multiple players—central and local politicians, administrators in Gwangju, and curators from across the globe—and multiple audiences from Gwangju, other parts of Korea, and outside of the country, whether as local residents making a family weekend trip or as art critics with accumulated frequent flyer mileage biennial "hopping" in East Asia. This can lead to areas of experimentation, in which the ambitions of artistic directors often differ dramatically from the expectations of the Gwangju city officials. For example, in stark contrast with the mayor's emphasis on regional economic benefits from cultural tourism, the main aim of the Biennale's 2004 artistic director, Yongwoo Lee, was to alter the spectator's position in artist-viewer relations.²⁹ Foreign curators, who are called upon to participate in the design of the exhibitions, contribute yet another



Yee Sookyung, installation view of *Translated Vases* at the 2006 Gwangju Biennale. Courtesy of Kim Kyeongbum and the *Namdo Daily*.

voice that represents a different agenda or exposes a lack of knowledge about Korea and Gwangju. In 1997, the Swiss-born curator Harald Szeemann (1933–2005), who had joined the Biennale as a commissioner, was criticized for exhibiting artworks mainly by European artists with whom he had already established familiarity, thus representing the Western hegemony that the Biennale had claimed to refute.³⁰ Conflicting interests produce instability, with the Biennale reflecting neither a single stakeholder's agenda nor a combination of all of its participants' wishes.

Within the prevalent international exhibition model, curatorial experiments incorporating discourse about the world's most contemporary art coexist disjunctively within the institutional framework of cultural politics. As this inherent incongruity incapacitates any efforts at explaining the globalization of culture with a single clean-cut formula, the case study of the Gwangju Biennale requires the exploration of local memory, political history, and multiple scales of ever-changing influences. My analyses of the globalization of culture in Gwangju, therefore, do not result in a conclusive resolution to the Biennale's conflicts or contradictions; rather, I uncover questions to be seriously considered when discussing this particular Biennale. How does the Gwangju Biennale interact with and evolve in parallel to its Korean siblings, namely the Seoul International Media Art Biennale and the Busan Biennale, both launched in 2000? Considering the landscape of the Korean arts scene, what is the cultural impact of having three mega exhibitions within South Korea? On the larger scope of East Asia, how do the nine biennial exhibitions that opened this past fall affect the region's economy of artistic production, dissemination, and critical engagement? And, finally, what do these biennials contribute in terms of the artistic discourses on cultural production from East Asia?

Here I return to *Translated Vases* in order to explore the process of turning "the local" into "the global" and to further provoke what that process may entail for the Gwangju Biennale or other biennales in the so-called "non-Western" countries. It is necessary to know that the initial violent act of destroying the vases was not done by Yee but by a renowned potter, Yim Hang-taek. In order to continue replicating the Joseon Dynasty white porcelain's perfection, unfaithful renditions of the tradition must be destroyed in the hands of the artist himself as a way of quality control via the act of erasure. Yee's installation represents not the act of destroying tradition but the violence done to parts of tradition in an attempt to preserve *only* what one considers worthy of conservation and promotion. *Translated Vases* thus embodies this paradox in the desire to achieve an ideal representation of a local tradition in contemporary society through self-selection, self-censoring, or even self-orientalization as expressed in the words of Richard Vine in his review of the 2006 Gwangju Biennale.³¹ Yee's reconstructing of "refractions of violence" thereby becomes critical commentary on the contestable notions of tradition and authenticity that represent "the local" in a more globalizing society of the twenty-first century, an institutional dilemma that the Gwangju Biennale is yet to overcome.³²

Notes

- ¹ This article was originally written for the panel "Multiculturalism, Migration, and the Mega-Exhibition: Considering the Impacts of Contemporary Festivals, Biennales, and Documentas" as part of the Association of Art Historians' Annual Conference held in London in April 2008. I thank the panel conveners Elsa Hsiang-chun Chen and Royce W. Smith for their continued support and encouragement. I am also grateful to Bob Foster and Rachel Haidu for generously offering me insightful comments.
- ² See the 2006 Gwangju Biennale exhibition catalogue, *Fever Variations* (Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2006), 211.
- ³ "Refractions of violence" is Martin Jay's phrase, which I will explore more in depth later in the paper. See Martin Jay, "Kwangju: From Massacre to Biennale," in *Refractions of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- ⁴ The government's official record counts the victims among protesters as 165, but an unknown number of civilians were indiscriminately slaughtered by the state army force. The Foundation of 518 Victims' Families' Web site: <http://www.518kdfamily.org/>.
- ⁵ The 1995 Biennale presented an ancillary exhibition titled Spirit of May, referring to the Uprising that occurred on May 18, 1980.
- ⁶ See Charles K. Armstrong's "Introduction: Civil Society in contemporary Korea" in *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy and the State*, edited by Charles K. Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–10.
- ⁷ See Samuel S. Kim "Korea and Globalization (Segyehwa): A Framework for Analysis" in *Korea's Globalization*, edited by Samuel Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2–3.
- ⁸ Preparations for the first Korean Pavilion in the 1995 Venice Biennale were concurrently underway.
- ⁹ The Johannesburg Biennale failed to continue after its second exhibition in 1997.
- ¹⁰ Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form," *Documents* no. 23 (Spring 2004), 10.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10–11.
- ¹² Martin Jay, "Kwangju: From Massacre to Biennale," in *Refractions of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ¹⁵ Young Chul Lee, "Contemporary Korean Art in 1990s," presented at a conference "Inside Out: Reassessing International Cultural Influence" in Wrocław, Poland, June 1999: <http://www.apexart.org/conference/Lee.htm>, accessed March, 16, 2008.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Eleanor Heartney, "Into the International Arena" *Art in America* 84, no. 4 (April 1996), 51.
- ¹⁹ Saskia Sassen, "Whose City Is It? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims," in *Public Culture* 8, no. 2 (1996), 208.
- ²⁰ During the author's interview in New York on October 3, 2007, an official of the Korean Ministry of Culture (Assistant Director, Department of Arts Education) recalls the initial conflict between the two cities.
- ²¹ Even for the third Biennale in 2000, the Gwangju Biennale Foundation's board of trustees was led by the mayor of Gwangju, and the Foundation's chief of administration was the city's vice mayor. See Lee Joohyun's "The Gwangju Biennale, what is its challenge?" in *MoonhwaGwahak* 17 (March 1999), 208.
- ²² Robert Fouser, "Picnic in an art garden: The 2000 Kwangju Biennale," in *Art Asia Pacific* no. 29 (2001), 24–26.
- ²³ Jeon Joo-eun, "Response to criticism of provincial bureaucracy," in *Wolganmisool* (November 1998) <http://monthlyart.com/>, accessed on November 3, 2007.
- ²⁴ Namely, the Shanghai Biennale in 1996, the Yokohama Triennale in 2001, the Guangzhou Triennial in 2002, and the Singapore Biennale in 2006. See <http://www.aaa.org.hk/onlineprojects/bitri/en/didyouknow.aspx>, accessed November, 26, 2008.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.* Also to be noted is that the organizers of the first Gwangju Biennale in 1995 invested \$23 million, an amount unheard of in the world of international exhibitions.
- ²⁶ Gwanghyun Sim, "Manipulating Reality: Social Malady of Provincial Bureaucracy," in *Wolganmisool* (December 1998) <http://monthlyart.com/>, accessed on November 3, 2007.
- ²⁷ See the 1997 Gwangju Biennale catalogue, *Unmapping the Earth* (Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 1997), 25.
- ²⁸ Defining the Biennale's identity became an important issue, and the artistic director Oh Kwang-su seemed to reach the conclusion that the Biennale should include more Asian artists in order for it to become "a distinctly Asian international event." See the exhibition catalogue *Man + Space* (Gwangju, Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2000), 19.
- ²⁹ The curators selected "viewer participants" from across the globe to be paired up with "artist partners." The Biennale exhibited the result of collaborative creation. See the curatorial objectives at http://2004.gwangju-biennale.org/eng/exhibition/exhibition_viewer.asp, accessed on November 17, 2007.
- ³⁰ Robert Fouser, "The Kwangju Biennale: Unmapping the Enmapped," in *Art Asia Pacific*, no. 18 (1998), 22.
- ³¹ Richard Vine, "Sins of Omission," *Art in America* (January 2007), 73. Vine's exact words are: "a new-style Orientalist reverie . . . dreamed . . . by East Asia's own elite." Although his above point adds an intriguing aspect to the discussion of the local/global, his criticism of the Biennale overall falls short due to his limited understanding of modern history of Korea and the Korea-U.S. relations.
- ³² For the 2008 Gwangju Biennale, entitled *Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions*, artistic director Okwui Enwezor began a self-reflexive dialogue on biennial models by bringing exhibitions previously held elsewhere to Gwangju for a section called "On the Road." On the larger scheme, the 2008 edition attempted to situate the Gwangju Biennale within the particular history of modern Korea as well as the cultural dynamism of the twenty-first century Asia.