

An Event City, A Pandora's Box A New Global Art Scene

Gwangju Biennale has been one of the most important global art events taking place in the Asia-Pacific region since its creation in 1995. The 2002 edition (the 4th one) is entitled "Pause" is open from 29 March 2002 till 29 June 2002. I have been invited to co-curate the main exhibition "Project 1" with Charles Esche and Sung Wan-Kyung. This project, instead of repeating most of international biennales' aims to present the most fashionable tendency and art stars, is conceived as a context specific event evoking new forms of critical reflection on the question of global art and its relation with the reality of global-local negotiation. To articulate this, we have also decided to turn the exhibition spaces into a kind of laboratory for new urban-architectural intervention in order to provide a specific context—questioning the issue of urbanisation as a new context for artistic activity today—for the event. Such a process certainly also brings art and architecture activities to confront each other and collaborate. The merging of different disciplines is today inevitable; we are facing the challenge of reinventing new identities for different practices, including art and architecture-urbanism. It's through this new negotiation that we can start imagining and defining new territories and strategies to cope with the tension between the globally increasing urbanisation and necessity of local interests. Our ultimate intention is to create a biennale which functions, a kind of on-going laboratory of reinvention of urban conditions and a new context for art practice.

1. From the beginning, the biennale has encouraged an understanding of the general theme "Pause" as a break with established biennale modes, which limit art creation to "correct" presentation of products. To start with a new direction: emphasize creativity, productivity instead of products. To open up space for "slow" works which are resisting voices against the highly utilitarian evaluation system dictated by the cultural logic of globalising, late Capitalism. In contrast with the culture of the spectacle, projects which deal with slowness, emptiness and openness are conceived to provide such spaces of criticism. Pause is therefore a dynamic and critical process of reflection and differentiation.
2. Logically, the roles of the artist and the art work are energetically challenged: the subjectivity of the one artist has to be open to the dialogue of the other, while an active and interactive relationship between the artist and the public is established through the realisation process of the works which are open, flexible, evolve in time and physically invite the participation of the audience. Together, they create magic moments in which both the artist and the public can critically contemplate and reflect on the issues of art and society, globalisation and locality, etc. Therefore, the biennale has been directly consistently connected to the interests of the local public. This relationship is unique and irreplaceable.

3. Exploring further the question of “global” biennale and locality, one should naturally question the established forms of institutional structure and discourse. Striving against the white cube, the space for contemporary art presentation, or “typical” form of biennale structure commonly taken for granted, we have encouraged projects and actions which go beyond such a confinement. However, more fundamentally, we have understood the truly innovative aspect of negotiation between artistic innovation and institutional framework in the efforts of self-organisation on the part of the artists, who not only endeavour to create differences in the art language but also struggle to open independent spaces to provide new freedom for their creation. This is particularly significant in the Asia Pacific region where a Western style of infrastructure has never existed. Many artists, to make their radically experimental work possible, have organised their own alternative spaces out of everyday life contexts. They live and work in highly diverse and different cultural realities. The forms of their organisations are accordingly different and therefore most enriching. In the meantime, they have also started dialogues across the region, and an important trans-regional network of self-organisations and alternative spaces have been built up and provide the most important conditions for artistic creation. This is proving to be one of the most innovative efforts in the Asia Pacific region’s contribution to the making of a new global art scene. They have shown examples of the necessity of decentralisation of power and resistance to the homogenisation caused by the accelerated globalisation of communication and cultural “exchange.” Instead of simply denying the necessity of globalisation, or global circulation and hybridisation of different cultures, they have creatively proposed constructive solutions to make sure our future can remain rich and diverse, while opening to the other is an inevitable central task. Certainly, this kind of initiative has not been limited to the Asia Pacific region. As a matter of fact, in Europe, Latin America and other parts of the world, similar self-organisational structures are becoming increasingly important. In the biennale project, we have attempted to bring those organisations to Asia so they can meet up with their colleagues on the other side of the globe. A first step towards a global network of independent, self-organisational and resistant structures for creation is hence made in the realisation of the biennale. The biennale itself is an ongoing event of such encounters and dialogues. It is not a once-for-all event. Instead, in one respect it’s like Pandora’s box in that once it’s opened, it can never be closed. On the contrary, it will be continued, developed, multiplied and spread in infinite time and space. Also, it can also be seen as an echo to the current movements of criticism of and resistance to economic globalisation and its geopolitical consequences. Once again, it proves that significant artistic activities are always engaged in reality; it’s ultimately political.

4. The biennale, with a great number of site-specific installations, and especially the adapted versions of "reproductions" of the alternative spaces, is by no means a simple presentation of objects. It's a permanent workshop, a lively urban space with real life events happening all the time. It's a dynamic, complex and mutating system of creation and exchange. It's an event city. To put forward this point, a certain urban organisational intervention becomes inevitable. We have invited Chang Yung Ho and Kim Young-Joon to act as the exhibition architects. What is remarkable is that Yung Ho Chang (principle of Atelier Fei Chang Jian Zhu, Beijing) was the space designer of "Cities On the Move 1-4" (1997-1999). He has been closely collaborating with the visual art world since then. In fact, exhibition design has become a significant part of his activities, a condensed terrain for his urbanist experiments. Obviously, the roles of the architects in the Gwangju Biennale project, like in Cities On The Move, are far beyond designing formal structures to hold the works. Their main achievement is actually an ingenious urban planning project which, in spite of the lack of resources and time, has successfully injected powerful energy and complexity into the biennale. Their extremely intelligent and intense organisation of the spaces between installations/pavilions and alternative spaces, between density and emptiness, between congestion and fluidity, between interior and exterior, etc. have brought a veritable new life necessary to the complex system of the project itself. This result recalls clearly the urban reality of Asian cities driven by the explosive urban expansion, density and dynamic economic, cultural and political modernisation. Visual art practices are now re-contextualised in a completely new environment. Organically binding together, art and architecture are now generating a new category of knowledge and practice.