



SCENE & HERD

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Seoul Cycle

GWANGJU | BUSAN | SEOUL    09.14.16

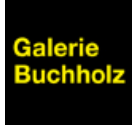


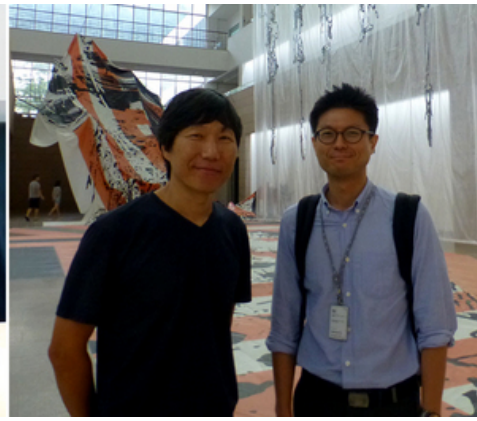
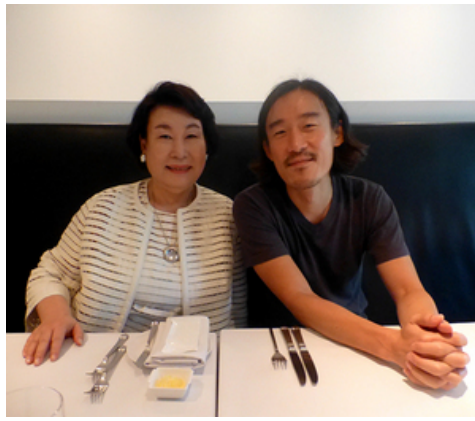
Artist Otobong Nkanga dousing artist Askhan Sepahvand during her performance at the 11th Gwangju Biennale. (All photos: Kate Sutton)

**EVERY FOUR YEARS**, the Olympics leaves a trail of heated debates as host nations are left to reckon with unpaid bills and abandoned stadiums. Culturally, however, the Olympics can effect more positive changes, encouraging evolving scenes to take stock of their own narratives. Take South Korea. "The 1988 Seoul Olympics really marked the first time we were able to see a lot of major international artists here," recalled Hyun-Sook Lee, founder of the Seoul-based Kukje Gallery. *Kukje*, I learned, simply means "international," a tag Lee earned by introducing local audiences to artists like Joseph Beuys and Frank Stella, parlaying her personal business savvy, a handful of antiques, and—crucially—her tolerance for European modernism into what is now a literal art-world dynasty.

The Olympics also prompted the construction of a behemoth of a building for the National Museum of Art (MMCA), which previously hunkered down in Seoul's imperial Deoksugung palace. The massive new museum was settled about forty-five minutes away, in the forests of neighboring Gwancheon. "All our military government cared about was that we had the biggest museum in the world," confessed MMCA curator Lim Dae-geun. "Back then, we were just an exhibition hall with no curatorial team and only a small collection, mainly things donated by artists. So the opening of Gwancheon was really the beginning of our history as a museum." The collection Lim helped build is now partially on display in an exhibition commemorating the building's thirtieth anniversary. Titled "The Moon Waxes and Wanes," the five-hundred-work survey spins the history of Korean art as one of cycles of emergence, disappearance, and rediscovery.

To extend the lunar metaphor further, earlier this month South Korea hit its Harvest Moon. In the first week of September, the country's three biggest biennials—Gwangju, Busan, and the SeMA Biennale Mediacity—opened back-to-back, sending art worlders scrambling to make their KTX trains, armed with WhatsApp group chats and "otter masks," an ingenious device enabling the critically jetlagged to look simultaneously drained and unsettlingly dewy ("moistful"). Institutions were quick to get in on the action, trotting out the power-punch Kimsooja/Korean Art Prize combo at MMCA Seoul; fresh additions to the Space Lee Ufan in Busan; and ArtSonje's "Still Acts," a series of reenacted excerpts from the institution's twenty-year history.





Left: Kukje Gallery founder Hyun-Sook Lee and Charles Kim. Right: MMCA curator Lim Dae-geun and Giseok Yi at MMCA Gwancheon

Rediscovery seems to be the primary engine propelling Korean art onto the current global art market. Particular interest has been paid to the artists of Dansaekhwa, a loose association of conceptual-abstractionists working from the 1950s on. The name means, quite simply, “monochrome painting,” though during our studio visit, movement mainstay Park Seo-bo described it more as “a way of emptying oneself.”

Artist Kim Yong-ik may have a troubled relationship to Dansaekhwa (he prefers polka dots to monochromes), but he sympathizes with their strategies. “In a time of repression, my silence was a political statement,” he told us, during a walk-through of his show at the Ilmin Museum. I ran this theory by MMCA’s Lim Dae-geun, who argued that this political spin was a recent acquisition. “In many ways, the government saw Dansaekhwa as the *safest* artists, precisely because they weren’t trying to say anything.” He paused: “Sort of like America’s Abstract Expressionists.”

The next stop on our tour was Kukje Gallery, where a fascinating solo of late painter Wook-kyung Choi—one of the first Korean artists to openly embrace an American-branded modernism—was coupled with new pieces from Anish Kapoor’s *Gathering Clouds*: wall-mounted, concave surfaces coated in a gray paint that made them appear flat. “There isn’t a whole lot to say about these works,” the artist admitted. “Richter made a whole series of paintings out of grays, and I just wanted to see if it was possible to do it again.” But it wasn’t gray that we wanted to talk about. Earlier this year, Kapoor caused a stir by trademarking *Vantablack*, a military-grade material that is purportedly the blackest black known to man. “This isn’t black paint that comes out on a tube,” the artist protested, clarifying that the trademark was not on the color, but rather on the technology used to trap the light to such an extreme. *An* extreme, not *the* extreme. “Perhaps the darkest black is the black we carry within ourselves,” Kapoor cooed. “The blackest moment isn’t when you turn off the lights, but when you shut your eyes.” Ponderous and amply distracting, yes, but maybe not the most considerate analogy to feed a room full of jetlagged journalists.



Left: Artist Kim Yong Ik at the Ilmin Museum. Right: Artist Anish Kapoor with landscape designer Sophie Walker at Kukje Gallery.

Kapoor’s show was set to open Thursday, the same night as both the SeMA Biennale Mediacity and the Gwangju Biennale’s beloved temple dinner. With vegan food conquering all, we had to settle for a quick loop around the SeMA install on Wednesday. Curator Beck Jee-sook had lifted the biennial’s zaumeskue title, “neriri kiruru harara,” from Shuntarō Tanikawa’s poem “Two Billion Light Years of Solitude,” which imagines life on Mars. “For me, this biennale is about nurturing languages that go beyond the limits of how we can imagine the world,” Beck explained, adding that the Sewol ferry accident had got her thinking about the ways contemporary art can respond to catastrophe. She settled on a “realism of the possible,” recruiting the likes of Nicholas Mangan, Cynthia Marcelle, João Maria Gusmão & Pedro Paiva, and Basel Abbas & Ruanne Abou-Rahme. Concurrent to the exhibition, Taeyoon Choi ran an Uncertainty School, a series of workshops that challenged the local communities to rethink disability, through programming like Choi’s collaborative intervention with Christine Sun Kim, *Future Proof*, as well as a performance from wheelchair-bound dancer Alice Sheppard, with help from Sara Hendren. While Sheppard was certainly convicting, I found myself most captivated by Ahmad Gossein’s *The Fourth Stage* and by *Sleigh Ride Chill*, a video by Kim Heecheon that managed to perfectly convey the acute dislocation one feels after having lost one’s iPhone and MacBook (to be honest, for most a far more relatable subject matter than the usual “pick a forgotten genocide, any forgotten genocide” biennial tactic).

This is not to discount the power of political context. The Gwangju Biennale was borne out of a passionate and now deeply entrenched drive toward democracy, a thrust that has propelled past editions into true civic

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initiatives. This year it was clear how much of that may have had to do with the biennial's founder and former president, the charismatic Youngwoo Lee (or "Dr. Lee"), who stepped down during the last edition following the censorship of Hong Seong-Dam's depiction of the Sewol ferry disaster in a parallel show. At this year's opening, Dr. Lee was all smiles, but even with the man himself in the room, his absence resonated.

On the heels of Jessica Morgan's spirited "Burning Down the House," this year's biennial felt like smoldering remains, with some light but little warmth. Acknowledging the all-female team—artistic director Maria Lind, curator Binna Choi, and a group of assistant curators—Lind offered the limp endorsement that "women are our future" (a phrase that only sounds rallying until you start to think about its implications). In a text describing the theme—or, as Lind prefers, the "set of parameters"—"The Eighth Climate" name-checked a concept formulated by twelfth-century mystic Sohrevardi and later fleshed out by his twentieth-century acolyte Henri Corbin. The basic premise is that art exists as a kind of extra-climate, a space for "potentiality" whose relationship to the ontological world is like that of the contents of a mirror to the objects it reflects.



Alice Sheppard performing at SeMA Biennale in Seoul.

If that's the case, then, judging by the preview, we can safely presume the other seven climates haven't yet been fully installed. Artists were just shy of panic mode, particularly after word spread that it would be a full two weeks before Hito Steyerl's work would be ready. "Instructions were not followed," Lind announced curtly at the opening press conference, after apologizing to the affected artists. At a press luncheon earlier in the day, she likened the experience to conducting brain surgery with nurses on their first day on the job. (In defense of those nurses, specificity may not be Lind's specialty. Earlier the curator had introduced the biennial's subtitle—"What Does Art Do?"—with the exhortation, "We need to remember that art *does things*.")

If its theme dipped into mysticism, the biennial's organization borrowed from Borges's *Encyclopedia*, with work loosely divided into four sections: Abstraction, Kaleidoscope, Zones, and Works That Had to Be Shown in the Dark. Lind repeatedly insisted that the real bulk of the biennial was in its public programming, which had quietly been taking place for weeks amid the local community. "If this is the trend, then why bother with the exhibition at all?" wondered critic Sabine Vogel. I didn't have a good answer, though I did appreciate strong contributions from artists such as Ane Hjort Guttu, Jeamin Cha, David Malković, Inseon Park, Mariana Silva, and Otobong Nkanga, who, during her performance, hurled an orange at an inattentive audience member not once but twice. "Would you call this love?" the artist howled at her audience. I know I was smitten.

If technicians were few, artists were plenty, with almost ninety of them flown in for the opening. The ceremony—traditionally a mind-blowing spectacle of aerial dancers and K-Pop celebrity ambassadors—was noticeably scaled down this year to some teenage breakdancers. More devastating was Gwangju's complete lack of Freedom. The iconic nightclub—all K-Pop karaoke, midnight "snowstorms," and dubious decision-making—was no longer in business, which sent the biennial's once-fabled afterparty to the nearby Bugatti club, the kind of luridly lit dive where TV cops go for an off-the-books rendezvous with Shady Characters #1 and #2. With the help of Shady Character #3, I breached a wall of bottle service to find curators Phil Tinari and Magdalena Magiera, dealer George Armaos, artist collective Tromarama, and Trevor Paglen, whose Wi-Fi-giving *Autonomy Cube* had been mysteriously disconnected just before the VIP dignitaries arrived, though the reasons why were not fully clear. Things got even blurrier from there, but somewhere in between catch-ups with curator Sohrab Mohebbi, Triple Canopy's Alex Provan, and artists Anicka Yi and Tyler Coburn, I missed the cue to reconvene at a neighboring karaoke bar, where Lind was coerced into taking on an Abba song. ("She was the quietest singer I've ever heard," one bystander marveled.) Freedom may have come to an end, but bad decisions linger on.



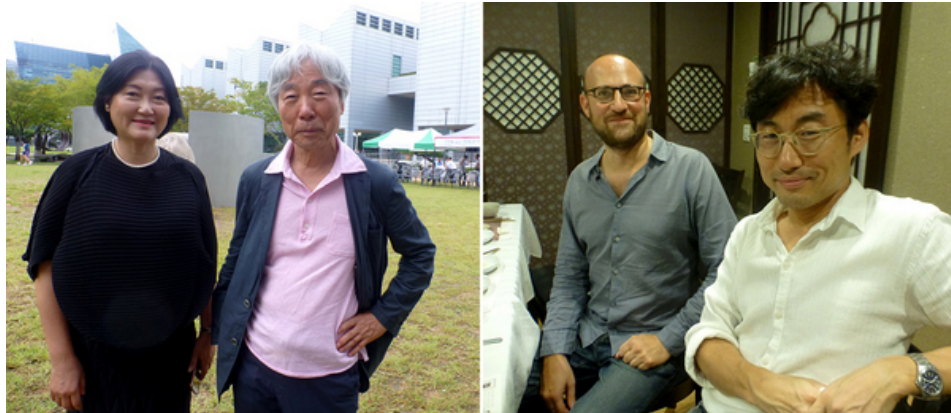
Left: Artist Hori Kosai with Busan Biennale curator Yuzo Ueda. Right: Artist Tyler Coburn, Mathaf's Laura Barlow, and critic Brian Kuan Wood at the Gwangju Biennale.

Speaking of, I wouldn't number the 9 AM bus to Busan among my better ideas, but I was determined to pull off the Korean Trifecta. Besides, this year's Busan Biennale strayed from the usual format, concentrating two-thirds of its resources on a historical survey comparing the respective avant-gardes of Korea, China, and Japan. "It's funny to see this kind of show without representation from Taiwan or Hong Kong," writer Amy Lin observed, underscoring my own ignorance of what's at stake in the region. To help fill in the blanks, the Busan Museum of Art hosted a multihour art-historical symposium, though I found artists like Sung Neung Kyung, Hori Kosai, and Ma Liuming were more than happy to provide their side of the story. How refreshing to see a biennial directing its international audience to this kind of art-historical brain trust, rather than the usual rat-race to scrape up salable works from the market's Next Big Things (Now if only the second part of the biennial had gotten that memo.)

With a torrential downpour crushing any hopes of sampling Busan's storied fish market, let alone its beach, I paid my respects to the ethereal Space Lee Ufan and retreated to Seoul. Briefly bussing the plaintive Lee Jung Seob survey at the MMCA's Deoksugung Palace outpost, I headed to Gangnam for the closing dinner for Jaewook Lee's synesthesia-driven solo at O'Newwall in Seoul. The restaurant was the fanciest I visited in Korea, specializing in the "art of food"—inspired arrangements of mushroom crepes, sashimi roses, and a plate with HAPPY DAY spelled out in wasabi paste, which was ceremoniously placed in front of philosopher Aaron Schuster, whom our waitress arbitrarily nominated the subject of the celebration.

Having barely made it through the eight courses to the black sesame ice cream, our band of marauders stumbled to an Astroturf lawn outside an all-night mall, where we chased sticky handfuls of glow-in-the-dark cotton candy with swigs from a ritzy bottle of soju swiped from dinner (Gangnam style). Suddenly Schuster spotted a booth grilling teriyaki skewers and resolved to snag one. We gawked. "It's something about South Korea," he laughed. "I just want to try everything, even though I know I've already had way too much."

— Kate Sutton



Left: Busan Cultural Center director Geum-Sok Son with artist Lee Ufan at the Space Lee Ufan in Busan. Right: Philosophers Aaron Schuster and Alex Taek-Gwang Lee at the O'Newwall dinner in Seoul.





Left: Art Space Pool director Sunghee Lee. Right: Artist Park Seo-bo in his studio in Seoul.



Left: Artists Jaewook Lee and Charles C. Hahn with curator Goeun Song at the O'Newwall dinner in Seoul. Right: Artists Lee Yongbaek, Jang Jaerok, and Park Jihye.



Left: Artists Jeon Joonho and Moon Kyungwon with critic Jean-Max Colard at the Gwangju Biennale. Right: Artists Hak-J Kim, Lee Yongbaek, and Yook KeumByung.



Left: Artist Neung Kyung Sung. Right: Artist Ma Liuming.





Left: CCA Singapore curator Magdalena Magiera, artist Tyler Coburn, and curator Prem Krishnamurthy. Right: Curators Övül Ö. Durmusoglu and Nataša Ilić with artists David Maljković and Trevor Paglen.



Left: Artists Pauline Boudry and Emily Roysdon. Right: Artists Tromarama (Ruddy Hatumena and Herbert Hans).



Left: Tina Kim's Nicole Calderón and Kukje's Zoe Chun. Right: SeMA Biennale's Jiwon Lee and Beck Jee-sook.



Left: Art Sonje's SooJin Lee and Sunjung Kim. Architect Sara Hendren with Alice Sheppard at SeMA Biennale in Seoul.





Left: Artist Jaewook Lee with glowing cotton candy in Seoul. Right: Artist Jia Aili.



Left: Artist Yu Sunghoon performing at the entrance to the Busan Biennale. Right: Orlan poses with her digital avatar at the Busan Biennale.



Left: Curators Bartomeu Marí, Yongwoo Lee, and Sally Tallant at the Gwangju Biennale. Right: Kukje's HeeJin Park with curator Sungwon Kim and Solji Jeon.



Left: MMCA curator Kim Kyoung-woon at MMCA Gwancheon. Right: MMCA Seoul managing director Jiyeon Lee.



Left: QAGOMA's Aaron Seeto at the Gwangju Biennale. Right: Curator Lee Mina at the Space Lee Ufan in Busan.



Left: Curator Juan Gaitán and artist Otobong Nkanga. Right: Choi&Lager's Sunhee Choi with artist Daniel Firman at the Busan Biennale.



Left: Ha Chong-Hyun in his studio outside Seoul. Right: Ullens Center director Phil Tinari with artist Trevor Paglen.



Left: Artist Jung Lee with One and J's Hyeyoung Yang. Right: Artist Chung Seoyoung at Art Sonje in Seoul.





Left: Busan Biennale director, sculptor Lim Dong Lak. Right: Curator Mami Kataoka with artist Ade Darmawan.



Left: Artists Arseny Zhilyaev and Babi Badalov. Right: Artist Taeyoon Choi with Triple Canopy's Alex Provan.



Left: Artist Kimsooja at MMCA Seoul. Right: Artist Kyungah Ham's soccer-playing defector.

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