



Seoul Mediacity Biennale
Newsletter
November Issue, 2023

INVISIBLE

The Biennial as a System

Presenting a biennial involves many distinct entities working together under the surface. Since biennials are typically organized as art and cultural events that are representative of particular cities or regions, certain procedures must be followed in order to reach mutual agreements with local governments regarding development plans and allocation of funds for the project. (One must respect the results even if they are less than ideal—to do otherwise amounts to denying the biennial as a system.) The Seoul Mediacity Biennale began twenty-three years ago as a form of an event happening every two years. If we trace back to when its unique timely attributes—new media and artistic experimentation—originated, its history extends to twenty-seven years. The scale of the Biennale, which operates under the auspices of the Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA), is circumscribed by an annual budget approved by the Seoul city government. Before proposing a budget, the Museum follows specific procedures to ascertain the manner in which the Biennale will be organized. Throughout this process, the Biennale's operational framework and its feasibility, the working environment for Biennale employees, and the accumulation and consumption of resources are among the Museum's ongoing concerns. Some of the more conspicuous aspects of management include recruiting artistic directors and curators, inviting artists and artworks, realizing projects, determining the voices and languages in which the Biennale's messages should be translated, and improving the accessibility of events. All these decisions and circumstances are not necessarily related to developing particular aesthetics or careers, however, but rather for creating the invisible 'public' value of art and art practice.

The late curator Okwui Enwezor, a prominent figure in contemporary art history, was known for pioneering the notion of "non-West." Following his emergence on the international art scene in 1997 as artistic director of the Johannesburg Biennale, Enwezor continuously

focused on regions and activities that fell outside the confines of Western modernism, while questioning the idea of universality from a global perspective and striving to redesign the topography of art. His convictions and approaches remained consistent throughout his curatorial projects carried out at Documenta, Gwangju Biennale, Venice Biennale, and Sharjah Biennial (despite Sharjah's most recent edition taking place after his death, it was nonetheless conceived by Enwezor); he concentrated on artistic practices that opened up alternatives to modernization and established new institutional spaces at the local level. Enwezor once explained that exhibitions such as biennials are excellent examples of representing "the vital and productive messiness of the contemporary." Biennials bring people together from diverse backgrounds to show myriad interests and strategies of their time, with the resulting ruptures reflecting contemporaneous changes in art production and cultural perspective. However, for a biennial to be rejuvenated as a "vital and productive" rupture, the existing system must respond in kind. That is to say, the system must be renewed in order to transform new experiments and glitches into values and resources. If there are no ruptures or public discussions despite recognizing such breaks, the biennial is doomed to repeat itself without progress as an institution.

What ruptures and attempts might be extracted from the current edition of the Seoul Mediacity Biennale, which now has a mere twenty days remaining? Can its relevant disagreements and endeavors be turned into a public resource and institutional legacy? How will this year's Biennale be read twenty-seven years from now? In April 2022, two meetings were held in which city residents interacted with experts in biennial and museum management, policymaking, marketing, and art. The ideas discussed in these meetings initiated the process of the Biennale's first-ever open call for an artistic director as well as improvements in

Jin Kwon

the Biennale evaluation system and recruitment of a marketer dedicated to the Biennale task force. This newly-launched task force published a book compiling historical records of the Biennale and reflections on its previous editions. Pre-biennale events, comprising publications, exhibitions and workshops, used to fall under the purview of the artistic director. For this edition, however, they were collectively presented as a SeMA project in an institutional context. The selection process for the 2023 Biennale's operational entity, which serves as the official agency of this Biennale, presented an opportunity to ask ourselves about the fairness and justice ingrained in the selection process underlying the Biennale. Approximately 100 contracts were signed with artists, participants, collaborators, copyright holders, sponsors, and cooperative institutions, carefully discussing and readjusting terms in each case to meet specific circumstances and thereby setting precedents for the future. Hosting exhibitions at the Seoul Museum of History, space mm, and Sogong Space constituted an experiment to expand the scope of Biennale to include venues outside the SeMA Seosomun Main Branch, while a project with Seoul Community Radio created a new category of collaborating platform and new relationships were formed between the operational entity and the Biennale which is usually limited as a payment agency. Of course, it is impossible for every aspect of the Biennale to be satisfactory; however, I would like to address some of the discrepancies in the Biennale as constructive reflections. Firstly, when gallery attendants refused to spend long hours with a work due to potential health hazards posed by the use of 3D printers, the artist modified its performative method for the work. Secondly, various barriers and signage for an artwork installed in the SeMA courtyard were continually moved, supplemented, and enhanced to better negotiate the split from the audience.

"Locality" is a frequent topic of many

international biennials, including the Seoul Mediacity Biennale. Narratives that encompass local cultures and histories are both crucial starting points as well as obstacles for all biennials; the former due to the fact that all biennials situate art and culture in the context of modernization of the region, and the latter due to the complexity of visualizing the connections between international venues and locality. The number of local artist participants or local cultural aspects in a biennial cannot serve as the sole means of understanding the relationship between biennials and their corresponding regions or activating the institutional cycle. However, Enwezor stated that biennials have shattered the mythology that different parts of the world lack artistic practices and added that biennials had *forced curators to look more carefully*. The 'looking' mentioned here does not refer to a simple discovery of a topic. Rather, it must involve consideration of the influences, responsibilities, and future directions of the biennial. The mechanisms that truly operate biennials as systems are each institution's stability, flexibility, persistent research and archival activities, and attentiveness for future generations. Above all else, having faith in the performance of such an invisible system is crucial.



† Bo Wang, *The Revolution Will Not Be Air-conditioned*, 2022
Exhibition view of the 12th Seoul Mediacity Biennale
THIS TOO, IS A MAP, Sogong Space, 2023
Photo: GLIMWORKERS

Reinterpreting the Underground, a Communal Mapping

The Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA) renovated the secret bunker that was discovered during the construction of the Yeouido Bus Transfer Center in 2005 and transformed it into an art space, rechristening it as SeMA Bunker. Prior to its accidental discovery, this bunker was completely unknown and lacked any quantifiable documentation. Based on aerial imagery and photographic records of the 1977 Armed Forces Day, the Seoul city government reached the conclusion that the bunker must have been constructed in the 1970s as a security facility for VIPs and key government personnel during the country's military regime.¹ A product of the Cold War and a representation of the historical chain of modern and contemporary Korea, this space is currently used to realize aesthetic projects that reflect the bunker's historical significance and sense of place, while preserving a section of the bunker in near-perfect condition as a Special Exhibition. This year's Biennale maps the underground ecosystem that bridges unfamiliar times and spaces—it traces humans and technology, migrations of minerals and their histories, and the extraction and displacement of politics and cultures, as well as investigating pluralistic perspectives toward mining disputes, environmental pollution, resource development, and waste management which continue into the present.

A Prelude to: When The Dust Unsettles (2022–2023) by Femke Herregraven deals with Digital Twin Smart Mining technology, which has been rapidly adopted in mining development. This technology makes intricate digital reproduction possible, structuring a physical environment using data extracted from multiple sources such as sensors, cameras, and artificial intelligence. When applied in simulating and analyzing excavation progress and mining performance, the technology optimizes procedures and maximizes efficiency. *A Prelude to: When The Dust Unsettles* transports the audience to Manono, a town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where multinational

corporations compete over lithium mines. In Herregraven's piece, an autonomous mobile robot maps the town's diggings and traverses the actual structures of the city, contrasting abstract figures, 3D pipelines, immaterialized data, sounds of disasters (which cannot be depicted through virtual brushstrokes), and complexities of the ecology and its inhabitants. Focusing on the unheard voice of the land scarred by long exploitation, the piece collides with the realities of the African mining industry and its significant harm to the region's residents and ecosystem, and raises questions about the future made visible by elaborate and complex cutting-edge technologies managed by the global economy and its digital transformation.

Seoul is one of the world's most overpopulated cities, thanks to its high concentration of residents and infrastructure. Here, underground malls are built around transit stations and areas with large pedestrian traffic to alleviate the city's density. These shopping complexes were originally developed as subterranean pathways connecting public spaces and alternative shopping destinations compared to high-priced business districts, the first of which opened in 1976 across from Seoul City Hall. Named the New Seoul Shopping Mall, it eventually succumbed to a period of decline in its commercial operations and was subsequently renovated and reopened as Citistaro Mall. It currently connects City Hall and Euljiro stations, a nearby subterranean sector of unique shops featuring art and culture products that sees heavy foot traffic. Amid the storefronts, an art gallery with a floor-to-ceiling window has hosted approximately 50 contemporary art exhibitions over the past five years. During the Biennale, Hyunsun Jeon's *Into the Unnamed Mountain* (2023) utilizes the entire space, known as space mm, including its windows, floors, and walls. An abstracted landscape painted in Jeon's distinctive style, this artwork captures the attention of passersby, with its rendering of what initially appears to be

Jooyoung Oh

a typical landscape spreading throughout the interior and exterior of the space. However, the work is filled with symbols that Jeon paints by association such as repetitive trees, geometric abstract shapes, and simple pixels. This landscape-like image where meaning is lost among misplaced signifiers reveals its spatial displacement through mundane landscapes and invites the audience to enter an unfamiliar, intimate, and personal dimension.

Sogong Underground Shopping Center is located at the nexus of City Hall and Myeongdong stations. During the 1980s, it was one of the most popular underground shopping districts in the city and it is still frequented by international tourists due to its proximity to Lotte Department Store and the Plaza Hotel. Naturally, many affordable gift shops selling local products, pottery, and folk art objects are found throughout its corridors, along with an independent art space for professional artists and hobbyists alike to exhibit their works. The so-called Sogong Space takes part in this Biennale with *The Revolution Will Not Be Air-conditioned* (2022), a two-channel video by Bo Wang consisting of footage and archive materials. Wang's video explores modern life in Asia, which has become dominated by global capitalism and materialism, through a juxtaposition of nineteenth-century British terrariums containing collections of exotic animals and plants from the colonies—as well as London's Great Exhibition of 1851, which proudly displayed Britain's industrial and scientific technologies. This work is set against the backdrop of a shopping mall, itself inseparable from colonial history and global capitalism, which transforms into the set of a Zombie movie, an arena of terror in virtual shooter games, and a site for Hong Kongers' guerilla protests. These scenarios pose a distinct contrast to the idealized notion of modern life that has been recklessly implanted in contemporary Asian countries like Hong Kong, revealing its intrinsic discrepancies and

persistent underlying aspirations for freedom.

Abandoned mining sites appear as hollowed-out landforms that sit atop thousands of mine shafts and underground tunnels. As water seeps into the perforated land, it becomes increasingly exposed to air and discharges toxic liquids into the ground surface or water table, eventually jeopardizing the local ecosystem and residents' lives.² Underground bunkers in many nations are ruthlessly demolished or neglected without being utilized. Deteriorating underground shopping malls in modern cities are barely visible to local governments, leading to inevitable abandonment and ghettoization. The births and deaths of these zones extend beyond aboveground urban ecosystems and enter into convoluted dynamics between nature, politics, social systems, power, and global structures; their revitalization thus requires fresh ideas from diverse entities. This year's Biennale explores new ways of encountering Seoul's urban and geographical characteristics through underground spaces located adjacent to aboveground exhibition spaces. *THIS TOO, IS A MAP* travels across the city, connecting various perspectives as well as scattered places and people. Invisible, concealed, and overlooked underground spaces are no longer hidden behind the history, but connected to the people sharing and celebrating the site's historical and cultural aspects.

1 Lee Dong-wook, "Secret underground bunker in Yeouido opened to citizens after 40 years," Seoul News Agency, 2015.10.01.

2 Gabrielle Hecht, "The African Anthropocene," trans. Seunghee Cho, *Epi*, no.8 (2019): 64–66.

Underground Dedication

The 12th Seoul Mediacity Biennale will have conducted nineteen programs encompassing twenty-seven sessions, ranging from talks, performances, and workshops to webinars, screenings, and podcasts, between September 4 (Pre-Biennale) and November 19, 2023 (the conclusion of the Biennale). The first weekend kicked off with *Demilitarized Goddesses*; *Domestic Resistance: Rasa & Asa*; and *Domestic Resistance: Nohdong/노동 Nongkrong*, where organizers of alternative networks seeking to connect lives outside geographic territories—the central theme of this year's Biennale—discussed methods of restoration and shared their experiences, stories, and food in the Project Gallery of SeMA Seosomun Main Branch. Biennale Program Advisor Ong Jo-Lene, who organized a series of programs, is an independent curator based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands and Ipoh, Malaysia. As an individual of Hokkien (ethnic Chinese living Malaysia) heritage, she engages with counter-colonial ways of sensing, remembering, and organizing via a long-term project aimed at restoring erased histories and knowledge systems, reconnecting ancestors and their intellectual heritage, and contemplating the possibilities of a sustainable and just future.¹ Ong and her female collaborators organized three events during the Biennale, which collectively created a time and space to acknowledge inconspicuous commitments and solidarities in the underground economy of national and social development.

Demilitarized Goddesses was partially named after *DMG: Demilitarized Goddesses*, Youngjoo Cho's *ajumma* dance project held in 2015, which was presented in three parts: a video screening of *Demilitarized Goddesses* and *Floral Patterned Romance* (2014) (another film of the same series); a conversation with Yang Suk Seo and Seonja Jeon, DMZ tour guides and the project's participants; and a performance of Shingosan Taryeong, a folk song from Hamgyeong Province, sung by Yang Suk Seo. After living overseas for

many years, Cho returned to South Korea and developed an art practice that draws from her experiences in Korea to explore the systemic absurdity of Korean society toward issues of migration, discrimination, and care labor, as well as the identities of the generations of *ajummas* (a Korean term used to designate married women, often accompanied by a negative social annotation, particularly in the context of K-Dramas) who have endured irrational circumstances. *Ajummas* who were born in the 1950s experienced the Korean War following the liberation of Korea, the US/USSR partition of Korea, politically unstable governments, and the nations' rapid industrialization. Through all this, they have strived to fulfill various social expectations imposed upon them, namely to provide labor at work and home in support of their parents and children while caring for their families. Cho, who initiated this project in order to better understand her own mother, traveled to five different cities in South Korea and met with women in their 50s and 60s who handled housework and cared for their families while also working paying jobs outside the home. Cho invited them to perform a dance that symbolizes self-restoration as a means of nonverbally expressing their suppressed desires, despairs, and unspoken stories. During the Biennale, Cho and her collaborators reconvened after eight years to reflect on the project, their work and lives at the DMZ, and the changes that such therapeutic choreography had brought to their daily lives.

Domestic Resistance, a workshop around housework and labor diasporas, presented works by artists and socially-engaged organizations based in Indonesia and South Korea. The workshop consisted of two parts: documentary screening and discussion, lecture performance, and rice ball making. When Malaysia's borders were closed during the recent pandemic, many migrant domestic workers from Indonesia could not return to their home country and became isolated in their employers' houses. However, by utilizing online meeting services

Jie-young Song

and digital storytelling platforms they were able to share their experiences, circumstances, concerns, and news. PERTIMIG (Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers Association) was established in late 2019, and during the COVID-19 outbreak it transitioned to online activities with the aim of fostering solidarity among their members and their Indonesian-born friends whose only means of communication was online platforms. *Rasa & Asa (Flavors, Feelings, & Hopes)* (2021), a documentary that celebrates these members' connections and creativity, repurposes online event recordings and smartphone footage taken by PERTIMIG members. Following the screening, Choi Hyeyoung of Working Women Academy, a recent collaborator from South Korea, discussed the creation of the film with filmmakers Okui Lala, Nasrikah, and Ong Jo-Lene.

At the event *Domestic Resistance: Nohdong/노동 Nongkrong*, which was held the same day, an impromptu collective sat down together with audience members at a table covered with hand-patterned wrapping cloths for making rice balls, participants' name cards, cooked Korean rice, and food ingredients from different countries prepared by the participants. The event took the form of a relay lecture performance for sharing labor diaspora experiences and advocating domestic work and artistic practices in conjunction with rice ball making. This event was a collaboration between Okui Lala, Nasrikah, PERTIMIG, Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin, the National House Manager's Cooperative (NHMC), and the Korean Women Workers Association (KWWA). The Korean word for 'labor' (*nohdong*) refers to a physical and mental act done in exchange for materials necessary to live. In Indonesian, *nongkrong* means "to get along with" or "to spend time together," and the event's title translates to "spending time together while making rice balls," which are traditionally prepared as homemade lunches for migrant domestic workers. *Domestic Resistance: Nohdong/노동 Nongkrong* was designed as part of the series

Makan Bersama/Eating Together, a workshop co-organized by other Malaysian collaborators. *Makan Bersama/Eating Together* invited migrant domestic workers and their employers to share poetry and stories over dinner in a comfortable and safe environment. This sort of exchange is rare in Southeast Asia, where migrant domestic workers seldom share meals with their employers.

Domestic work and care are essential for maintaining one's household; however, such labor can burden individuals who also hold jobs outside the home. In most patriarchal societies, including Korea, housework and care have long been considered the responsibility of female family members. It is a widespread assumption that domestic work merely supports the family's breadwinner or sustains the employer's daily life, an idea reflected by frequently referring to domestic workers as 'helpers.' The Domestic Resistance project and its collaborators seek to provide quality jobs and welfare to migrant domestic workers and improve general perspectives on housework. Sitting down to share a meal together is one way of respecting and understanding each other, which represents the ultimate goal of the project. It is worth noting that a new version of the Domestic Resistance project hosted by the Biennale took place on Sunday, which is customarily observed as a day of rest in many countries. Malaysia has the second largest number of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in the world, yet among countries that have signed MOU agreements with Indonesia, Malaysia is the only one that does not provide legal protections for live-in migrant domestic workers' holidays.² Therefore, providing rest days and breaks for employees is entirely up to each employer, prompting Nasrikah and PERTIMIG to begin a campaign focused on establishing domestic workers' weekly holidays and advocating for their rights.

¹ joleneong.com

² International Labour Organization, *Towards Achieving Decent Work for Domestic Workers in ASEAN*, 2018.

서울미디어시티비엔날레
SEOUL MEDIACITY BIENNALE

Published by Seoul Museum of Art
Publisher Eunju Choi
Editor Seoul Mediacity Biennale
Contributor Jin Kwon, Jooyoung Oh,
Jie-young Song
Sujin Lee
Translation Andy St. Louis
English proofreading Mabasa
Design (An Mano, Kim Jeesep)
Printing and Binding Seguleum

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