

OMENTUM

TOO, IS A MAP

TOGETHER

AS

TO GATHER

SOUL MEDIA CITY  
BIENNALE

Seoul Mediacity Biennale  
Newsletter  
June Issue, 2023

ART OF DIPLOMACY

## Biennials as Diplomacy

In 1764, an envoy was murdered while en route to Edo (present-day Tokyo) with the Joseon Dynasty Diplomatic Missionaries. A Joseon diplomat got into an argument with interpreter Suzuki Denzo, who was also a low-level Japanese warrior, and ended up being killed. The Tokugawa shogunate delayed their investigation, but the incident became a frequent topic of conversation among the Japanese public at the time and was invoked in traditional theater performances such as kabuki or kyogen. Two hundred and fifty years later, Tamura Yuichiro reconsidered the subject in his video installation *Suzuki Knife, Social Cooking* (2014), which was presented at SeMA Biennale Mediacity Seoul 2014 *Ghost, Spies, and Grandmothers*. Inside the Seoul Museum of Art Seosomun Main Branch, a building that once housed the supreme court during Japan's colonial occupation of Korea, Yuichiro recreated a period-accurate courtroom and screened a two-channel video installation with related objects. In this fictional courtroom, one video channel showed a kitchen knife used for cleaning a sea bass ('suzuki' in Japanese) as well as a cutting board and a freezer, along with footage of a kabuki performance about the 1764 homicide. The second video channel documented the artist asking an artisan blacksmith to produce a knife, which he later used to gut the fish. Yuichiro's work presents art as a life skill to understand artistic phenomenon based on the language of satires and representation regarding a historical fact.

In addition to traditional theater performances, contemporary artworks presented at international biennials and exhibitions frequently depict diplomatic incidents. Doesn't this indicate that 'diplomacy' may operate as a keyword to guide our understanding of today's artistic practices? 禮 [Ye], a term used to designate an administrative agency during the Confucian era, refers to the division of diplomatic business between cultural and educational sectors.

It seems that this arrangement was originally based on an idea shared by East Asian scholar-bureaucrats; national exchanges should be considered within the same classification as cultural regulations produced by the general public or knowledge passed down from teachers to their students. Korean words that signify coming-of-age rites and wedding ceremonies also use this Chinese character 'Ye.' In a broader sense, exhibitions serve as another form of 'Ye,' functioning as rituals to honor intangible values. Diplomacy, culture, and education are all 'crafts for handling relations,' so it is no surprise to see all three in the same category.

Biennials also involve relational skills—diplomatic techniques—and not just because they host international symposiums, invite numerous artists from overseas, and receive assistance from embassies. Biennials envision a world where national and regional borders are traversed, building new relational structures from the imagination. Contributors to this newsletter discuss the biennial MOMENTUM 12: *Together as to gather*, held in Moss, Norway. Choreographer John Seung-Hwan Lee investigates his cultural identity by asking, "Where are you from?" Political scientist Cissie Fu examines state dinners as sites for exchange among diverse cultures in *Embassy Project*. All these endeavors explore how international interactions generate new networks. Former SeMA director Hong-hee Kim contemplates the SeMA Nanji Residency and the Seoul Mediacity Biennale as catalysts for the museum to break away from convention. The audiences of biennials also have a chance to experience artistic practices that stem from myriad backgrounds and transcend their own boundaries to reach a new embodiment of relations—their own diplomacy.

## Moon-seok Yi



Tamura Yuichiro, *Suzuki Knife*, *Social Cooking*, 2014  
Mixed media, 2 channel video, color, sound, Dimensions variable(installation); 20 min 30 sec; 19 min 23 sec  
Commissioned by SeMA Biennale Mediacity Seoul 2014  
Collection of Seoul Museum of Art  
Exhibition view at Seoul Museum of Art, 2014

The energy that grants individuals diplomatic dexterity and the spirit that enables their interaction with others are pertinent to the various collectives participating in the 12th Seoul Mediacity Biennale *THIS TOO, IS A MAP*. Over the past twenty-five years, 146 collectives have been invited to the Biennale, some of which were temporarily assembled for the occasion. For example, 11th Seoul Mediacity Biennale *One Escape at a Time* included C-U-T, a provisional collective managed by contemporary artist and teacher Ming Wong that comprised six students from the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, Sweden. They studied K-pop traits such as the genre's fandom culture, universe-building, and production system to produce *KALEIDOSCOPE* (2021), which encompassed newly composed music,

music videos, and interviews. By expanding the K-pop language using transnational and queer-friendly philosophy, in contrast to the existing traits of idol groups, this work presented new ideas emerging from relational skills that were developed through boundary-crossing.



C-U-T, *KALEIDOSCOPE* still, 2021  
Multimedia installation, video, color, sound, 4 min 16 sec,  
5 min 30 sec

The Japanese word ‘さばく [sabaku]’ refers to both ‘cleaning a fish’ and ‘trial.’ The tasks of refining and organizing matters and incidents, as well as untangling structures intertwined with relations, have always been a function of biennials and are still ongoing today. A sense of antagonism between the relational arrangements found in transitory gatherings of artists also travels across national and social borders. In the process, museums become embassies and artists and curators become ambassadors. It is not an overstatement, then, to say that biennials are diplomatic crafts.



Moon-seok Yi writes and curates exhibitions delving into representations of the social aspects of mediating nations and individuals in visual art. Since 2019, Yi has developed *Against the Dragon Light* with curator Eugene Hannah Park in order to share knowledge and resources with (South)East Asian social artists. In 2021, he launched the exhibition space *Philosopher's Stone* with curator Seul bi Lee. Yi was project manager for the 11th Seoul Mediacity Biennale *One Escape at a Time* and is currently an assistant curator for the 12th Seoul Mediacity Biennale *THIS TOO, IS A MAP*.

## Momentum in the Making (of home)

In November 2022, I visited Galleri F15 as to witness a gathering arranged by Tenthaus for curators, artists and designers involved in MOMENTUM 12. Tenthaus' practice of striking a balance between interdependence and autonomy within a horizontal organizational structure was intriguing to me.

One popular ice-breaker at the gathering was the age-old question: "Where are you from?" I often end up explaining my background of moving between South Korea, the US, and Berlin to justify my detachment from American culture, despite my accent and status as a US citizen. Since many people presume that South Korea is my country of origin, I find myself describing the mixed feelings that I harbor toward being at 'home' there. The first culture in my memory has changed so much, as have I. After spending my formative years of education in California and New York, I have learned to live as a perpetual foreigner.

This line of questioning also arose in my conversation with an artist at the gathering. After my brief response, I asked them the same thing. To my surprise, they seemed a bit ashamed of not having spent enough time living abroad. I envied those who felt a definite sense of home. Yet, even for them, home became a place of shame.

What is home?

The next morning, Robert Young answered me in *White Mythologies*, a book that accompanied me during my trip. He wrote about Emmanuel Levinas's idea of "home" as a space enabling the fulfillment of one's ethical "responsibility for the Other, as being-for-the-other" without losing a sense of oneself. The subjectivity of being-for-the-other operates within the gift economy. It takes its departure from the self toward the external world, with the intention to give something back to the world. Home is then not fulfilled by coming back, but by giving back.

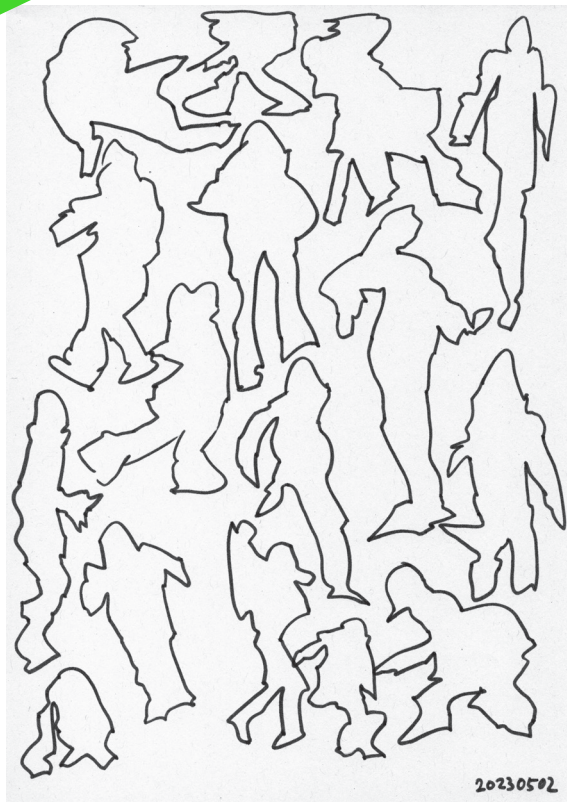
Maybe what Tenthaus does is homing. The collective is comprised of artists from different

parts of the world. In principle, there is no single leader, and everyone's opinion is considered when making decisions. They put theory into practice by assigning members to different "bubbles," autonomous subgroups that are interdependent on each other. Individual members contribute their unique perspectives and skills to a certain bubble, with each bubble complementing the rest. This requires every member to exchange trust and responsibility.

Everyone at the event showed genuine interest. Genuine care. Not the kind of care implied by a sense of hospitality, although that was also present. Stan prepared our beds and oversaw the camping site. Guest chefs served a delightful dinner with Jerusalem artichoke soup and kvass. Mechu served the design chapter with breakfast eggs and coffee. But what stood out to me above all else was their caring approach, as if saying, "I want to reach out, engage and exchange with you."

The name Tenthaus evokes both mobility and stability. Reflecting upon the Latin etymology of 'tent,' which means 'stretched,' Tenthaus can be understood as a stretched house. Like a boulderer, it's an international roof of nomadic urbanites with the mobility to stretch out and anchor itself in different corners and cracks of the world.

# John Seung-Hwan Lee



John Seung-Hwan Lee, *Body Border Study*  
20230502-03, 2023  
Ink brush pen on paper, A4 size  
Courtesy of the artist

John Seung-Hwan Lee's drawings and writings document his short stay at Galleri F15's gathering of participating artists in November 2022, observing the event through the lens of personal experience and history.



John Seung-Hwan Lee was born in the US, but grew up in South Korea. In 2002, he moved back to the US and relocated to Berlin in 2018. At the core of Lee's practice are the disciplines of dance, drawing, reading, and writing. His training in dance, particularly Breaking, informs his use of feet and floor to perform embodied drawings and writings. Prompted by his ambivalent experience of learning English as a second language, Lee's artistic inquiry contemplates language through an absorption in the theory of the origin of dance, drawing, and writing that arises from our bodily experience of the world, and hence in the bodily

relations between these practices. Lee cites the influence of a philosophy podcast and publisher *Paper Renaissance*, which informs his embrace of languages at the edge of consciousness such as critical theory, and his exposure to such languages as transcendental experiences. In addition to critical theory, his research investigates comparative history between the East and West as well as North and South Korea. Inspired by the theory of revolution in one's everyday life, he also organizes reading groups. His works have been exhibited in galleries and institutions in Berlin, Leipzig, and New York.

# The Embassy Project: On Conditions that Make Possible (1st of a Movement in 3 Parts)

It started with an encounter:  
electronic, exploratory, evitable.

We are, says Norway.  
We'd like...  
Would you?

Can, says Singapore.  
Let's!  
Now?

And so an unfolding of the unplannable began:  
extemporaneously, experimentally, eminently.

This essay is an attempt to render effable the enabling conditions for a new diplomacy. Wherever there is no model to follow, no permission to seek, and no immunity to exercise, there are nonetheless patterns to question, questions to practice, and practices to guide. It is in this spirit of practice-based research and experiential learning that the McNally School of Fine Arts at LASALLE College of the Arts took up Tenthaus' invitation from Oslo in March 2023—to organize a discursive dinner together with the objective of devising translocal recipes for MOMENTUM 12: *Together as to gather*, the upcoming iteration of the Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art which promises to put an end to the routinely expected and executed tendencies of biennales.

The notion of centering discourse as a key dinner ingredient in Singapore is creative in at least two ways:

Culturally and economically, the diversity of culinary delights in the city-state speaks for itself. From the protected heritage of affordable eats enshrined in hawker sites to the more recently elevated mixed heritage of Peranakan and Eurasian cuisines, there is hardly any need for words to accelerate—nor any power for words to retard—the process of consumption. For citizens and foreigners alike, eating one's way into or out of fiscal and colonial tensions is

a matter of course, or courses per se.

Pedagogically and politically, there is little incentive to digest one another's thoughts or ideas. Although it is widely considered more efficient to adopt policies and observe protocols as means of circumventing differences, strict utilitarianism is a tried, true, and trusted strategy, with many a breath saved and no possibility of misinterpretation. Under such circumstances, it becomes expedient to swallow one's own words rather than listen to or rehearse one's voice, that unique marker of tone and timbre that stands out in order to withstand.

... and suitably ripe for the test kitchen of an educational institution for contemporary art-making.



Dr. Cissie Fu is a political theorist and co-founder of the Political Arts Initiative, which is interested in the ways that people interact and compose political ideas and actions through technology and the arts. Born in Hong Kong, Fu has studied, taught, curated, and performed at cultural and educational institutions in Asia, Europe, the UK, and the Americas. Most recently, she served as Dean of the Faculty of Culture and Community at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Canada. She is the author of a forthcoming open textbook on cultural production and the law, and is currently completing a monograph on the politics of silence, which draws from artistic practices that resuscitate silence as a positive political concept. Fu's practice-led research focus on relational aesthetics and decolonial action, combined with her experiments in experiential and transformative organisational design, inform her approach to institution-building as a creative, critical and communal cultural practice.



## Cissie Fu + Wang Xi Jie



Wang Xi Jie, *Resonance*, 2023  
zinc-coated metal sheet, with black enamel  
paint, turpentine and epoxy lacquer  
20.3 x 29 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Wang Xi Jie tried to express a fluidity and a sense of latent energy between the conversations and connections that transpired in the thematic concerns of both the Biennale and the dinner gathering. The drawings were made from his memories, including the food and messy leftovers as remnants of the passing of platters and the participation of many hands, Adeline's pieces everyone sat on, and the batik carpets which were arranged to suggest a visual collage and tapestry of ideas and connections.



Wang Xi Jie is a Singapore-based artist whose practice explores the intersections of the corporeal body, class, space, and the everyday. Working primarily with found objects and materials, Wang creates gritty and poetic installations and sculptures that foreground unseen spaces and the forces that seek to control

them. Influenced by the experiences of the working class, his works also examine the physicality of labour and its effects on the body. Industrial and hardware materials feature prominently in his pieces, which are recontextualized to explore themes of violence and suffering as well as resilience.

서울미디어시티비엔날레  
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John Seung-Hwan Lee,  
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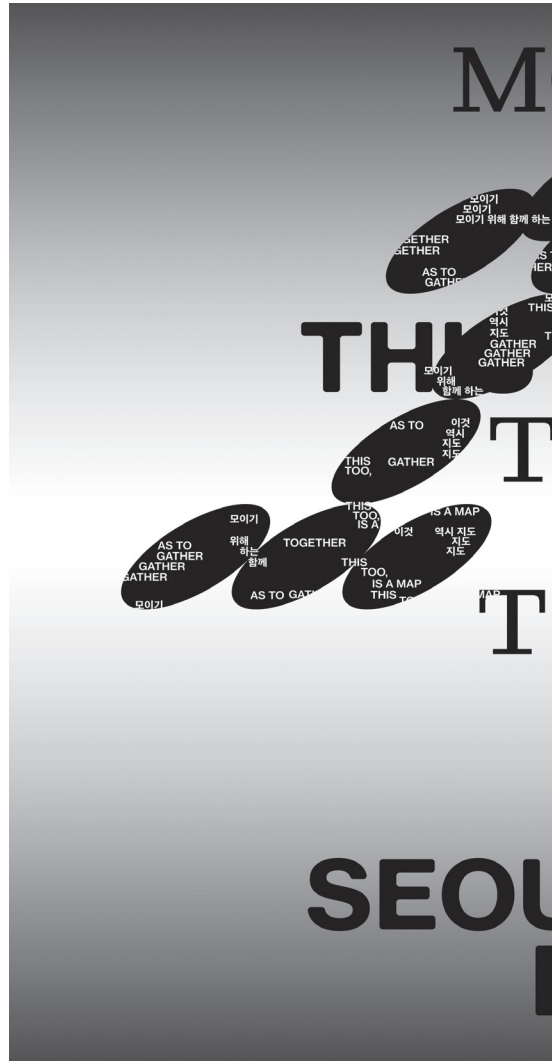
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Seoul Mediacity Biennale  
Seoul Museum of Art  
61, Deoksugung-gil, Jung-gu, Seoul  
contact@mediacityseoul.kr  
mediacityseoul.kr



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Artwork design by Siri Lee Lindskrog and Amanda-Li Kollberg,  
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Identity, designed by So-Hyun Bae, 2023



Artwork design by Siri Lee Lindsdreg and Amanda-Li Kollberg, the design bubble of the MOMENTUM 12: Together as to gather, applying the 12th Seoul Mediacity Biennale THIS TOO, IS A MAP Identity, designed by So-Hyun Bae, 2023

# MOMENTUM

# THIS TOO, IS A MAP TOGETHER AS TO GATHER

# SEOUL MEDIA CITY BIENNALE