

'Soft and Weak Like Water'

The 14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023

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'Soft and Weak Like Water', the 14th Gwangju Biennale, various venues, Gwangju, Korea,
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... a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity
and genius, eternal value and mystery ...

Walter Benjamin ¹

... a weak messianic power ...

Walter Benjamin ²

... powerless power ...

Maurice Blanchot ³

... This is where art, against its enemies, justifies itself
by proving precisely that it is no one's enemy ...

Albert Camus ⁴

... they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it
without always having the feeling that water might come up there again ...

Sigmund Freud ⁵

The Taoist title and concept of the 14th Gwangju Biennale, 'Soft and Weak Like Water', directed by Sook-Kyung Lee, is inherently mercurial and purposefully makes this Biennale difficult to gather up or pin down. This is a Biennale that feels as if it could have been installed at night, with each piece of art slipping from a small vessel, without a splash, beneath the

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p 218

² Ibid, p 254

³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, Station Hill, New York, 1988, pp 27–56

⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Penguin, London, 1975, pp 191–192

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *On Art & Literature*, Penguin, London, 1990, pp 343–344

surface of a dark expanse of water. In Seoul, back in 2014, I visited an exhibition with the unforgettable title ‘Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers’, held at Seoul’s SeMA museum of modern art and curated by Park Chan-Kyong.⁶ That show seemed to announce that new technologies do not necessarily dispel or supplant old beliefs, and the reader can discern from the memorable title and a little further research that the exhibition embraced age, wisdom and mystery, even as it promoted a young generation of highly technologically influenced Asian artists. The 14th Gwangju Biennale does not repeat or emulate this gesture but could be said to extend one significant aspect of it – that is, the conscious removal of barriers and structures that might otherwise categorise and separate differing ages of art, artists and cultures, along with various media, technologies, etc.

Here in Gwangju in 2023, the Biennale tradition proceeds majestically (like a river, it could be said), bringing together a rich array of new, ancient, overlooked and other voices that, if not carefully chosen for their ‘softness’ might cause a curatorial cacophony. Instead, we are invited to turn our attention towards consideration of the fact that we live in a time and a world in which art is perhaps no longer called upon or expected to fight or win battles (‘... art is no one’s enemy ...’ Albert Camus once said), at least not by any directly or explicitly confrontational means. Nor, apparently, does art today need to surprise or aim to innovate, but it can still reassure us that (yes, like water – a fountain, spring, river, tears, a well, or the ocean) it is immanent and innate. It is always made, has always been made, is still being made, and will continue to be made, and by all. There will always be art and artists, and in addition to any other purpose they might have, artists will always provide an individual, a community or a culture with some sense of destination, possibility and hope.

As a Marxist, Jewish, German Intellectual working in the 1920s and 1930s, Walter Benjamin found himself at the fearful heart of the dark twentieth century. He responded, in part, by conjuring, in one of his last pieces of writing, the image of ‘weak power’. Perhaps there are times and places, forces and events, against which it is foolish to explicitly contend, and when it is wise or preferable to make an affirmation of ‘weakness’ and to thereby strip that ‘weakness’ (along with ‘softness’, for our convenience here) of any negative or derogatory image it might have (recalling here Friedrich Nietzsche, where he speaks of the special value of thoughts that ‘come on dove’s feet’ – ie with the lightest of steps and always ready to depart again).⁷ Benjamin, as we know, tried to slip silently away over the Alps to save his life, his writing and his career, but ended up slipping down a suicidal substance that at least kept him out of the clutches of the notorious Gestapo. Maurice Blanchot, in a beguiling short study of Marguerite Duras that includes reflections on the revolutionary days in Paris in 1968, once conjured the concept of ‘powerless power’, thereby promoting the peculiarly oxymoronic efficacy of refusing to respond to force, tautologically, with further force.

⁶ See <https://sema.seoul.go.kr/mediacityseoul/2014/en/sub/introduction/ghost-spy-grandmother.html>

⁷ See Friedrich W Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra, A book For Everyone And No One (The Stillest Hour)*, Penguin, London, 1969, p 168

So, what happens if, in response to insurmountable power, we recede, dispel, dissolve, melt away from, or even into the conflict? What happens when or if, as in certain martial arts manoeuvres, by falling and failing back (showing our weakness) we encourage our opponent to fall forward, thereby tripping them over their own presumptions about the fundamentals of combat? Luce Irigaray, a leading poststructuralist philosopher, wrote her book *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* as a feminist using the strategy of ‘saturating’ the German Romantic philosopher – a patriarchal figure who had inspired her as a radical thinker but who also displayed foul bouts of misogyny. Her book is then, supposedly, a tract in which a female writer overwhelms their male opponent through immersive non-confrontation, becoming, not only the enemy’s ‘lover’ but his ‘solvent’, flooding and thereby reducing him to something she is capable of accommodating.⁸

Water will eventually find its own level and adjust itself to whatever form it comes to inhabit. In a spirit of fluid and mercurial non-confrontation, the 14th Gwangju biennale does not prioritise or oppose ‘hi’ or ‘lo’ culture, new or old art, modern or traditional processes, old or new technologies – in fact, it doesn’t appear to prioritise *per se*. Nor does its collection of works, by seventy-nine artists, suggest that this time in the world, and in ‘the art world’ – for all its social and political radicalism and disruption – is one of significant isms or innovations in the arts. Art here does not concern itself with any assumption that it should or might be innovative within a specific context, but prefers to it show itself happy to be drawn from and into any culture, medium or technology. The result is an eclectic and transhistorical potpourri, for which we always feel prepared, any potential culture shock having already been absorbed by our familiarity with a history of similar practices. Such a demotion of modern shock, surprise and invention might help set us free of a few more of those modern shackles (including, perhaps, the fetishisation of freedom itself) that have chained us to certain assumptions about art.

Innovation, like progress, may, after all, disguise a restriction or command (‘thou must innovate’) proffered as a form of liberty. This line of thought invites reconsideration of a statement made by Walter Benjamin near the start of his best-known essay, where he speaks of ‘...brush(ing) aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery’.⁹ If we follow the radicalising form here, rather than restrict ourselves to the content of Benjamin’s thoughts, we might be able to also release ourselves from, or ‘brush aside’, not only innovation and progress but also confrontation, argument and debate (recalling here that the modernist concept ‘avant-garde’ is originally a military term that

⁸ Luce Irigaray, in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1991), was moved to make a carefully crafted and convoluted embrace of Nietzsche. Irigaray was thus seeking to immerse Nietzsche’s undeniably influential, Romanticist and sublime thought within an even more oceanic and extensive feminine expanse or formidable formlessness. She thereby acknowledged Nietzsche’s undeniable influence on the progressive thought of her generation, while simultaneously disallowing him from patriarchally dominating feminist post-structuralism’s own alterity, adventures and possibilities.

⁹ From ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p 218

situates art in a model of violent conflict). And if such core, prescribed concepts and values can be brushed aside, it could then be asked what are we left with, and how can a prestigious and prominent biennale like Gwangju's be used to create other values and/or structure a coherent contribution concerning the current place, value and purpose of art?

As said above, the 14th Gwangju Biennale is thematically curated around a concept of water, and this, one might think, is a potentially overwhelming and expansive idea. It is true that often in this city-wide exhibition you can lose all track of any overarching theme as you evaluate individual works, consider their interrelation, admire the rich range of spaces, old and new, in which they are presented and weigh up the subtitles given to sub-aspects of the main theme. Then there are the international 'pavilions' with their own themes, sites and titles, and, finally, to this list of tasks and duties can be added all the travelling around, involving so many addresses, place names, institutional titles, etc.



Soun-Gui Kim, *Gwangju, Poems*, 2023, installation view in the Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall, four-channel video and sound installation, 7 mins 29 secs, commissioned by the 14th Gwangju Biennale, supported by Arario Gallery and Institut Français, courtesy of the artist and the Gwangju Biennale Foundation, photo by glimworkers

One or two liquescent highlights (for me) of the city-wide Biennale experience worth mentioning here, if only in passing, were a work in the 'Luminous Halo' section of the Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall by Soun-Gui Kim, entitled *Gwangju, Poems* (2023), and another by Jeong Jae Choul in the Horanggasy Artpolygon. Choul's piece (*Map of South Island and North Sea*, 2016, part of the *Blue Ocean Project*) caught my eye with its evocative sky-blue renditions of handdrawn ocean maps, through which the artist traces the journeys of equally

colourful fallout from our over-plasticised consumerism. Meanwhile, in Kim's piece, schoolgirls recite sections of ancient women's poetry in the presence of images and sounds of the sea. There was something strangely moving, and slightly uncanny about this juxtaposition. Such mixed feelings might have been due to the fact that it recalled the terrible Korean *Sewol* ferry disaster of 2014, in which over three hundred people died – most of them schoolchildren, who sent heartbreaking mobile phone messages to parents as they perished in confusion and disbelief. Meanwhile *Poetry* (2010), Lee Chang Dong's brilliantly tragic and important movie (a subtle indictment of lethally ingrained Korean patriarchy, among other things) also came to mind when viewing Kim's piece, and, along with those tragic memories of *Sewol*, brought water involuntarily to my own eyes.¹⁰



Jeong Jae Chou, *Map of South Island and North Sea*, 2016, part of the *Blue Ocean Project*, installation view in the Horanggasy Artpolygon at the 14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023, courtesy of the Estate of Jeong Jae Chou and the Gwangju Biennale Foundation, photo by glimworkers

It might sound unprofessional (I don't object to that sobriquet) but my partner and I were fortunate enough to be travelling in Korea on family matters mostly when we realised that the Gwangju Biennale was about to open, and so we could, for the first time, attend. We did not therefore participate in the special press preview days or opening events, other than attending part of the symposium that took place on the first weekend. However, if you were not present for the opening ceremony, and not acquainted with the Biennale bumf in cool tote bags and crisp folders, you could still enjoy and evaluate this expansive exhibition by dropping in to

¹⁰ Re the 'Uncanny', see again: '... they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again ...' Sigmund Freud, *On Art & Literature*, Penguin, London, 1990, pp 343–344

part or parts of it as and when you might be in the relevant part of town. And surely many, if not most of the visitors will encounter the biennale in this way during the several months that it is open. So, although the curators may have carefully cultivated ‘best laid’ plans, they also built in and appreciated the idea that – again, a little like water – any particular and prescribed structural organisation needs to be adequately fluid and flexible in order to accommodate twenty-first century urban complexity and human vicissitudes, and all that we cannot plan and control, including chance, the weather, and the undue influence of more powerful others upon our own wishes and wants.

Korea’s bus services, whether in Seoul, Gwangju or more rural and mountainous regions, such as Andong (which my partner and I were fortunate to also visit on this trip), are clearly designed to withstand mountainous regions and extreme seasonal changes. They grind and groan, rattle and swerve their way along rough country roads and well-tarred city streets alike, making the user hold tight to a twisting, plastic overhead strap (there are few seats) while being pirouetted around in response to the driver’s often expressive style. Still, it seems ethically intelligent and far-sighted to support this local infrastructure, particularly as Gwangju is plagued with even wider yet still jammed highways than the capital Seoul. My partner, the artist Bada Song (who deserves plenty of mention here without fear of undue nepotism) insisted, almost as an artist’s statement, on using the local bus services (we even stuck out a thumb and hitched a lift at one point) rather than more expensive and less ethical taxis or the Biennale’s own shuttle bus (said to be a little slow, tethered to a restrictive hourly timetable, and, of course, shared only by fellow *biennalistas*). All of this, plus the fact that neither of us were equipped with a smart mobile phone fitted with a smart map app, meant that we (well, just Bada really) ended up talking a lot to a lot of local people whom we asked for advice and directions. So much so, in fact, that we later wondered aloud if a future Biennale curator, or a participating artist perhaps, could incorporate such relational activities into plans and strategies that might better bring international biennale goers and local non-Biennale-goers together in similar, random, mutually enlightening encounters.

One of the landmarks that helped orientate us in the city of Gwangju was a rather diminished, dried-looking river that our bus rides often ran alongside and sometimes crossed over using one of several small bridges. But as in Seoul and many other Korean cities, as well as the rivers that these cities grew up around and along there are often mountains on the city’s horizon, and sometimes right within a city’s centre too. These sleepy giants tend to look slightly ominous, their timeless immobility contrasting with the roaring revelry of the ever-changing metropolis. So, while humble pedestrians wait what seems an age to cross a car-packed four – or five – lane highway, they might sometimes claim a private moment in which to consider those distant waiting shapes, quietly calling out to be visited and climbed.

On the first sunny Sunday morning of the Biennale, we took a bus out of the city to a beautiful, carefully chosen site, from where none of the hectic city can be seen or heard, and where a devastatingly sad monument and cemetery has been created for victims of events on

or related to the uprising of 18th May 1980 – a dark stain on the record of humanity as a whole, and an event from which the great and contrasting humanity of the Gwangju Biennale itself (founded in 1995) has grown. Thus, the scale, sophistication and ambition of the Biennale is always in some way an expression of the deep shame and pain associated with this infamous event: the so-called ‘Gwangju Uprising’ or ‘Gwangju Massacre’. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to pay our humble, historical respects and dues at this place before going any further with evaluations and interpretations of the 2023 Biennale.

At the May 18th National Cemetery, a symbolic central monument is apparently derived from certain, very particular traditional Korean symbols. However, for me, on this first encounter, and with only a little knowledge of the context, it abstracts and communicates a symbol of democracy as something necessarily raised up and held on high, above the everyday needs, greeds and other follies and failings of our shared humanity. Democracy, taking the form of a fragile, egg-like structure, is cradled there as something seemingly just within our grasp, but only delicately so, and when we are at full stretch. It is therefore unstable, kept aloft and in view only by the will of all those who care sufficiently for democracy to vote, fight for and even die for it, and, in so doing, vote, fight or die for all others everywhere who enjoy the fruits of modern democracy.



18th May National Cemetery Monument Tower, 1997, by Na Sang-Ok (b 1958), image courtesy of The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Archives

The monument can be seen from a great distance away and looms ever larger as you approach, but it is only when you come quite close that you realise its backdrop, and thus the

space that it guards and announces, is a huge arrangement of hundreds of graves containing the remains of the (mostly) students who opposed the dictatorship on or around the fatal day after which the cemetery is named. The victims, now no longer described as just part of a total number but visibly evidenced in the form of neat, identical graves, most with a small, touching, black-and-white photographic portrait attached, is overwhelming to behold, and this impact is compounded by the fact that various experts and commentators claim that the actual number who died fighting the government, either in the May uprising itself or subsequently as a result of their injuries, far exceeds the approximately four hundred that you see here, and may reach from the hundreds into possible thousands of prematurely curtailed lives.

Gwangju is, then, a city like no other in Korea, and like few in the world, in that its name cannot be mentioned without invoking the massacre that took place there. Though we may have heard of the ‘Peterloo Massacre’, and other associations of cities or places with disgraceful historic events, there is something about the iniquitous events in Gwangju that insist upon remaining current and impossible to diminish through the effects of passing time. There is something about the uncertain and probably unknowable numbers of the dead, on the one hand, and the evidence, on the other – including photographs and movies, despite a press blackout imposed at the time – of such extreme brutality, that creates a special need for these events to remain in the view and focus of *every* city and *every* state, of *every* person or public that regards itself as modern and democratic, or that aspires to modern democracy. It is for this reason, and out of a sense of adequate respect, that I place the memorialisation of these events, rather than a piece of contemporary art, at the centre of my written response here to the city’s 14th art biennale.

Such tragic historical events may be more like mountains than they are like water; they refuse to be forgotten, will not pass on, even if changing times, times of day, or shifting weather make them more or less visible, shrouded and paled by distance. Mountains, perceived on the periphery of a modern city like Gwangju, might also allow citizens to examine or uphold their very own monumental qualities, and keep alive any heroism they might retain amid Korea’s hyper-modern way of life. Meanwhile the motor car, TV, mobile phones, and the rampantly invasive apartment tower building might make those same citizens feel relatively small, unimportant, complicit, predictable and pacified.

Highly technologised and commodified lifestyles are prominently promised on digital billboards advertising a new car’s aspiration to provide ‘freedom’ and ‘escape’, albeit cheapened by the security of prosaic satnav technology. Ethereal images of perfect skin and heavenly hair gloss over a grossly bloated cosmetic industry that profits from proliferating cosmetic surgery applied to as yet unformed teenage faces. The avaricious process of what might be called ‘apartmentisation’, in Seoul and in Gwangju (as well as in London and probably most major cities today) buys up once shared and public skylines, converts them into commodified concrete space and consigns the city’s future horizon to one of crowded and clustered thirty-floor towers. This process often involves the annihilation of older

neighbourhoods, and even chopping the tops off of some of Korea's myriad peaks, allowing for flatter, firmer foundations while simultaneously fattening the wallets of developers. Meanwhile, with unapologetic irony, these towers, often sited in lucrative, semi-rural sites, sometimes display a kind of 'natural' branding, using slightly rustic names painted huge and high on their sides, sometimes compounded with a leaf motif.

Our arts might need to balance or maintain a dialogue between all this rampant, runaway, often grotesquely excessive hyper-modernity and the reassuring benefits of resilient and resistant tradition, but fortunately this is a country that does this more and better than many others. The Korean people found, established, fought for, evolved and defended their own *alter*-modernity at a particular pace and in a special way, determined by the terrible aftermaths of Japanese colonisation, the Second World War, the Korean War, military dictatorship, and eventual, relative democracy – all followed by impressively increasing financial and cultural achievement. Yet progress is somehow prioritised here without neglecting tradition or losing touch with the ancestors. Honorifics are at work in every spoken Korean sentence, exchange, encounter and relationship. The world renowned, delicious and seemingly infinitely variable traditional Korean diet also resists Westernisation and modernisation, despite the epidemic of European-style coffee shops and bakeries and the eager encroachment of global brands and chains.

Recent and current political history also reveals large swathes of the Korean people to be unceasingly passionate and noble in their insistence upon the reduction of corruption in their political system. Partly guided and fuelled by dutiful remembrance of several terrible key historical events that loom large every year in the Korean calendar, their constant collective striving towards a more ethical society might appreciate the 2023 Gwangju Biennale's theme of 'water' as something that may assist in this constant process of political cleansing.

We toured the Biennale thoroughly, slightly pedantically, and ambitiously even, only missing one pavilion (the Italian), a few individual works (two videos at the Ukraine pavilion) and most of the introductory symposium. Although I had lots of enjoyable and critical experiences, as mentioned above, I felt initially a little surprised that I was so *unsurprised* by the forms, images and processes on offer, whether provided by artists or curators. I saw multi-channel videos, various kinds of painting, some photography, immersive installations (that never seem quite immersive enough), as well as sculptural objects, textiles, interactive artworks, and processes, ranging historically from digital video through the ancient arts of carving stones, weaving and braiding, making pots and pencil drawings. I saw artists of many generations, and even one or two modernist-looking practices laced within the wide range of post- or alter- modernisms on show. I did not see much of the kind of knowing wit, wryness and conceptualism that often accompanies contemporary art, and I am certainly not complaining about that. Rather, I sensed a kind of immanent belief in the powers of traditions; a certain faith in quiet depths, as if the decisions of the curators had been guided by the

marine equivalent of a lodestone being dragged, beyond their own sight, across an unfathomable ocean floor.

I was sometimes struck by possible evidence of what the radical historian Ariella Azoulay (in yet another recourse here to oxymoronic thinking) suggests in her book *Potential History* might be ‘progressive tradition’, although even this, to me, seemed something of a revival than a surprise, ie more of a ‘neo-progressive-traditionalism’ capable of breathing today’s air and life into movements and tendencies initiated or nurtured by previous generations.¹¹ Of course, it is important and fascinating to learn ever more about what might be called ‘other others’, ie more and other artists, communities and cultures (eg Roma, Inuit and Ainu peoples, First Nations and Aboriginal peoples), abused, oppressed and marginalised by Eurocentric modernity and modernism, by patriarchy and other conservative, hegemonic and reactionary forces. This Biennale shows this generous, ethical and far-sighted tendency in the arts to be thriving, amplified and spurred by a current battle for global truth, reality and other shared social resources, a battle being fought between, on the one hand, contemporary, progressive, so-called ‘woke’ groups bolstered by new levels of justified, clarified and confident radicalism, and, on the other, newly indomitable, insufferably disruptive right-wing forces, which, with equally growing confidence, shamelessly display neo-fascist beliefs and credentials.

Otherness and difference (of which there are many examples in Gwangju) ooze with in-built justification and exude undeniable charm as features of artworks prepoliticised by their historical context and traditional means. But while these works might claim to communicate ideas that can subvert and challenge modern knowledge, might offer an alternative trajectory, or radically disrupt certain rational and material bastions of modernity, they may also appear all-too-easily consignable to the realm of the innocent and naïve. That is to say, all-too-easily rendered ineffectual by the massed, inhuman, twenty-first century forces ranked up outside and beyond the Biennale; demonic forces that can lace a city like Gwangju with four- and five-lane highways filled with gleaming and polluting cars, and that rapidly fill the same city with higher and higher-rising apartment towers. Inside those towers, more than a hundred TV channels broadcast on huge black screens that now dominate every Korean hearth, yet providing only cold comforts of crass consumerism in the form of non-stop TV that is cynically designed and edited to keep enormous audiences socially sedated and somewhat infantilised.

The twenty-first century’s exponential expansion and proliferation of so-called social networks may have revealed that no-one is any wiser or wittier than anyone else, and nothing is more or less beautiful or interesting, as we all come to feel less and less distinguished and more and more part of everything and everyone else. But what brought about this holistic relativism, this strange equilibrium and discomforting equality, may not just be the rapid evolution of a smarter and more mobile telephone/camera nexus, and not even more and

¹¹ See Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Verso, New York, 2019, pp 314–324

more ensuing debate and representation extending beyond the modern, middle and professional classes to incorporate all peoples, places and times of day and night. What may have also flattened our cultural and philosophical condition is the inevitable levelling and deadening effect of our young century's earth-shaking encounters with new forms of horror and terror, made more ubiquitous than ever before and jammed up against all our everyday desiring and striving for liberal, democratic and progressive lifestyles. Sometimes this horror and terror has come from within our societies, even emerging through our democratic process; at other times, it has arrived through the shocking alterity of barbarians unexpectedly breaking through our bounds from without. The point is that we are more than ever conscious and aware of possibly impending terror and horror (reconciled, for example, to constant surveillance of both public and private space) and therefore feel more than ever part of it, even losing the distinction at times between peace and war.

It must be said that little of this cynical aspect of hyper-modernity, or artists' explicit responses to it, finds a way into the 2023 Gwangju Biennale, and we might feel it should be more salient, otherwise the exhibition could be accused of becoming a cultural bunker or silo, protecting a wish-list or dream of the 'softer, weaker' world invoked by the Biennale's title but which is perhaps only achievable at one remove from the harsh, sharp world beyond the walls and doors of the Biennale's formidable and gracious contexts and spaces.

One work that I felt to be directly and inextricably engaged with the contemporary world and its current fears and dangers was an event-based work that took the form of a court hearing concerned with climate change and the crime of certain, particular eco-violations. Titled *Court for International Climate Crimes (CICC)*, this work was staged by Jonas Staal and Radha D'Souza in the Gwangju Museum of Art, part of the city's impressive plethora of dynamic, strikingly modern and purpose-built spaces (this one temporarily claimed as the Biennale's Netherlands Pavilion).

Attending a work of art that is also a court hearing immediately provides some sense of the urgent, visible and socially engaged role that art might need to play today, setting examples that reveal how our modern, democratic, social, political and legal systems could be failing us. *CICC*'s work reminded me of some impressive exhibitions seen a few years ago in London staged by the organisation Forensic Architecture. In Forensic Architecture's work, too, there is a suggestion that the forms, processes and traditions of the legal profession might need to turn in the direction of the speculative, forward thinking and far-sighted processes of art to be able to look at and into twenty-first century law as it proceeds through a current crisis. This crisis might involve the fact that publicly funded legal aid is being diminished by right-wing governments; that women's complaints are not being adequately processed and represented; that changing technologies are incorporating new kinds of evidence and proof; that social media and journalism exert changing impacts upon juries and witnesses; and that increasing right wing lobbying and contestation of the legitimacy of legal processes undermines and usurps the authority of 'high', 'international' and 'supreme' courts. If, despite all of this,



Jonas Staal and Radha D'Souza's *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes: Extinction Wars*, 2023, in the Gwangju Museum of Art, photo courtesy of the Gwangju Biennale Foundation

art can retain a dispassionate, impartial and therefore 'clean' reputation for virtue and trustworthiness amid the sleaze that can be found within the law-making process, it may be incumbent on art to take more responsibility for, and even take the reins of some of modern democracy's greatest promises, its highest and most original values, which emerge from and still centre on matters of justice.

We visited the *CICC* event slightly clumsily, crashing-in on the hearing, partly as the result of our aspiration to encounter the Biennale as 'ordinary punters', using local services and consulting local people, while remaining relatively uninformed about scheduled Biennale events, and seeing all that we could within the limits of our three-day visit to Gwangju. We both immediately admired and gleaned the gist of what was going on at the Gwangju Museum of Art, then left after about an hour while the hearing was still in progress and before votes on the debated issue were made and tallied. Although aesthetically this artwork never asked to be liked or enjoyed, it nevertheless imposed a strong visual and sensual atmosphere on the space and on the audience – all of whom were, of course, democratically invited to participate. The contextual transformation of the space was achieved by deploying stacked sandbag modules throughout – elements that clearly represented climate crisis, referring to rising water levels and a defensive emergency.

An important point that this event brought home, and in a newly powerful and convincing way, is that a modern, democratic society, based on modern human rights, is increasingly forced today to give way to and incorporate something less anthropocentric, more complex,

less ‘modern’ and perhaps more hyper- or post- modern, involving newly asserted rights of animals, ecology and of the planet as a whole. Crucially, it asked whether applying rights in this newly expansive manner, while dethroning and decentring the value of the modern and the human, might inadvertently leave the cherished modern and human rights (such as those that were fought and died for in Gwangju in 1980) newly exposed, vulnerable and undefended against the sniping challenges of right-wing forces, who, in their turn, like to promote ‘responsibilities’ in place of rights, and promote and prefer their own choice of rights, including the right of a foetus over those of a pregnant woman; the rights of those who wish to bear arms, however murderously excessive; and the right to stringently control national borders at the expense of the human rights of asylum-seeking refugees.

If much of the Biennale seems to gradually accumulate and cultivate a dark, slightly mysterious but always implicitly meaningful interiority (also evoked by the design of the Biennale booklet/catalogue, with its watery words apparently reflected, like moonlight, in a flood of deep, sea-blue/green printing ink); and if, as I have tentatively suggested above, the exhibition might thereby be accused of disconnecting itself slightly from the world of the here and now, of the streets, and of the everyday – one work that undeniably seemed to counter that thesis, and point in the direction of a typical mobile phone-obsessed urban consumer’s experience, was *De Anima* (2021) by James T Hogg, a USA-born artist working in Taipei.



James T Hogg, *De Anima*, 2021, installation view in the Gwangju National Museum, 2023, two-channel video installation, 19 mins 26 secs, courtesy of the artist and Gwangju Biennale Foundation, photo by glimworkers

Here, the artist seemed to introduce something rarely seen elsewhere in the Biennale, although surely common to artist's practices worldwide in 2023. Showing at the Gwangju National Museum, Hogg attempted to occupy a kind of hyper-contemporary nihilism in which we are invited to scrutinise the immediate present, invariably in vain, for remaining dregs of meaning and value, in the especially intimate and banal way that new technologies allow and encourage.

If the Biennale exhibition promotes a thesis concerning the potentially resistant profundities of water, weakness and softness, while inviting a certain eclectic timelessness and lack of categorical borders and constraints, Hogg, although apparently on another trajectory altogether, ultimately supports this thesis by demonstrating that new technologies' constant scanning and sampling of 'the contemporary' hi-tec realm, results in little more than short-lived, super-superficial and faintly entertaining ways to observe and respond to very little. While one of the spokespersons (the artist himself?) on his soundtrack proclaims '... you have to believe in all the clichés ...', Hogg's all too Adam Curtis-like, two-channel video ironically uses the over-familiar strategy of juxtaposing found and filmed footage with an accompanying world-weary-but-wise-sounding monologue. All of this is backed-up, filled out and swayed by a musical soundtrack that features the kind of sustained synthesiser bass notes that can make almost any image appear critical, meaningful and momentarily menacing.

Bringing things further up to fashionable speed, the artist implicated his pet dog in the video footage, mixing close-up canine selfie-clips with dog's eye views of a rather dull and generic urban world and a jaded-looking populace. The 'post-human' animal ingredient could have been cute and comic, even revelatory, but just seemed to loosen one more knot in the frail cat's cradle keeping all of us vulnerable creatures from collapsing into philosophical oblivion. Coincidentally, on my long-haul journey back to Europe, and with all this in mind, one of several Lufthansa headrest movies I consumed was the Oscar-winning *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022), which struck me as an example of Hollywood's strangely masochistic current eagerness to export similarly value-free, neo-nihilist, self-conscious thoughts and images, portraying a culture whose crumbling credibility seems keen to cancel out its once proud claim to be world-leading. This hit movie and Hogg's contemporary art may share a certain post-philosophical wavelength, but a fine artist like Hogg should perhaps be a few steps ahead of Hollywood in creatively and critically analysing contemporary culture. He might also have moved on from using Curtis-like samples of 1950s or 1960s sounding voices, whose well-crafted and confident convictions, taken out of their time and woven into a twenty-first century digital soundscape, ring ominously hollow. Such retro sound bites give us little more today than an eerie sense that we have been here before, and for a long time, and might just be forever, irretrievably enlooped within the inescapability of 'the contemporary', caught up on the precipice of a grand impending failure, and witnessing the demise of our once clever species that proved all too good at creating freedoms and technologies that turned

out to be capable of annihilating everything we should cherish and value, and be proud of and protect.

While the mountains of Gwangju sleep on the city's horizon, barely containing and framing one of Korea's – and the modern world's – most shameful tragedies, Gwangju's massacre should always remind us of just how violent and terrible the pathway to modern freedom and democracy has been and can be. By travelling to pay respects and to learn more about this atrocity, I surmounted some of the distance, in space and time, between here and there, between now and then. Thus, the tragedy became less mitigated by language and images, until it was only the formal, physical structures of the abstract monument, the carefully designed cemetery, the heaped earth, the cropped dry grass and the small black and white portraits that separated me and our own moment from those horrific remains. And this proximity brought home, harder and more acutely, the fact that all this not only *did* happen but *can* happen to any of us once democracy is allowed to slip from its cradle and dictatorship take its place.

For now, the cemetery's lofty, lanky monument stands, looking slightly precarious, its sentinel form guarding over those lost young lives, protecting the dream they died for and which is almost all that is left of them. The public monument is the work of Na Sang-Ok (b 1958), an artist who clearly believed that art can proudly, successfully, objectively and collectively symbolise and materialise a shared and recognisable idea concerning our human capacity for intelligence, generosity, love and trust. Much of the art in the 2023 Gwangju biennale might lack such demonstrative certainty, preferring to subtly conceal rather than blatantly assert itself. Meanwhile, of course, the form of the Biennale also invites us to search out and find whatever we might be looking for therein, so that the exhibition as a whole takes on, at best, the qualities of a journey and adventure, akin to the motion of a river or stream.

On reflection, and the more its many rich and rewarding memories recede into the darkening pool of my memory, everything in this Biennale feels somewhat obscured and ensconced in spaces that, while often spectacular and always efficient, might deny a more direct encounter with the light and air that could otherwise be shared with the wider city and thus the broader world, including the many local passers-by whom my partner and I repeatedly stopped in the street to ask the way, each one of whom invested time and trouble in working out our problem. Several even took pride in leading us all the way from one location to another. Like these unsuspectingly enlisted guides, water can be relied upon to lead us to an appropriate destination, orientating and assuring us, if only because we know, unequivocally, that it is necessary to life, and so we stay close by it. We also know that water will tend to lead us to somewhere suited to our needs; it will travel downhill and find equilibrium and we can also trace it to its source without getting lost.

It is helpful then, as artistic director Sook-Kyung Lee has done, to think of art today in comparison with or akin to water – 'soft and weak', deep and still, mysterious and untimely, but also perhaps sparkling and celebratory, as, even in and through dark times, we can, will

and must always uphold the right and the need to move in the direction of something or somewhere preferable to where we currently find ourselves. In this way we can better withstand and justify our difficult engagement with the here and now, keeping in mind, and in view, if only in the imagination, the promised rewards of another place and time.

Thus, water becomes a symbol, not only of time's undeniable but indefinable form and motion, and of our own uncertain purpose, but also a symbol of the hope that once promised and led us to our modern, progressive democracy, and which might now help us find ways to somewhere and something else, as yet undetermined, as we search for forms for our twenty-first century hopes and promises to occupy.

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