

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL ARTS

Gwangju Biennale Taps Into the Korean Activist Spirit

By AMY QIN SEPT. 16, 2014

BEIJING — The video shows a handwritten poster taped up on a university bulletin board in Seoul with a simple greeting in English: “Dear Students, How are you doing, you said.” In the video, students trickle by the poster — some stop to read it, others simply walk on.

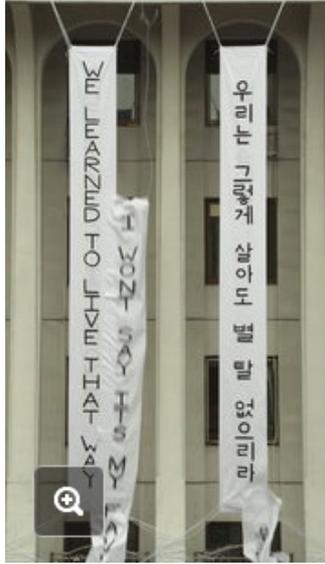
Created by the American multimedia artist Sharon Hayes, the video is a reference to a viral movement that erupted in South Korea last December when a poster featuring the question — “how are you doing?” — appeared on a bulletin board at Korea University in Seoul. A traditional form of student protest, the handwritten poster, also known as daejabo or “big character poster” in Korean, struck a nerve among students on campuses across the country, prompting many to put up their own daejabos in response to vent their political and social grievances.

Ms. Hayes’s video re-enactment of the daejabo is being shown as part of the 10th edition of the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, which runs through Nov. 9, and in recent years has emerged as an important stop on the biennale circuit. The works by 103 artists from 38 countries will be exhibited within the city’s huge 8,100-square meter Biennale Hall. Organizers expect some 350,000 visitors.

“The Gwangju Biennale is probably the most significant event of its type in Asia, and has a reputation as one of the most important biennales in the world with curators and critics alike,” said Neil Wenman, senior director at the art gallery Hauser & Wirth, who attended the opening. “It’s no coincidence that previous artistic directors such as Massimiliano and Okwui are of great international standing,” he added, referring to Massimiliano Giano and Okwui Enwezor, former directors of the Gwangju Biennale who were selected to curate the Venice Biennale — widely considered the most important of the biennales — after directing the Gwangju Biennale.

Jessica Morgan, the curator of international art at the Tate Modern and director of this year’s Biennale, will be the new director of the Dia Art Foundation in New York, it was announced last week.

Many of the works in the event, like Ms. Hayes’s video, tap into what organizers call the “Gwangju spirit,” or an activist element that has underpinned the identity of this city in the country’s south since 1980, when a pro-democratic civil uprising led by university students in the city was brutally quashed by the military government.



A video still of Sharon Hayes's installation "We cannot leave this world to others." Sharon Hayes and Tanya Leighton Gallery

Created as a living memorial to the uprising and the more than 200 students killed during its subsequent crackdown, the Gwangju Biennale has in each edition sought to find different ways to engage with the deep historical and political context of its host city.

For Ms. Morgan, the challenge was to create a show that paid respect to this history but also shifted the focus to reflect the ways the city has changed.

"I was thinking about the relationship to recent history and, in Korea in particular, the very violent way in which there has been a forward movement of development and production in society," Ms. Morgan said in a telephone interview from Gwangju.

Each of the five halls in the Biennale is organized around different interpretations of the show's theme, "Burning Down the House," inspired by the 1983 song by the Talking Heads, with the idea of using the song's title as a way to describe the rapid transformation of Asia in the late 20th century. To tie the ideas of the exhibition together, a wallpaper design with a pixelated smoke motif created by El Último Grito, a Spanish design duo, runs in different iterations in each of the halls.

Ms. Hayes's video installation, titled "We Cannot Leave This World to Others," is one of 35 new commissioned works in the show. Other participants include the Swiss artist Urs Fischer, who has a major new installation in this year's Biennale. Using precise photographic methods, Mr. Fischer addresses the theme of the house through wallpaper that reproduces a full-size interior of his New York City apartment, filled with books, art, and kids' toys. Works by other artists are displayed within this space.

Continuing the theme of architecture, in the same gallery there are also two new films that examine local environments that are shifting: one by the Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari on the changing urban landscape in postwar Beirut and another by the Puerto Rico-based artist duo Allora & Calzadilla, looking at the destruction of a U.S.-owned pharmaceuticals factory in Puerto Rico.

Ms. Morgan also worked with a number of artists from Asia, like the Chinese painter Liu Xiaodong and the Korean artist Lee Bul. She said the experience gave her an understanding of the “very different sense of time” with which artists in the region operated compared with those in the West.

“Here the exciting thing is that the artists have a considerable sense of their place in the present and in the future,” she said. “The work here doesn’t carry this very heavy sense of how can I produce work with all the great work that’s been made in the past 100 years — it makes for a very vibrant, very present sense of art production.” Still, the question of history and how to engage with it in the present is one that pervades the Gwangju Biennale, as shown in a project titled “Navigation ID” by the Korean performance and video artist Minouk Lim.

For the opening of the Biennale, as part of her project, Ms. Lim brought two shipping containers holding the remains of civilians massacred during the Korean War into the public square in front of the Biennale Hall. It is an act, she said, that she hopes will help link the history of Gwangju to lesser-known events in Korean history and raise questions about what she sees as the constant “rendering of memory and pains like a touristic object” in present-day rhetoric about the Gwangju uprising.

“What’s the meaning of paying respect to past events? Does it come from the future? The past? The present?” Ms. Lim asked. “I’ve learned that the future doesn’t come from nothing. It arrives with what we burned.”

