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THOSE STICKS, THE UP
RIGHTS IN THE WATER,
WHAT ARE THEY?

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Sins of Omission

Korea's sixth Gwangju Biennale defined Asian identity—and redefined political cant—via selective cultural blindness.

BY RICHARD VINE

Among the most intriguing works recently on view at Korea's sixth Gwangju Biennale was "A Second History," an archival installation by Chinese artist Zhang Dali. The piece comprises scores of propaganda photos, as they appeared in doctored form in mid-20th-century Chinese publications such as *People's Pictorial*, *Liberation Army Journal* and *China Pictorial*, matched in wall displays with their unaltered source images. In every case, something crucial has been changed: a figure from one shot transposed to the background of another, a smiling portrait of Mao added to the exterior wall of a factory school, distasteful sights or politically undesirable individuals deleted from views of the PRC's Communist utopia.

In one particularly memorable example, Mao's body lies in state before a semicircle of Party dignitaries. In the original photo, the ranks of shoulder-to-shoulder comrades, their heads respectfully bowed, are unbroken. But in the published version, dark gaps appear. Certain no-longer-privileged (or worse) individuals have disappeared, leaving only a smudgy darkness in their place. Almost as chilling as the juxtaposed photos themselves are the texts—sometimes from English or French editions of the Chinese journals—which either knowingly further the deception or fall for it whole-hog. These passages are an implicit

reminder of the geopolitical gullibility that once made Maoism a romantic creed among radical leftists in the West and that continues—as the show inadvertently made clear—in a different, subtler, but no less dangerous form today. For the Gwangju Biennale 2006 was a purportedly benign multicultural exhibition that in fact masked elisions and interpolations of disturbing political import.

Working with eight international curators, artistic director Kim Hong-hee structured the event in two "chapters." The first, "Trace Root: Unfolding Asian Stories," concerned both contemporary Asian identity and the historical influence of Eastern thought on Western art; the second, "Trace Route: Remapping Global Cities," addressed the effects of migration and attendant culture collisions within the global economy. Together, according to the catalogue, they thus embodied the biennial's official theme, "Fever Variations"—a concept whereby, for reasons not apparent in English, "fever" implies a shift of the center towards Asia through dynamic energies and visions," and "variations" denote the differences in the Asian region and their consequent cultural multiplicities and richness." (A third component, "Citizen Program: 1.4 Million Torches" offered local tradition-based artwork, performances and music intended to appeal to the Gwangju public.) In practice, this organizational premise yielded a lively international exhibition that began with real art like Zhang Dali's, devolved into illustrated sociology and ended with an anti-American harangue.

The majority of esthetically noteworthy works were in the first "chapter," encompassing some 70 individual artists and groups selected by chief curator Wu Hung, organizer of China's 2002 Guangzhou Triennial, with the aid of three international colleagues: Binghui Huangfu, former director of the Asia Australia Arts Centre in Sydney; Shaheen Merali, exhibitions head for the House of World Cultures in Berlin; and Jacquelynn Baas, director emeritus of the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Not surprisingly, the biennial prize was shared by two participants from this section, Chinese artist Song Dong and Korean-American participant Michael Joo. The latter's *Bodhi Obfuscatu* (*Gwangju*), 2006, consists of a weathered Bodhi statue whose head is encased in a kind of oversize space helmet formed from a metal latticework bearing myriad tiny video cameras. On the surrounding walls of the small, dimly lit, mirrored room, flat screens displayed the resulting close-ups, prompting viewers into two modernist experiences derived from the ancient figure: a contemplation of its abstract patterning of lichen and an attempt to reconstitute the whole image from its scattered fragments.

Song Dong, in producing the biennial's most poignant work, shared credit with his mother, Zhao



Zhang Dali: One of 120 photographic pairs from the series "A Second History—China History Photography Archive," 2005-06.

Xiang Yuan. In fact, the frugal 68-year-old woman received top billing for *Waste Not* (2005), an installation displaying in orderly groups and piles every item—old clothes and shoes, bottles, dinnerware, bars of soap, tote bags, blankets, even Styrofoam sandwich boxes—that she has accumulated in her house over the past five decades. Having experienced the Japanese invasion, the political imprisonment of her father, civil war, the death of her mother from cancer, familial poverty, the Cultural Revolution and her husband's fatal heart attack in 2002, Zhao, like many in her generation, lives by the principle that anything still potentially useful should be saved—an utter contrast (and perhaps a material rebuke) to the throwaway consumerism that now runs rampant in urban China.

Many pieces in this chapter, though tinged with some discursive intent, were highly formalist in nature. Thomas Bayrle, from Germany, presented one of the 10 large hanging "bacteria" sculptures, made from incised white cardboard woven over wood frameworks, that make up his *SARS-Formation* (2005). *In Silence* (2002), by Japan's Chiharu Shiota, consists of a charred piano and a phantom audience of empty wooden chairs knit together by a dense, room-filling network of threads. U.S.



View of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's Memorial Project Waterfield: The Story of the Stars Performance, 2005-06, over 24,000 bottles, water, urine.

The Asian persona so frequently—and sanctimoniously—invoked in “Fever Variations” was not Asian in the broad sense at all. It was East Asian, in an idealized, self-exoticized version.

ters. To explore such historical links is why people visit museum shows like the superb Dada survey recently mounted at MOMA [see *A.I.A.*, June/July '06], not why some viewers elect to fly 12,000 miles for a contemporary art biennial.

Many works in the first part of the show dealt directly with Asian cultural heritage and identity. Xu Bing, Chinese-born but long resident in the U.S., displayed a “shadow” version of Korean master Huh Baek-ryun’s

Landscape after Rain-fall (1947). On the front of a 32½-foot-wide scrim is what looks like a vastly enlarged traditional Eastern landscape painting; on the other side, however, a tangle of branches, straw and weeds spreads across the floor, with bits strategically tarred to the back of the scrim to create the gray-toned pseudo-ink picture on the recto plane—a compelling metaphor for the messy reality that often lies behind such spiritualized images.

In a similar vein, Jitish Kal-lat showed seven large lightbox photos of *roti*, the flat pan-bread staple from his native India, progressively eaten away to resemble the phases of the

moon. Korea’s Lee Sookyung glued together discarded fragments of broken traditional-style ceramics to form the irregular hybrid vessels of *Translated Vases* (2002). In *Mobile Landscape* (2006) by Kim Jong-ku, also from Korea, a wall-projected video image seems to depict—in time-honored Eastern fashion—a sweep of hills and



Zhao Xiang Yuan & Song Dong: Waste Not, 2005, clothes, dishware, furniture and other household items accumulated by Song Dong’s mother over the past 50 years.

blank-space valleys; but, instead of ink on paper or silk, the pictorial medium turns out to be piles of steel powder strewn on the floor before a low-lying camera. David Hammons’s *Praying to Safety* (1997) features two kneeling Buddha figures, each with hands pressed together in prayer, joined by a taut thread bearing a safety pin suspended at midpoint. Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê’s *The Headless Buddha* (1998), an obvious riff on Nam June Paik’s classic *TV Buddha* (1974), has the head of a Buddha statue perched on a pedestal, seemingly contemplating a lightbox image of a headless Buddha-statue body. Chen Chieh-Jen, from Taiwan, presented *Lingchi: Echoes of a Historical Photograph* (2002), a three-screen, black-and-white video installation that reenacts—in slow-moving, highly ritualized fashion—the execution by repeated cutting of a prisoner in early 20th-century China.

Chen’s film, mesmerizing and horrifically beautiful, might well be seen as a meditation on the refinement of cruelty in a particular time and place, or in the human psyche in general. Instead, it was woefully mischaracterized by catalogue essayist Chia Chi Jason Wang as “a metaphor of the power relations between weak and strong under the hegemony of the First World, with its designs to project globalization.” The author somehow arrives at this interpretation despite the fact that there is not a single Western face in the video, that the now abandoned *lingchi* (sometimes known as “slicing,” “death by a thousand cuts” or “death by dismemberment”) was an indigenous Chinese punishment that long predated (and ended before) contemporary globalization, and that the practice so revolted early Western visitors that photos of it were circulated, occasionally in postcard form, as self-serving “evidence” of the Far East’s moral perversion. Such historical facts and complications are clearly of no interest to Chen’s commentator, whose present-day anti-capitalist, anti-Western agenda perfectly reflected the underlying political bias of the Biennale as a whole.

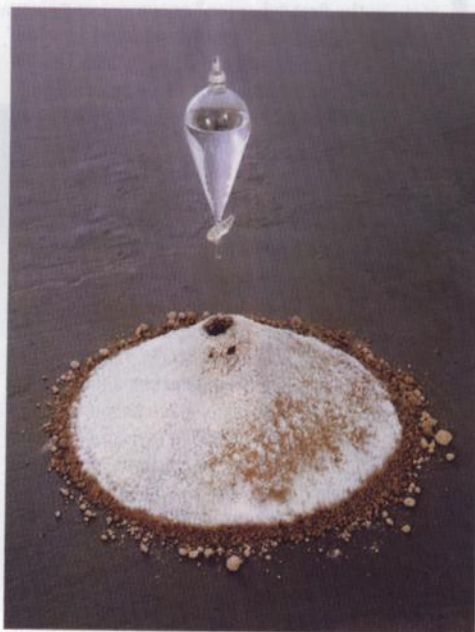
Even in this esthetically diverse first chapter of the exhibition, the social-activist art on display varied little in ideological content. At the rude and energetic extreme was Thai artist Vasan



Detail of Michael Joo’s multimedia installation Bodhi Obfuscatus (Gwangju), 2006.

artist Dove Bradshaw offered *Six Continents* (2003/06), six cone-shaped mounds of various minerals slowly dripped upon by water from suspended Pyrex funnel-beakers. Korean-born Lee Ufan painted three soft-edged gray rectangles, each modulated in tone from light to dark, on three adjoining white walls. The quartet of four-panel canvases that make up Japanese artist Hiroshi Senju’s “Waterfall” series (2006) evoke, with their smoky drips on brownish-gray backgrounds, both traditional air-and-water scroll images and Pat Steir’s large-scale paintings on the same theme. Vong Phaophanit (Laos/UK) presented an exquisite floor installation composed of six uniform waves of rice grains with five long tubes of red neon nestled in the troughs.

An anomaly in the midst of this typical fare was Jacquelynn Baas’s section of Fluxus-related works by 22 artists, drawn largely from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection at the Cranbrook Art Museum. Even though the entire “Unfolding Asian Stories” chapter was billed as “diachronic” in structure, setting up a dialogue between Eastern culture past and present (including the influence of Zen on the West), this intrusion of golden oldies by Duchamp, Cage, Maciunas, Paik, Ben, Ono, Brecht, Spoerri, Filliou, etc., felt misplaced and a bit tired. Yes, as Baas points out in her essay, Fluxus had important Asian members such as Mieko Shiomi; yes, many of its Western participants were deeply affected by Taoism and other Eastern philosophies, often via the influence of Duchamp and Cage; and, yes, Fluxus remains a conceptual resource for many artists today. But context mat-



One of Dove Bradshaw’s Six Continents, 2003/06, 100-lb. salt mound, glass funnel, water.

Sitthiket's noisy, improvisational Bush-bashing shadow-puppet theater, while, at the formally elegant pole, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba arranged a quietly engrossing performance in which white-clad assistants picked their way through a courtyard tightly packed with plastic water bottles, drinking steadily and replacing the clear-liquid Pepsi and Coke vessels with others filled with urine. The process simultaneously evoked—so viewers were informed by the artist's handout and catalogue entry—a prison yard, a minefield, a rice paddy, Western commodification of basic resources and, triumphantly, the subversive displacement of the white stars of the American flag by the yellow of the Vietnamese national standard.

Only one sociopolitical work in this chapter got beyond such easy binary thinking, and it—startlingly or maybe not—was by an American. Susan Meiselas's *Kurdistan Project* (2006) is an archive of photographs by herself and others accompanied by images and life stories (projected via computer on a monitor and wall) of Kurdish individuals who suffered deprivation and abuse as their homeland was, from 1918 onward, repeatedly seized and partitioned by Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the Soviet Union. The poignancy of these witness accounts was matched only by the refreshing non-PC probity of Meiselas's catalogue observation:

"For many Kurds, the names of Western travelers, missionaries, military officers, and colonial administrators float among the names of their own heroes." What? Asian-on-Asian violence, while Western colonizers bring much-needed social benefits along with their racism and greed—this is exactly the real-life complexity that was lacking in much of "Unfolding Asian Stories," to say nothing of the second, even more ideologically simplistic chapter that lay ahead.

The root of the biennial's conceptual problem was easily missed, but unignorable once perceived. Alarming, the Asian identity so frequently—and sanctimoniously—invoked in the works and the catalogue was not really Asian in the broad sense at all. It was East Asian, in an idealized version. Curatorial choices focused on the China, Korea and Japan of family-and-state-enhancing Confucianism (despite its current disintegration), Beautiful Buddhism (the nice contemplative type, not the proselytizing doctrine that spread inexorably across the continent for 1,500 years beginning in the fifth century B.C.) and Noble Artistic Tradition (no Kung Fu movies or pachinko parlors here).

Such flattering self-caricature, while troubling enough in its psychology, also entails a form of editing worthy of Zhang Dali's Mao-era censors. The cultural construct presented in Gwangju was not, by and large, the Asia in which poor farmers earn \$800 per year and factory workers \$1,200. It was not the Asia of Indian Hindus and Sikhs, of Philippine Catholics, of Indonesian secessionists or of China's myriad ethnic minorities. It was not the Asia of the world's largest Communist oligarchy. Nor, most significantly in light of today's global tensions, was it the Asia of 670 million practicing Muslims.

Imaginative exclusions of this sort have large consequences. An Asia without poverty and without Islam, for example, is an Asia without land protests, dwindling resources, ghastly pollution or Islamic fanaticism—a world in which commercial towers can rise with impunity in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur, and the U.S. can be safely vilified. In other words, it is a fiction, a new-style



Thomas Bayrie: SARS-Formation, 2005, punched cardboard strips around wooden grids, 7 pieces, 33 by 12 by 8 inches each.

Orientalist reverie—one dreamed at great peril by East Asia's own elite.

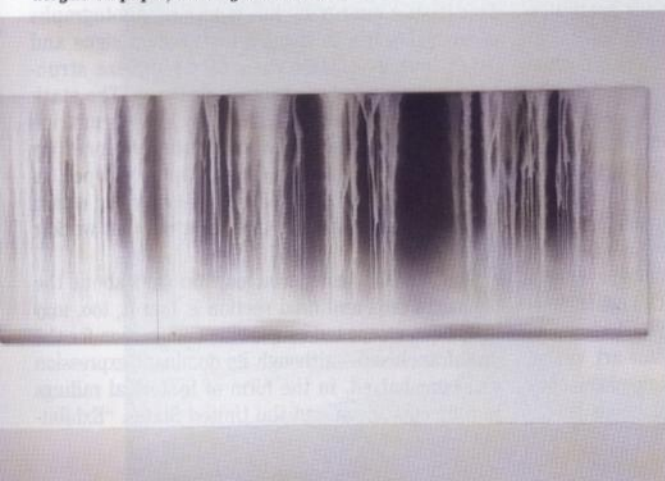
The biennial's second half, dealing mostly with the world beyond Asia, began auspiciously enough with a 21-artist European section organized by Cristina Ricupero, a former curator at the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art in Helsinki and former associate director of exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Several of the works she selected were notable for a sheer beauty that extended viewer engagement. Dutch artist Jennifer Tee's 13-by-26-foot folding fabric fan with accompanying performance by traditional Korean singers and drummers was a reminder, like her own ethnically mixed background, of the cultural reciprocity between Europe and Asia. Melik Ohanian's multi-screen video installation, lushly shot in his native France, juxtaposes seven enigmatic story lines that, over 21 minutes, eventually converge. Also formally intriguing, though more wry, were pieces like German artist Michael Beutler's footbridge of wood, plastic netting, bamboo and rope that, in theory at least, can move like an inchworm; or the descriptively titled "Wig Buildings" (2006) by Benin-born Meschac Gaba, who now lives in the Netherlands.

Many other works, while dealing with serious socioeconomic issues, were leavened with humor. Shen Yuan, a Chinese artist residing in Paris, plays upon the old "yellow peril" bugaboo with a horde of buck-toothed ceramic figurines, which, having apparently emerged from a large egg that has just spilled chocolate in the form of China, cavort across a map of the world performing Sino-stereotypical acts: pulling rickshaws, wearing conical hats, holding blue-and-white ceramics, spinning plates on sticks. Julika Rudelius, of Germany and the Netherlands, contributed two equally sly videos. In one, showing various affluent businessmen who lament the character faults of the young and/or poor (laziness, economic naïveté, lack of imagination), the satire is obvious. In the other, documenting hip young immigrants as they show

Lee Sookjung: Translated Vases, 2006, ceramic, trash, epoxy, gold leaf.



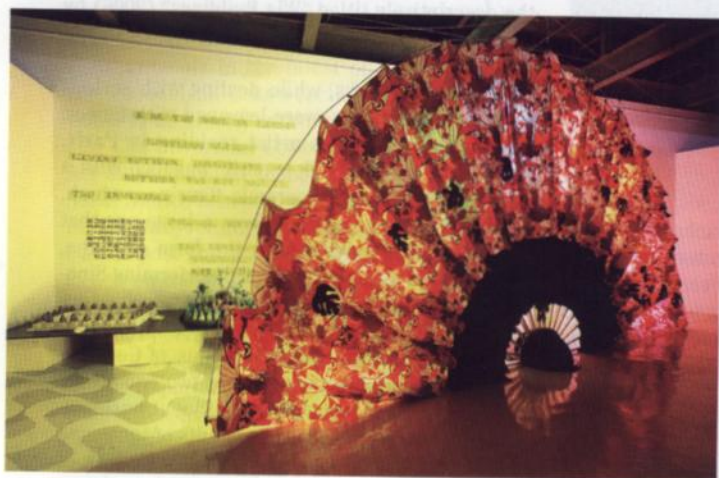
Hiroshi Senju: One of four works from the "Waterfall" series, 2006, acrylic on paper, 70% by 189 inches.



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off their favorite streetwear (high-tech sneakers, three-quarter-length pants, designer T-shirts, etc.), the authorial point of view is harder to pin down. Does Rudelius think these youths are really cool or just victims of the marketing trade? One inescapable conclusion is that it certainly costs a lot of money these days to dress so badly. That lesson was echoed in a series of 12 posterlike photos of similar young men posed in everyday locales by Jens Haaning & Superflex. The Danish team's other pranks included shipping five flamingos from a Korean zoo to one in Denmark (global dislocation, get it?) and two large wall-text paintings, reading "Foreigners, please don't leave us alone with the Danes" and "Foreigners, please don't leave us alone with the Koreans." Xenophobia, it seems, can be fun—or at least funny.

It's hard to know who the joke was on in Korean artist Lim Min-ouk's *Original Live Club* (2006), a room reserved for women in a parody of men-only hangouts. According to Lim's text, the controlled access was intended to put viewers in mind of—what else?—globalism. Loitering on the periphery, men (elsewhere so powerful, you know) were supposedly forced to identify with the world's Others, garnering reports of the inner sanctum only secondhand. Well, this particular excluded male was told, by more than one female informant, that the booth contained girlie magazines and an office machine upon which lady visitors were invited to photocopy their butts—which many did. Whether true report or conspiratorial lie, the idea didn't sound like a major advance for the earth's huddled masses, or for feminists.



Foreground, Jennifer Tee's Love Lucious Slumber (Un)(Re)Veiled Fan, 2003, fabric, mixed mediums, 13 by 26 feet.

Tending more toward sentimentality than vituperation or laughs was another female-centric work, *Evening Primrose* (2006) by Korea's Song Sang-hee, which features floor projections of predictably sappy poems composed by Dutch prostitutes. In the words of one, "sex workers are humans," too—in case you thought otherwise. Thankfully, a much richer treatment of this theme could be found in a pseudo-documentary video by Lithuanian artist Deimantas Narkevicius. In his *Matrioskos* (2005), three actresses from a fact-based Belgian TV series of the same title give interviews in character, hesitantly detailing how they were caught up in the international skin trade, a move that got them out of dead-end situations in Lithuania and into something much worse in Belgium. The inextricable mix of reality and fiction in these "confessions" bolstered Narkevicius's deft critique of two industries (TV and white slavery) based largely on the exploitation of fantasies.

Lacking both humor and sentiment (to say nothing of conceptual subtlety), an installation of signs, building models, urban photographs, videos and camouflage gear by Lithuania's Nomedas & Gediminas Urbonas protested the privatization of formerly public spaces in Vilnius. By virtue of its victim temperament, the work ought to have been in the following section, which did little else but bemoan the social impact of economic change and development. Some of those complaints are undoubtedly warranted. But whining about the loss of old communal comforts and the evils of emergent for-profit enterprise seems a tad petulant when it comes from young Eastern European artists whose parents and grandparents were forced to struggle for subsistence in an unworkable Communist economy, shadowed by Stalin's death camps.

The penultimate section—comprising, in a rather strange combination, 11 practitioners from the Balkans, the Middle East, Asia and North America—was put together by Beck Jee-sook, an art critic, freelance curator and current project director at the Insa Art Space of the Arts Council Korea. This is where social consciousness kicked in big-time, resulting in galleries that looked less like an art venue than a junior-high classroom during World Awareness Week.



Dinh Q Lê: The Headless Buddha, 1998, Buddha head, 15½ by 9½ by 9½ inches; lightbox, 43½ by 63 inches.



Shen Yuan: The Dinosaur's Egg, 2001, ceramic figures, floor map.

No doubt there is great humanitarian validity to the concern of the 16Beaver group (U.S.) with border zones in Korea and elsewhere, or of Lebanese photographer Akram Zaatari with a war-torn Beirut. But the didactic photo installations they created to express that concern were almost entirely lacking in artistic interest. Offering some respite, a ramshackle tabletop model of a dream island, by the Korean group flyingCity, at least had a measure of comic-utopian charm. Local residents Jeong Kiheoun & Siyon Jin created visual energy by interspersing photographs of everyday life in Gwangju with shop signs and price listings on the walls of a roomsize structure surrounded by a ramped walkway. The stark color photos in *Return* (2006), by Korea's mixrice group, fascinatingly document the two primary means of social advancement that are open to impoverished citizens of Nepal—becoming either a Gurkha in the Indian Army or a migrant worker abroad.

The kindest thing that can be said about the biennial's next and final section is that it, too, may have been motivated by genuine compassion for the disenfranchised—although its dominant expression was pure hatred, in the form of hysterical railings against capitalism and the United States. "Exhibit-

ing U.S. Imperialism and War”—the title was emblazoned over the entrance like Dante’s “abandon all hope, ye who enter here”—consisted of photos and videos by seven mostly Latin American social-activist groups. These artless works served primarily as visual aids to the hortatory wall texts authored by curators Chris Gilbert, formerly a curator at the University of California Berkeley Art Museum, and Cira Pascual Marquina, artistic director and curator at the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore. The nature (and source) of their argument was established with the very first sentence: “Ninety years ago, V.I. Lenin named our condition—imperialism, the highest state of capitalism—and outlined the inexorable logic according to which transnational capital resorts to imperial war in the effort to control resources and secure sites for favorable investment.” Thereafter the usual Marxist-Leninist mantra was rehearsed—“everywhere covertly and overtly the U.S. empire wages war against humanity . . . in the service of corporate interests”—accompanied by projected slides juxtaposing images of Guantánamo holding pens and Israeli checkpoints, and such scintillating video fare as a study of young, rather ineffectual-looking radicals from several countries sitting around in a circle and discussing their resis-

tance strategies. Virtually all of the works were in Spanish with only Korean subtitles, a nice “screw you, gringo” touch.

Roughly three months before the Gwangju Biennale opened, Chris Gilbert resigned his post at the Berkeley Art Museum in a dispute with the museum board over the wording of text panels for his show “Now-Time Venezuela: Media Along the Path of the Bolivian Process.” As Gilbert explained in an on-line statement: “Their plan was to replace the phrase ‘in solidarity’ with revolutionary Venezuela with a phrase like ‘concerning’ revolutionary Venezuela—or another phrase describing a relation that would not be one of solidarity.” Faced with the likelihood of losing the show altogether, the board restored the original wording. But Gilbert, practicing the “radical and daily intransigence” he preaches, left anyway before the end of the exhibition run [May 14-July 16], inform-



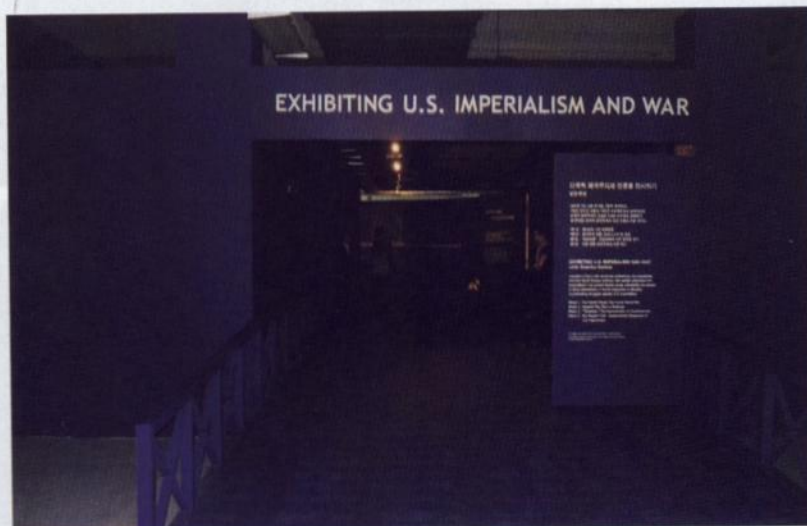
Jeoung Kiheoun & Siyon Jin: Fragments of Everyday Lives in Gwangju, 2006, mixed-medium installation with video projection.

ing his on-line readers that “contemporary art of the past 30 years is really in most respects simply the cultural arm of upper-class power.”

Surprisingly, Gilbert contributed a relatively insightful essay to the Biennale catalogue’s appendix of conference papers on new media, but the curatorial travesty he helped inflict on viewers in Gwangju was an act of crude intellectual bullying (hardly surprising in one who cites Lenin, Mao and Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos among his moral exemplars), and indicates that his departure from Berkeley was not exactly a great loss to world thought.

On balance, although it contained numerous fine works, the Gwangju Biennale 2006 merited—and in many whispered instances got—a reaction teetering between bemusement and outrage. After all, one can scarcely overstate the irony of a global art biennial thoroughly riddled with antiglobalist prejudice, sponsored by a country that hosts more such roundups than any other (five different semi-annual events at last count)—no doubt because Korea’s economic welfare depends absolutely on foreign trade. The narrow, self-exoticized definition of “Asian” that prevailed in the galleries verged, for lack of a more diplomatic term, on intra-Asian racism. And the exhibition’s virulent anti-capitalist and anti-Americanism strains, too cliché-ridden to be even mildly persuasive, seemed little more than pseudo-bohemian “acting out” in the midst of a madly consumerist country that would not even exist, except as a starving fiefdom of Kim Jong Il, were it not for American military intervention in 1950-53. Given the embarrassment of the drastically ill-considered final sections, one must ask some tough accountability questions: Who conceived this overall Biennale program, and what were they thinking? Indeed, were they thinking at all, or just, while ensconced in the bourgeois comfort of the Korean cultural bureaucracy, striking “oppositional” attitudes left over from the dawn of modernism and lately propagandized by radical-chic theorists? □

The sixth Gwangju Biennale, “Fever Variations,” was held in Biennale Hall, Junggoei Park, Gwangju, Korea, Sept. 8-Nov. 11, 2006. It was accompanied by a 415-page catalogue in Korean and English.



Entrance to the show’s final section, curated by Chris Gilbert and Cira Pascual Marquina as a collective project with seven Latin American and Korean social-activist groups. Photo Richard Vine.

View of the subsection “Terrorism,” the Demonization of Counterpower, with alternating image and text slide projections focusing on Guantánamo Bay (left) and Israel (right).

