

Biennial Governmentality.

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BIENNIAL GOVERNMENTALITY

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The world does not belong to one person; it belongs to the whole world. The harmony of the Yin and Yang forces does not favor growth in only one species of thing, the sweet dews and seasonable rains are not partial to one thing, and so the ruler of the myriad people does not show favoritism toward a single individual. ... Heaven and Earth are so great that while they give life they do not raise anything as their own, and while they bring things to completion they do not possess them. The myriad things all receive their blessings and obtain their benefits, but no one knows whence they first arose.

—*The Annals of Lü Buwei*, 239 B.C.E.

Ecological crisis ... is the slow and painful realization that there is no outside anymore. It means that none of the elements necessary to support life can be taken for granted. To live under a huge inflated Globe you need a powerful air-conditioning system and powerful pumps to keep it inflated. ... So here is the question I wish to raise to designers: where are the visualization tools that allow the contradictory and controversial nature of matters of concern to be represented?

—Bruno Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus?: A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design," 2008

The Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism is driven by a sense of crisis. It is not only a crisis of our physical and social environment but also of the words and ideas with which we deal with this reality. Though a small part of an expansive and fluid condition, the Seoul Biennale is part of an ongoing transformation, both global and local, that requires us to question our political, economic, and technological systems. Not initially conceived as a goal of the biennale, working through a series of ideas in the midst of transition will, I believe, nevertheless come to be a key contribution of this biennale. The first idea to be questioned is the concept of the biennale. The birth and transformation of the biennale during the past 120 years has been part and parcel of the changing political economy of art and architecture. In the manner of the world expositions of the nineteenth century, the pavilions in the exhibition grounds and the art and products exhibited in them were identified with nations, people, and corporations as organized within nineteenth-century colonialism and capitalism. Based on the contradictory foundation of nationalism and the Romantic notion of autonomous art, the Venice Biennale and its national pavilions were born from a Eurocentric notion of a "world art." As part of "the exhibitionary complex," the exposition, museum, and biennale emerged together with modern representation.

Since the advent of the Havana Biennale and the explosion of biennales after the 1990s, the

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biennale took a major turn as it began to fly the banner of the global contemporary. Justified in its progressive stance against the conservatism of established museums and the promotion of a global, expansive notion of art, the art biennale has now become a dominant cultural form. As I write, there are 207 biennales listed on the Biennial Foundation website, with many more, including the Seoul Biennale, not registered in this listing. Even as an architecture and urbanism biennale, the Seoul Biennale adheres to the following general and quite pertinent definition of the art biennale: "Often grandiose in scale, sometimes dispersed across several locations in a city, at times locally imbedded through site-specific commissions while being global in ambition, and often involving discursive components such as symposia, extensive publications, or even accompanying journals alongside a group show featuring, for the most part, a panoramic view of a new generation of artists." Within this definition provided by the editors of *The Biennial Reader*, the only point to be changed for the Seoul Biennale would be to substitute the last phrase with its thematic of the urban commons.

What, then, is the justification of my claim that the Seoul Biennale provides a moment to question the idea of the biennale? Wouldn't the fact of its sponsorship by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, one of the largest municipal bureaucracies in the world, only give more credence to such skepticism? Bureaucracies are, by definition, conservative. Working through regulations, official documents, and hierarchical organizations, maintenance, rather than innovation, is their inherent nature. It is not that public sponsorship of biennales is rare. Most biennales in Korea and many biennales around the world are supported by state and public entities. However, in almost all such cases, the official position of both the bureaucracy and the biennale is that the former does not interfere with the art displayed in the latter. For example, while Seoul also supports a major art biennale, Media City Seoul, neither the municipality nor the biennale would confess to a symbiotic relation in its content or thematic. In contrast, for the Seoul Biennale, both the sponsoring municipality and the biennale have staked a position that the latter will serve as an experimental laboratory of urban governance, not just of Seoul but also of the major cities of the world. It is a position that urbanism-focused biennales, such as the Rotterdam and Hong Kong–Shenzen Bi-City biennales, have also staked out. With its urban agenda and the "live projects" that connect with municipal projects and policies, the Seoul Biennale has sought no refuge in the idea of autonomy. It invites the inevitable criticism that it will restrict itself by merging itself too deeply into the requirements and politics of local governance. The Seoul Biennale and the governance systems of Seoul will challenge, frustrate, and assist each other in their expectations and definitions. It is a marriage that is not only immediate in the thematic focus on the commons but also can be traced to the political lineage of Korea and the East Asian region.

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Suseonjeondo, Map of Hanyang (Seoul during the Joseon Dynasty), 1846-49, Yonsei University Museum

The scholarly and professional literature on the commons, if less so for the urban commons, is vast. This introduction to the conceptual issues of the Seoul Biennale is not the place to reiterate the debates of the past fifty years. I will rather discuss the context in which the commons became its central thread and the issues that were raised in the process. Early conversations with Alejandro Zaera Polo on the thematic direction of the Seoul Biennale included a debate on the nature of ecological elements, the emergence of posthuman conditions and the idea of the posthuman, and the search for a new urban cosmology. In setting the basic parameters of the commons, I suggested a comparison between the Taoist Five Elements—water, fire, earth, metal, and wood—and the Four Elements established during ancient Greece—water, fire, air, and earth. My first point was that the Taoist “element” is an inaccurate and misleading translation of *hsing* (in Chinese) or *haeng* (in Korean). *Haeng* more properly designates “actions” or “movements,” and has at times been translated as “forces” or “powers.” The most striking aspect of the Five Elements, for me as well as for many commentators on East Asian cosmology, is the inclusion of metal and wood. It has been suggested that “the grouping of these elements was not originally associated with primordial matter or substances of the world but with the practical, productive activities of agriculture.” In the *Book of Documents*, for example, Emperor Yu is quoted as saying, “Virtue is seen in good government. Good government is proven by its to nourish the people. There are water, fire, metal, wood, earth, and grain. These must be properly regulated.” Hence, the five *haeng* are not elements of nature but pre-humanized and institutionalized technologies incorporated in a system of governance. Nature and technology, in all its disruptive force, were never distinct from the human but were viewed as an inherent part of governance. This world view stands in contrast to the Western genealogy of humanism, first emerging as a radical challenge to the transcendent absolute and subsequently becoming a political, technological, and social mechanism. It may be argued that the politico-religious arena in China and East Asia never entertained the idea of the absolute. In human history, very few societies had the power and arrogance to view humans (themselves) to be the masters of a separate nature. Beyond this specific tradition, posthumanism is at once obvious, a contradictory misnomer and, in the case of its most naïve forms, once again self-delusional.

In East Asia, governmentality, to use a Foucauldian term, has an expansive history. Modernity, industry, and capitalism in the region emerged not through the mechanisms of the bourgeoisie and the market but through the state and its guidance of capital. Generally designated as “late industrialization” and the “strong state,” they are characteristics confined not just to South Korea but to most economies of East Asia. From the Western perspective, it would seem strange to talk of the

state in the context of a municipality such as Seoul. We must hence be reminded that local self-government based on democratic representation was de facto established in Korea only after the first modern local elections in 1995. If industrialization came late to South Korea, civil society, in all its fluid variations, appeared even later. As Seoul's governance now evolves into more horizontal forms, governmental apparatuses continue to provide the context of the Seoul Biennale. Its thematic direction is played out in the fact that in 2012 the Seoul Metropolitan Government announced the "city of commons" as official policy. This new policy has disrupted not only the internal workings of the municipality but also its relation to elements of civil society working with the commons. The Seoul Biennale emerges from this re-organization of governmentality. Rather than work to ward off its controlling forces, my approach as director has been to engage directly with them, intensifying their logic and commitments. *ive Projects Seoul*, a major sector in the Seoul Biennale, in particular function less as exhibition installations and more as interventions, instigating projects and steering policies that extend beyond the time frame of the biennale.

In the limited space of this essay, I point to the background and approach of *Production City*, one of the three thematic sectors of the *Live Projects Seoul*. As a theoretical project, *Production City* is an exploration into post-capitalism and the future of work, essential aspects of the commoning process. The history of work tells us of its changing nature, of its spatial distribution in local and global networks. "The end of work" is one of the fundamental issues not only of post-industrial societies but of emerging economies. *Production City* takes the position of economists, sociologists, and urbanists such as Jeremy Rifkin, Ulrich Beck, and André Gorz that, as mass work declines in all sectors of the economy and new technologies accelerate the disappearance of existing jobs, a radically new form of work must find a place within an evolving urban fabric. Production, as described by André Gorz, "takes place not only in the work situation but just as much in the schools, cafes, athletic fields; on voyages; in theatres, concerts, newspapers, books, expositions; in towns, neighbourhoods, discussion and action groups—in short, wherever individuals enter into relationships with one another and produce the universe of human relationships." Gorz is articulating why a radical redefinition of production is key to the urban commons. In contrast to private, insulated urban spaces, production in the city requires all the modalities of sharing, connecting, and making. In this system, knowledge and space, the two commons that are enhanced through intense use, must be shared. As the transformation of production in the city is not an abstract process, it will play out in the specificities of local and global conditions; and in the case of the Seoul Biennale, in the streets and back-alleys of central Seoul.

Seoul is estimated to have around 270,000 people working directly in manufacturing.

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John Hong, 10-Minute Neighborhood Mapping of Seoul, 2016

It is a small percentage of the working force of Seoul and is not significantly larger than the employment figures of a similar sized metropolis such as London. What is peculiar with Seoul is that significant manufacturing sectors still exist in its central areas. Whereas most of the world's major metropolises have agglomerated into centers of business and consumption, historical Seoul sustains a complex ecology of traditional and cutting-edge production. These areas include the fashion and garment districts of the Dongdaemun and Changsin-dong areas and the electronics,

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printing, and machinery clusters of the Euljiro-Saeoon Sangga area, all key sites of the Seoul Biennale. The historical background to this condition lies in the fact that Seoul's industrialization, led by national economic policy, came late in the twentieth century; peaking around the mid-1960s, a moment when most major cities in Europe and the United States had already lost most of their manufacturing functions. Zoning was a key mechanism for managing and controlling the different functions of Seoul, and presently the semi-industrial zones still take up 5% of the land area of Seoul. Even as neo-liberal policies sought to disassemble this bureaucratic system of control, the rigidity of zoning delayed what once seemed to be an inevitable elimination of all manufacturing capacities. When the global economic crisis triggered a fundamental shift in the real estate dynamics of Seoul, the retention and development of the manufacturing sector became a key policy of the Seoul Metropolitan Government. Production City, as a strategic agent, consists of a range of interventions, installations, and interpretations: historical overviews of the nature and distribution of work in the city, analytic and creative documentation of sites and activities, interventions into manufacturing districts in Seoul, and proposals for new modes of work and productive spaces. The point of Production City is to coalesce the different agents in the landscape towards a moment not only of visibility but also of engagement.

The great attraction of modern curatorial work is the fact that it can work in a realm that moves between thinking, showing, and acting. The Seoul Biennale takes full advantage of the global mandate that the biennale privileges as well as the particular governmentality of a large municipality. It assumes a worldview in which nature, technology, and politics are inseparable. In its thematic, on the one hand, the Seoul Biennale follows Bruno Latour's thesis "that there is no outside anymore." In its curatorial approach, on the other hand, I must question and refine Latour's subsequent logic that the role of the designer lies primarily in representation. Even as I acknowledge Latour's understanding that to represent is a "verb" that includes "artistic, scientific and political representation techniques," we must understand that the idea of representation is itself part and parcel of the modernist divide of interior reality and exterior appearance. If there is no outside, the very idea of representation must be questioned. The search for a different kind of biennale is, then, a search for a renewal of representation and engagement as political practices. The Seoul Biennale brings the element of the stage into the urban fabric, a stage that is "simultaneously a locus of public activity and the exhibition-space for 'fantasies.'" It is a stage that is specific to Seoul but one that invites an array of diverse agents to engage in a specific biopolitical performance. Rather than an exhibition enclosed within gallery walls, the Seoul Biennale seeks to be part of the everyday fabric of the city. It is interested less in putting up a show and more in bringing a multitude of agents into

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the existing city. This is the *architecture* of the Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism. It is an architecture less of representation and more of organization and performance. It involves aspects of architecture as a building practice but divests from the fundamentalist notion of architecture as work. For, is not architecture the discipline where “the sense of self-realization, in the sense of ‘poiesis,’ of the creation of work as oeuvre,” to again borrow Gorz’s characterization, is strongest, and is not this kind of work “disappearing fastest into the virtualized realities of the intangible economy”? This open-ended transformation is never a one-way street. As much as architecture is mandated to redefine itself, this transformation affects the way urban societies function. The point of the Seoul Biennale is neither to preserve nor to throw away the efficacies of terms such as “the commons,” “architecture,” “production,” and “representation.” It enters into the fray of the politics of aesthetics not in the dichotomy between artistic autonomy and bureaucratic control, but as a performative engagement in a mechanism of biopolitical production.

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