Reality Check: The GanaArt Collection's Timely Lessons on Minjung Art

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The gift of the GanaArt Collection to the Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA) in 2001 gave immediate rise to institutional discord, to "wrangling and infighting within the bureaucracy," as one journalist put it.[1] For some, the realist works in the collection, many of which were created by artists associated with the 1980s *Minjung* democratization movement, amounted to "anti-government propaganda with no artistic value."[2] As such, according to this line of thinking, they deserved little more than to be stacked away in the bowels of the museum. For others, however, the collection indexed a crucial moment in the history of twentieth century Korean art, one that demanded critical probing rather than reactionary dismissal. Speaking under the guise of anonymity, one SeMA curator went as far as to declare: "without featuring Minjung artworks, this museum will have no reason to continue to exist."[3]

As unlikely as it might have seemed at the time, the latter perspective ultimately won out. When the museum exhibited works from the collection for the first time in 2002, SeMA's director Yoo Jun Sang addressed the controversy in a public statement, explaining: "there has been some debate over the artistic value of populist works from the 1980s, but we concluded that they are true to a realist form representing the times they were created in."[4] This defense of the GanaArt Collection served a dual function, at once affirming the value of realist artworks while blunting their critical edge as hard-hitting "anti-government propaganda" by consigning them to a specific timeframe—one decidedly of the past and thus no longer a threat to the order of the establishment. With this characterization, Yoo mirrored what has become a prevalent tendency to fasten works of South Korean realism—and Minjung Art in particular—to specific historical events, plotting them along a timeline that typically begins with the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and ends in the early 1990s with the dawn of democratization.

One need not look past the contents of the GanaArt Collection to grasp how this mode of historicizing realist art had become a standard practice by the late 1980s, largely as a result of the frameworks advanced by leading Minjung artists and critics themselves. Perhaps nowhere is this tendency more openly displayed than in "Story of the Painting Scene in the 80s"(p. 315), a monumental banner painting produced collaboratively by one of the most prominent Minjung artist groups, Reality and Utterance. Measuring over 14 meters in length, the work takes the form of a timeline that tracks the output of the collective from its beginnings circa 1980 through its 10th anniversary in 1990. Thumbnail-like representations of works by individual group members appear in a chronological arrangement, with references to the Gwangju Uprising, the 1987 June Democracy Movement, and other major events that shook South Korean society throughout the decade likewise figuring among the run of images. First envisioned by Reality and Utterance members Kang Yo-bae and Min Joung-ki, who co-produced the initial sketch for the painting, "Story of the Painting Scene in the 80s" demonstrates how the group conceived of their output as a linear sequence of development.[5] The painting pushes a diachronic understanding of how Minjung artworks relate to one another and to specific social and political episodes.

At the time, this visual logbook was hardly meant to mark a definitive conclusion to the Minjung Art movement, the prospects of which appeared especially auspicious in light of the June Democracy Movement, in which artists had played a major role in forcing the military dictator Chun Doo-hwan to relinquish the presidency and open a path to a democratic electoral process. It would not be long, however, until a steady succession of analogous timelines—both literal and discursive—would be pressed into the service of art critical writings that described Minjung Art as a phenomenon of the past.

The Minjung Art movement was first pronounced dead in 1994 with the opening of the state-sponsored exhibition "15 Years of Minjung Art: 1980-1994" at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Gwacheon. South Korean critics largely lambasted the show and the art historian Frank Hoffmann evocatively deemed it "a gigantic funeral ceremony for [Minjung] Art."[6] Once defined by its guerilla ambitions to disrupt political malfeasance, headlong industrialization, and the globalization of the South Korean economy, Minjung Art now appeared wholly coopted by the most mainstream of art institutions. Tellingly, the journalist Mark Clifford described this effect in temporal terms, noting how the exhibition caused the works to appear outmoded, writing: "To outsiders, Minjung Art seems more like a quaintly anachronistic reminder of struggles past than a current threat."[7] As suggested by his attribution of this perspective to "outsiders," however, Clifford sensed that Minjung Art might carry more political valence in contemporary South Korea than the museum's nominal assimilation of the movement would suggest. His suspicion stemmed from the fact that procuring an interview with a representative of the museum proved to be a considerable challenge. "Museum officials refuse to confirm the existence of the show, let alone discuss Minjung Art," he wrote, noting that even Minjung artists involved in the preparatory process would suddenly be called away by their superiors when they began speaking to him.[8] In this light, the exhibition took on the air of a backroom conspiracy concerned with tempering any potentially subversive aspects of Minjung Art.

Clifford's uneasiness with the museum's deliberate historical distancing of Minjung Art highlights how institutions and ideologies work to frame certain artworks and art movements as belonging to the past while raising up others as contrastingly relevant to the contemporary world. The occasion of the present English-language publication for SeMA's now permanent exhibition of works from the GanaArt Collection affords an opportunity to reflect on this problem by attending to the ways in which Minjung Art has been discursively treated in exhibitions and catalogue texts marketed to audiences outside of Korea. The presumed need to provide a comprehensive contextualization of Minjung Art for viewers with little to no familiarity with Korean cultural or political history has resulted in a habitual reliance on the timeline as an interpretative lens. Weaving through exhibition texts from the late 1980s, when Minjung Art was first shown outside of Korea, to the late 2000s, in what follows I argue that Minjung Art objects hardly correspond in such regimented fashion with the alignment of historical events said to demarcate their collective lifespan. On the contrary, these works have a peculiar way of returning to us long after the moment of their creation, oftentimes igniting heated debates that undermine any claim to have moved beyond the controversies, causes, and convictions that gave shape to the political and aesthetic context of the 1980s. In their continuous resurfacing, the works in the GanaArt Collection assume a renewed political potency in our contemporary moment, just as they intervened in realities past.

"A New Movement of Political Art," as It Was

In 1987, Toronto's A Space Gallery hosted what was likely the first international touring exhibition of Minjung Art. Titled "Min Joong Art: New Movement of Political Art from Korea," the show featured a small cohort of artists, four of whom are now represented in the GanaArt Collection: Kim Bong-jun; Kim Yongtae; Oh Yoon; and Park Bul-dong.[9] The occasion prompted some of the first writings in English on Minjung Art, including an essay by the North American critic Lucy Lippard and a translation of a text by Um Hyuk, one of the exhibition's curators. For our purposes, the latter stands out because of its singular treatment of temporality.

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[1] Choe Yong-shik, "Dissident Artworks Deemed Worthy of Permanent Display at Public Museum," *Korea Herald,* August 13, 2002.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Quoted in ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Exhibition and Publication Commemorating 10 Years of Reality and Utterance and the Realist Art Movement," Hankyore Newspaper, September 27, 1990.

[6] Frank Hoffmann, "Images of Dissent: Transformations in Korean Minjung Art," *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 1.2 (Summer 1997): 45.

[7] Mark Clifford, "Art for Politics' Sake: South Korean Protest Movement Seeks New Directions," *Far Eastern Economic Review,* August 26, 1993.

[8] Ibid.

Um's essay opens with the following declaration: “A vast wave of change swept the Korean contemporary art world in the Eighties.”[10] A routine remark on the surface, this line proves extraordinary for the fact that it went to print a full three years before the 1980s had actually passed. Employing an emphatically retrospective tone, the essay's introductory passage describes the Minjung movement's immediate aims as, by and large, already accomplished. In all its peculiarity, the sentence bespeaks how, even in the thick of its unfolding, Minjung Art was consistently relegated to the realm of the historical. Indeed, the past tense runs throughout the essay, as readers encounter such claims as: “One significant aspect of Min Joong art was the criticism of Modernism and self-criticism of over dependency on Western influences.”[11] Whether these references to Minjung Art as a historical wonder stemmed from the initial Korean text or the always-imperfect process of translation, the resulting document vocalizes the implicit anxieties that lurked beneath the surface of the exhibition, anticipating that Minjung Art might appear outdated in the eyes of international audiences.

This concern was far from unwarranted. Even in his largely favorable assessment of the A Space exhibition, John Bentley Mays acknowledged how out of touch Minjung artists' figurative realism seemed vis-à-vis the mainstream contemporary art world. Mays began his review with the exhortation: “If the very idea of trucking down to Queen and Bathurst in the dead of a Toronto winter to see some political art turns you off—it certainly turned me off—keep reading.”[12] Here the critic assumes that the mere mention of “political art” would not only discourage his audiences from going to the gallery, it might even deter them from reading his appraisal. Only with added encouragement would they bother to entertain South Korean agitprop with little apparent relation to cutting-edge contemporary art. In another review, Christopher Hume reiterated this outlook, stating: “As unlikely as it may sound, one of the liveliest exhibitions in Toronto right now is a display of contemporary political art from South Korea.”[13]

When in March 1987 the exhibition travelled from Toronto to New York, where it opened at Brooklyn's Minor Injury, an independent gallery run by the Korean artist Mo Bahc (now better known as Bahc Yiso), it caught the attention of curator Valerie Smith, paving the way for a more expansive showing of Minjung Art at New York's Artists Space gallery the following year. Re-titled “Min Joong Art: A New Cultural Movement from Korea,” the Artists Space show boasted a roster of prominent Minjung artists including Lim Ok-sang and Shin Hak-chul, in addition to collectives including Dureong and the Gwangju Visual Art Research Institute. Initially, the organizers of the exhibition had intended for the show to act as a response to the South Korean state's refusal to include Minjung Art in an allegedly comprehensive exhibition titled “The Yesterday and Today of Contemporary Korean Art,” which was scheduled to overlap with the 1988 Olympics. Discussions of Minjung Art's engagement with problematic aspects of the Olympics largely fell out of the essays published in the catalogue that accompanied the Artists Space exhibition, however, the majority of which employed a mode of historicization comparable to that which had characterized Um Hyuk's text for the 1987 catalogue.

In addition to new texts by Lippard and Um, the Artists Space catalogue contained several essays by South Korean critics, each of which provided social, political and aesthetic background for the works in the show. In an effort to establish an overview of the Minjung Art movement, the critic Sung Wan-kyung structured his contribution in the form of a discursive timeline, graphing two distinct generations of Minjung artists and the intersections of their work with landmark events from the Gwangju Uprising to the June Democracy Movement.[14] In his discussion of the latter event, he even included a day-by-day timeline excerpted from the records of the artist Choi Byung Soo, who had produced portraits and a banner painting of the student Lee Han-yeol after he was hit and ultimately killed by a tear gas grenade canister during a protest. In Sung's analysis, the “two faces of Minjung Art” involved an early generation who espoused nationalistic tendencies and favored visual forms that bore conspicuous connections to indigenous Korean aesthetic traditions, and a later generation who incorporated “Western” and “modernistic” aesthetic strategies such as photomontage and installation. As emblematic of the former, Sung had in mind works like Oh Yoon's 1985 print "Dance," (Fig. 1) with its foregrounding of traditional clothing and cultural practices, and the depicted figure's literal turning away from the deleterious conditions of modernity implicitly lurking beyond the frame.

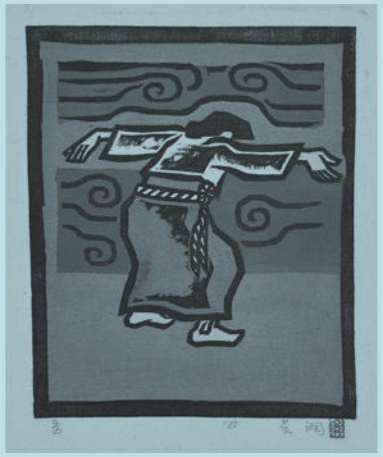

Fig. 1. Oh Yoon, "Dance", 1985.

Meanwhile, a work like Shin Hak-chul's montage “Modern Korean History: Seoul Pagoda” (Fig. 2) of 1984 signals what Sung considered as the second wave aesthetic of Minjung Art.

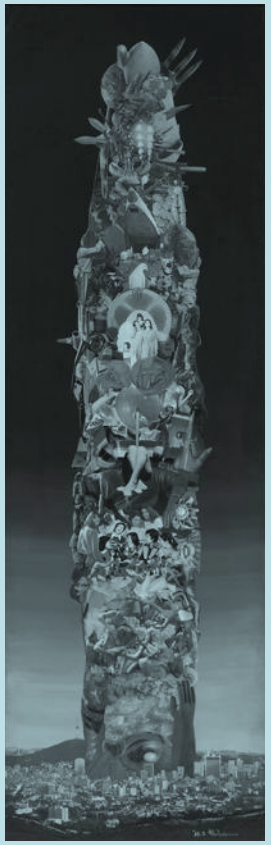

Fig. 2. Shin Hak-chul, “Modern Korean History: Seoul Pagoda”, 1984.

Here, Shin confronts everything that the figure in Oh's print has renounced, stacking up the dregs of consumer culture to form what reads as a phallic monument to the grotesque excesses of capitalism.

As suggested by the fact that both of these works were produced in the mid-1980s, the two aesthetic lines identified by Sung did not emerge in a neat succession, with one giving way to the other. In proceeding as if this were the case, however, Sung sought to forge a new direction for the Minjung Art movement wherein artists who remained committed to either of these two aesthetics would collaborate with each other and develop more dynamic ways of integrating art and activism. Even if inadvertently, this framework has the effect of pushing those artists identified as the torchbearers of the two purported “camps” of Minjung Art into the past, the implication being that their aesthetic strategies of choice had already been put to the test and found on some level inadequate. New forms would need to be developed in order to more effectively serve the political agenda of the democratization movement going forward.

The notion that Minjung Art had developed along a linear timeline began to fall apart in other impromptu forms of contextualization provided to non-Korean audiences. Such was the case when the *Los Angeles Times* art critic Laurie Ochoa witnessed a 1988 exhibition of Minjung prints titled “Woodcuts of Liberation,” which was held at the Social and Public Art Resource Center gallery in Venice, California. Upon her visit, Ochoa was given a casual tour of the space by Han Kyong Kim, who was at the time chair of the Los Angeles chapter of Young Koreans United, a pro-reunification organization. Acting as an unofficial docent, Kim led Ochoa through the gallery and singled out specific works that, at first, corresponded with the same chronological sequence of political events highlighted in the *Min Joong Art* catalogues. The Gwangju Uprising, as depicted in a print titled “Mourning of May,” served once again as a starting point. As Kim explained: “This is the event that sparked the *Minjoong* movement, the event that made us know that the government couldn't be moved.” It quickly became apparent to Ochoa, however, that many of the issues that Minjung artists confronted were far from reducible to specific events. They remained, in fact, ongoing dilemmas.

This became especially clear in the case of works addressing the issue of reunification with North Korea. One of the prints in the show, for example, depicted barbed wire signifying the division of the peninsula at the 38th parallel along with azaleas planted in the foreground. Kim explained that despite seeming like an innocuous icon on the surface, the image of the azalea had taken on strong associations with North Korea and, as a result, any depiction of the flower by Minjung artists might be met with severe penalties: “Azaleas grow everywhere in Korea—North and South. It's a wildflower···But when North Korea made azaleas its national flower, the flower was outlawed in the South. The simple act of painting a single azalea on a wall got its muralist arrested and the [painting] covered up."[15] Examples of such censorship were not limited to images invoking North Korea. Kim related that virtually all Minjung artists inevitably came face to face with authorities who habitually blocked the entrances to galleries where Minjung Art was set to be shown and confiscated the offending works. Seen from this standpoint, events such as the Gwangju Uprising might serve as useful points of reference, but they hardly provide any precise temporal ordering of Minjung Art, many instantiations of which bear on the multiple and continuing manifestations of national division and government oppression in South Korea.

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[9] While “Minjung” is now the most widely accepted Romanization of the Korean term, several texts and exhibitions from the late 1980s through the early 1990s spelled it “Min Joong” or “Minjoong.” Although potentially confusing, they all refer to the same term.

[10] Hyuk Um, “*Min Joong Art,” in Min Joong Art: New Movement of Political Art from Korea* (Toronto and New York: A Space and Minor Injury, 1987), n.p.

[11] Ibid.

[12] John Bentley Mays, “Korean Works Full of High Spirits, Sharp Ironies,” *Globe and Mail*, January 9, 1987.

[13] Christopher Hume, “Man's Roots Evident in Garden Photographs,” *Toronto Star*, January 16, 1987.

[14] Sung Wan-kyung, “Two Cultures, Two Horizons,” in *Min Joong Art: A New Cultural Movement from Korea* (New York: Artists Space, 1988), 9–18.

In the wake of the exhibitions of Minjung Art in Canada and the United States in the late 1980s, one of the most incisive critiques of the timeline as an interpretive scheme came in the form of a catalogue for a little known exhibition titled "In Search of a National Identity: The Min Joong Art Movement of Korea," which opened in 1991 at the State University of New York at Binghamton's University Art Museum. Curated by Jamie Park, then a student at the university, the exhibition seems to have contained primarily prints and photographs of ephemeral works, from banner paintings to clothing. In the exhibition's only catalogue essay, Park problematizes the movement's temporal mapping of identities. Throughout the 1980s, Park explains, the Minjung movement had regularly denounced the "old" identities prescribed by the South Korean state, which were invariably connected to "modernization, modernism, and anti-communism." Park underscores the misleading implications that accompany the qualifier "old," particularly in the context of celebratory rhetoric proclaiming Minjung culture as the foundation for a "new" national identity, as in the opening line of Um Hyuk's 1987 catalogue essay. In doing so, Park resists any claim to have surpassed the identities sanctioned by the South Korean state or to see them as having been eradicated with the democratization of the country. "These are not things of the past," Park writes, "but the effects of the discourses that are still present in modernist art practices, television programs, educational institutions, and consumer culture, as well as in governmental policies."[16] This argument would go largely unexplored throughout the early 1990s, however, when the logic of the timeline continued to prevail. This much is evidenced by the critical responses to "Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean Art and Korean-American Art," which opened at the Queens Museum in New York in 1993, running through the following year.

In her review of the Queens Museum exhibition, Eleanor Heartney cited a generational divide between Minjung artists comparable to that posited by Sung Wan-kyung in his essay for the Artists Space exhibition. Heartney noted that while "hard-core" Minjung artists leaned heavily on an aesthetic resembling Chinese socialist realism, younger artists incorporated a more capacious set of artistic strategies.[17] On the issue of contemporaneity, Heartney sensed that the Minjung Art movement had entered an "identity crisis" in the 1990s. After all, Kim Young-sam, a former democratic activist, had been elected president of South Korea in 1993, and on the global scale, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe significantly attenuated the political thrust that figurative realism had maintained in decades past. Heartney thus aligned the two camps of Minjung artists—the "hard-core" and the younger generation—with separate temporalities: "Classic examples, like Bong Joon Kim's cartoon-style representation of a 1989 street demonstration or Min Hwa Choi's folk-art-inspired representation of peasant guerillas in the 19th century, are joined by works which attempt to shift the discussion toward more contemporary issues such as Western consumerism and the oppression of women in Korean society. One also senses an effort to break away from the Socialist Realist-inspired esthetic."[18] Both form and content, in Heartney's account, work to align a given example of Minjung Art with either an increasingly distant past or with pressing contemporary concerns—virtually no overlap occurring between the two.

While the retrospective grammar that ran through the *Min Joong Art* catalogues and reviews like Heartney's might have stemmed from innocent intentions, the stakes involved in establishing temporal frameworks for art movements like Minjung came to the fore in a review of *Across the Pacific* published by Holland Cotter in the *New York Times.* In this text, alarm bells sound from the opening lines in which Cotter quotes the title of Gauguin's 1897 painting "Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going," asserting that "[a] century later, they are still being asked by non-Westerners whose lives have been changed—as the Tahitians were—by Western culture."[19] By this logic, the incursion of Western culture into South Korea, in part through American military presence following World War II, had awakened Korean artists and prompted them to grapple with the fundamental questions of life's meaning. Cotter's imagining here bears a disturbing resemblance to justifications of Japanese colonization of Korea on the grounds that Japan effectively brought the country into the modern age, the implication being that Korea could not have made such a leap on its own. For his part, Cotter does not even consider that the works on view in *Across the Pacific* might bear any relevance to the contemporary world. Rather, he consigns them to an exoticized past removed from any markers of historical time. To be sure, Cotter's review stands as an exceptionally distasteful account of Minjung Art, sliding into to the realm of cultural superiority, if not barefaced racism. But as such it underscores the importance of seeking out more critical and rigorous models of temporality through which to understand the movement. Several compelling examples have emerged as a result of exhibitions held since the mid-2000s.

"Mapping the Realities" in the Present Progressive

In 2005, the Kunsthalle Darmstadt hosted "The Battle of Visions," an exhibition co-curated by Beck Jee-sook of the Arts Council of Korea (ARKO) and the Kunsthalle's Peter Joch. This exhibition paired examples of Minjung Art from the 1980s with works by contemporary Korean artists such as the collective known as mixrice, who the curators saw as continuing in the politically critical vein emblematized by Minjung Art. If one were to turn straight to the exhibition's catalogue, they would find a seemingly intensified dependence on the model of the timeline as an anchoring principle. Indeed, the catalogue features an entire section titled "Chronology: Times of Minjung Art 1979–2000," which consists of a 24-page timeline that places documentary photographs and reproductions of Minjung artworks alongside blurbs describing major political and social events that had unfolded in South Korea year by year.[20] While the range of dates suggests that this timeline would show a continuation of Minjung Art long after its high points in the 1980s, representations of Minjung Art suddenly cut off in 1994, where the cover of the catalogue for the aforementioned exhibition "15 Years of Minjung Art: 1980-1994" appears, reiterating how this event was widely taken as marking the demise of the movement. From that point on, no images at all appear on the timeline, aside from two documentary images showing the collapse of the Sungsu Bridge and the Sampung Department Store in Seoul in 1994 and 1995 respectively. What initially appears as an exercise poised to disrupt the conventional dating system applied to Minjung Art in fact only reinscribes a well-rehearsed endpoint.

This portion of the catalogue, however, found itself at odds with the recursive model of temporality posited by the exhibition's curators. According to the press release, "The Battle of Visions" would mark a departure from the tendency to frame Minjung Art as a dated phenomenon, characterizing it instead as a movement "whose tense continues to be present-progressive." The works in the show were in turn cast as embodying "at once the continuation and the discontinuation of [Minjung Art] from the 1980s, the conclusion and a return to the 80s."[21]

Beck expanded on this thesis in an essay included in the catalogue, stating: "my interest starts from the sense and the hope that Minjung Art will not be relegated merely to the status of an artistic trend of a particular locality, or a cultural ideology of a defunct political moment, that Minjung Art still has and will continue to have significant influence on the practice of contemporary art."[22] Well aware of Minjung Art's contentious relation to art institutions, Beck goes on to remind readers that much of the work that Minjung artists produced in the 1980s was ephemeral. Many banner paintings, for instance, existed only for the duration of a given protest while prints were oftentimes distributed among local populations rather than preserved for posterity. The surviving canvases that have come to signify the whole of Minjung Art for museum audiences should thus be seen as only part of the phenomenon that was and is Minjung Art. For Beck, this perspective allows us to grasp the continuum between Minjung Art of the 1980s and contemporary art practices that share in the kind of political activism integral to Minjung Art, even if figurative realism no longer remains a dominant aesthetic. In this way, Beck writes, we might "decipher the legacy and the impact of Minjung Art that exists outside the 'canvases' of the surviving Minjung Art today, whether such a legacy and impact exists as a virtual shadow, a parallel circuit, or a transcendental witness."[23]

Beck's propositions offer an opportunity to rethink assumptions about Minjung Art's relation to the contemporary. That the GanaArt Collection provides an instructive set of works with which to undertake such an investigation was apparent upon the opening of the exhibition "Mapping the

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[15] Laurie Ochoa, "Exhibit Looks at Oppression in S. Korea," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 1988.

[16] Jamie Park, *In Search of a National Identity:* The Min Joong *Art Movement of Korea* (Binghamton: State University of New York at Binghamton, University Art Museum, 1991), n.p.

[17] Eleanor Heartney, "Hybrid Identities," *Art in America* 82 (September 1994): 47.

[18] Ibid., 49.

[19] Holland Cotter, "Korean Works Coming to Terms with the West," *New York Times*, December 10, 1993.

[20] "Chronology: Times of Minjung Art 1979–2000," in *The Battle of Visions* (Seoul: ARKO, 2005), 155–85.

[21] "The Battle of Visions," press release, October 5, 2005, accessed May 24, 2019, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/41810/the-battle-of-visions.

[22] Beck Jee-sook, "Minjung Art in the Year 2005, or the Year 2005 in Minjung Art," in *The Battle of Visions* (Seoul: ARKO, 2005), 117.

[23] Ibid., 128.

Realities" at SeMA in 2012. This exhibition utilized the museum's multiple floors to demonstrate a stark contrast between the abstraction and experimentalism of the 1970s and the realism of the 1980s. On the whole, the layout of the show assumed the form of a spatially constructed timeline. Audiences first moved through galleries exuding what the reviewer Joon Soh described as an ambience of "Modernist cool."[24] These galleries contrasted with the third floor spaces, which Soh warned might induce a "shock to the senses," as the Minjung works on view here expressed the "anger and frustration felt by Koreans through years of dictatorial rule, and their artistic and political efforts [which] helped to bring about profound democratic change."[25] An accompanying leaflet underscored this conventional bifurcated framework for understanding Korean art of the 1970s and 80s by including a timeline that stretches across six foldout pages.[26] The portion dedicated to Minjung Art begins with the formation of groups such as Reality and Utterance in 1980 and ends even earlier than most historical accounts of the movement, with the 1988 Olympics and the Min Joong Art exhibition at Artists Space serving as concluding episodes. It is no wonder, then, that reviewers read the exhibition's contents as belonging to and reflecting a particular historical moment, one emphatically divorced from the present. "A work of art is like us, in that it cannot avoid being a product of its times," wrote Soh, who left the exhibition convinced that the works provided "a poignant reflection of the historical realities of when and where they were made."[27]

Despite this overarching narrative, however, the display of Minjung Art in "Mapping the Realities" might be read against the grain, especially in light of the temporal framework put forth in "The Battle of Visions." Curated by Wooim Shim, the floor dedicated to Minjung Art was arranged not chronologically but according to five different "scenes." Here, the English term used in the exhibition materials evokes not a fixed positioning but rather a provisional process of constructing and staging. The following themes acted as a tentative ordering structure for the exhibition's contents: "Criticism and Political Art"; "Industrialization and Labor Issues"; "Consumer Society and Media"; "Capitalism and Human Alienation"; and "Traditional Values and Mass Production." Drawing largely from works in the GanaArt Collection, the exhibition's arrangement afforded an opportunity to think about discrete works outside of a chronological framework. What became apparent as a result was the fact that these conceptual "scenes" hardly remained exclusive to the context of the 1980s. If anything, the five areas across which the exhibition mapped Minjung Art have become even more amplified since the 1980s. Despite the exhibition's stated intention to "[shed] light on the spirit of Minjung Art and its art historical conclusion," the show had the effect of denying any sense of closure.

Any doubts as to Minjung Art's enduring capacity to set off debates in the contemporary political realm were put to rest one year after "Mapping the Realities" closed, when in November 2013 the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art opened its Seoul branch with a show titled "Zeitgeist Korea." Curated by Jong Yong-mok of Seoul National University, the inaugural exhibition drew from the museum's permanent collection with the intention of providing a new way of looking at the history of modern and contemporary South Korean art through lesser-known works that captured the "spirit" of specific historical moments. The newly constructed space marked an extension of the museum network that South Korea had erected in anticipation of the 1988 Olympics, when it aimed to secure a position on the cultural world stage. To mark the occasion, newly elected President Park Geun-hye planned to make an appearance at the opening ceremony. In advance of the event, Blue House authorities conducted a procedural walk-through of the site, at which time they flagged a handful of artworks that they deemed politically "awkward," requesting that these pieces be removed from the show so as not to cause embarrassment to the president.[28] Of those designated inappropriate, Minjung artist Lim Ok-sang's 1989 mixed media on plywood painting "To Become One" received the most media attention. The work depicts the Reverend Moon Ik-hwan leaping over barbed wire at the DMZ. Moon had travelled to Pyongyang in 1989 upon receiving an invitation from North Korea's Committee on the Peaceful Unification of the Fatherland. There he met with Kim Il-sung before returning to Seoul where he faced a prison sentence that ultimately lasted five years. Because Park Geun-hye had only recently assumed the presidency, her service agents intuited that their response to Lim's painting would be read as an indicator of her stance towards Pyongyang, and specifically whether or not she would continue the hard-lined approach of her predecessor Lee Myong-bak. Seeking to underscore her commitment to an aggressive policy on the North, Park's administration ultimately succeeded in having the work withdrawn from the exhibition. The kind of censorship that Han Kyong Kim had described to Laurie Ochoa during the 1988 "Woodcuts of Liberation" exhibition in California still had not subsided in contemporary South Korea.

How does all of this change the way we look at Minjung Art? One way of answering this question is to return to "Story of the Painting Scene in the 80s" and specifically the installation of the work that featured in Mapping the Realities. For the 2012 exhibition, the work was hung along the open walkway that links the two prominent gallery spaces of the museum's third floor. This installation ensured that visitors to the museum would see at least part of it from the ground level, such that it presaged the Minjung aesthetic to come following the display of abstraction and experimental art in the lower galleries. Given the inevitably steep sightline, the banner appeared to hover above the show's principle wall text, which was inscribed in Korean and English on panels just below the third floor. This text spelled out the exhibition's temporal focal points: "the 1970s, an apex of modernism, and the 1980s, a tumultuous period." And it proclaimed that the show would enable viewers to take stock of the various ways South Korean artists had conceived of art's connection to contemporary realities, "looking back on their approach to drawing the map of contemporary Korean art history." Situated directly above this proposal, "Story of the Painting Scene in the 80s" furnished a compelling counterpoint to the language of the wall text and its invocation of mapping by looking back historically. Despite literally mapping out a timeline of works produced by Reality and Utterance group members, and thereby prompting audiences to reflect back on that historical lineage, its positioning within the museum rendered unavailable any ideal viewing position from which to take in the full narrative. Viewed from the ground floor, only the upper half of the work could be seen, its lower half cut off by the wall text. And from the third floor, the installation of the work in a narrow walkway meant that viewers had to press their backs against the wall in order to even partially apprehend the chronological arc depicted. The work seemed appropriately out of place, demanding that viewers encounter it either from an obscured vantage point or from an uncomfortably close proximity. This caused audiences to cast their gazes every which way, opening onto possibilities of reading the Minjung works depicted in the banner as out of time with any prescribed chronology. However undesignedly, this presentation of "Story of the Painting Scene in the 80s," with its temporal bearings out of whack, serves as a useful metaphor. For it dramatizes the ways in which examples of Minjung Art refuse to stay put, resisting any mappings that would place them in strict correspondence with the sociopolitical circumstances in which they were produced. In the final analysis, Minjung artworks such as those comprising the GanaArt Collection do not merely reflect the story of the 1980s-they return as biographies of our present reality, and perhaps also as stories yet untold.

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[24] Joon Soh, "Exhibit Maps Out Modern Historical Realities," *Korea Times*, July 29, 2012.

[25] Ibid.

[26] "Mapping the Realities: Korean Art in the 1970s and 1980s Reviewed Through the SeMA Collection," exhibition leaflet (Seoul: Seoul Museum of Art, 2012).

[27] Soh, "Exhibit," op. cit.

[28] Lim Chong-ob, "Suspicion of External Pressure by Blue House to Exclude Certain Artworks Prior to the Opening of an Inaugural Exhibition at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art's Seoul Branch," *Hankyore,* November 15, 2013, accessed November 11, 2018, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/culture_general/611365.html.