

An Emerging Paradigm Derived from the Asian Biennials?

The Case Studies of the Mediacity Biennial (Seoul), the Busan Biennale (Busan), the Gwangju Biennale (Gwangju), and the Taipei Biennial (Taipei), 2014

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Abstract

The rise of biennials in Asia took place in the last century during two periods, the 1950s and the 1990s. The former is bracketed between the Tokyo Biennial and the Taipei Biennial, while the latter coincides with the emergence of several city-based biennials in South Korea. Since the appearance of biennials in Asia, their organizers have paid attention to the dynamics of colonialism and the treatment of modern and contemporary art as a tool of influence—political, economic, cultural, and artistic. While the 2014 biennials under investigation continue to show a preoccupation with politics, equally strong is their focus on the global issues concerning humanity, its past and its future. This keeps the biennials rooted in the local context and, at the same time, takes them away from directly addressing political concerns, which is particularly visible in the case of the biennials under the artistic directorship of guest curators from Europe. This author would argue that growing ambiguity about the nature of biennials in Asia springs from the fact that they heavily rely on the Western Enlightenment approach to art and culture, and because of that prevent a new paradigm to emerge.

Keywords: paradigm, Asian biennials, biennialization, biennialology, Enlightenment

“What is this world? A complex whole, subject to endless revolutions. All these revolutions show a continual tendency to destruction; a swift succession of beings who follow one another, press forward, and vanish; a fleeting symmetry; the order of a moment.”

—Denise Diderot

“The passions that incline men to peace are fear of death, desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living, and a hope by their industry to obtain them.”

—Thomas Hobbes

The word “paradigm,” which was *assigned* to me as the topic of my presentation at the Taipei Museum of Contemporary Art by the organizers,¹ has ancient roots,² but its modern use often harks back to its well-known application in Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962. In his book, Kuhn paired revolution and science as agents of progress in society by stating that “[s]uccessive transition from one paradigm to another via revolution is the usual developmental pattern of mature science.”³ Science, to achieve its maturity, must pass through three stages: “prescience,” “normal” (related to past achievements) and “revolutionary.” The latest stage can be achieved only when the second one reaches a state of crisis, which happens after a period of “paradigm-testing.”⁴

Reaching a state of crisis has been evoked over and over again in the discussions of contemporary art and culture, particularly when their relevance for the society at large is addressed. Crisis in art has often been analyzed in relation to the demise of the avant-garde in the late 1970s and the end of the history of art and of art itself.⁵ But nowadays discussions about contemporary art increasingly also tackle the subject of the growing

1 “An Emerging Paradigm Derived from the Asian Biennials,” presented at TFAM on October 18, 2014.

2 Late Latin *paradigma*, from Greek *paradeigma*, from *paradeiknynai* to show side by side, from *para-* + *deiknynai* to show.

3 “Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996, third edition), 12.

4 Kuhn viewed crisis as “the essential tension” implicit in scientific research.” *Ibid.*, 79. To develop his ideas, Kuhn relied on Gaston Bachelard notion of “coupure” or “rupture épistémologique,” as re-interpreted by Alexandre Koyré.

5 Among its canonical assessments is Hans Belting’s *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte ?* (1983), which was first read at a conference held at the Munich University in 1980; the book appeared in the English translation, under the title *The End of the History of Art?*, in 1987. See also, Arthur Danto, “The End of Art,” in *The Death of Art* (New York: Haven Publications, 1984), 5-35.

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institutionalization of art, including the “institution of critique,”⁶ which occurs in part due to the proliferation of biennials (and art fairs) around the world. What seems to be most problematic for many critics of the biennials is not their existence per se, but rather the fact that they usually present the same kind of art (often by the same group of artists), and that they are too often curated by an exclusive group of curators with strong ties to major art institutions. On the other hand, the proponents of the proliferation of the biennials see this expansion as a sign of the democratization of the international art scene, which, they believe, seriously benefits both artists and the public at large all around the world. And, there are also those who position themselves in the middle—and they are often the most directly involved with the biennials. For example, the artistic director of the forthcoming Venice Biennale, Okwui Enwezor has stated: “The biennial is an exhibition structure beyond itself, an event that allows for very different subject matter. Its function, as defined by planners and curators, is to add intellectual capital, to think about the relationship between the past and present and to experiment with truths.”⁷

Several successive “waves of biennialization” have been identified, helping to break down their developments into periods. The first of these covers the time from the first Venice Biennale in 1895 (and the Carnegie International in Pittsburg in 1896) roughly until the 1950s; the second runs from the 1950’s to the 1980s; and the third from the 1990s on.⁸ As new biennials rapidly emerge around the world, their *raison d’être* and content generates growing scrutiny, producing a literature on the subject that has been provocatively (and semi-humorously?) categorized as a field of “biennialogy.”⁹ Because of the relatively short existence of this field of inquiry, more questions are asked than

6 On this subject, see Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum* 44. 1 (2005), 278-283.

7 Quoted from, Carolee Thea, *On Curating: Interviews with Ten International Curators* (New York: D.A.P, 2009), 10. The fact that Enwezor chose the words “intellectual capital,” instead of, for instance, “artistic output,” might speak for itself: the biennials have become about the ideas first, and to fit artworks must *represent* them. The ambiguity of statements by the curators who are both critics and makers of the biennials is already reflected in Enwezor’s “Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form,” often quoted as the landmark text on the subject. *MJ - Manifesta Journal* 2 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004), 6-31.

8 See for example, Anthony Gardner’s periodization: “[There are] three (maybe even four) waves of biennialization that have emerged since the development of the Venice Biennale in 1895. This would comprise a first wave in the late 19th century, a second in the 1950s to the mid 1980s, a third from the early 1990s on, and if there is indeed a fourth, then it is only in recent years as biennales have supposedly begun to decline and become discursive, have reflected on their own conditions, as they age.” <http://culturalpolicyreform.wordpress.com/2011/01/09/an-interview-with-anthony-gardner-about-biennales/>

9 A name given by the editors of *The Biennial Reader*, Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø, published by Bergen Kunsthall in 2010.

answers provided. What is a biennial? Or, what is it that a biennial is not? What should biennials' proper function be? How do they enrich the contemporary art scene internationally and, especially, locally? Should "gentrification"—a word often mentioned in relation to the spread of biennials—be considered a dirty word? Are there "biennials without borders"? (asked rhetorically), and finally, must biennials of Asian art take place in Asia? This last question brings me to the subject of the latest biennials in Asia, or to be more specific, in East Asia, which is the focus of this article.¹⁰

The emergence of biennials in East Asia coincides with the two latter periods of the history of biennials outlined above, that is, from the 1950s on. At that time, the event that initiated the "biennialization" of contemporary art, the Venice Biennale—"a map within a map," as Artur Danto called it¹¹—played a major role in the way Asian art was perceived and received internationally. That first stage might be bracketed between the Tokyo Biennale and the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art.¹² The Tokyo Biennale was launched in 1952, the same year that Japan made its official debut at the Venice Biennale.¹³ The appearance of Japanese art on the international stage occurred a year after the country signed the San Francisco Treaty, ending official occupation by the United States, but obviously not the American military presence on the islands. The Taipei Biennial grew from two cyclical exhibitions of modern and contemporary art organized between 1984 and 1991, "Contemporary Art trends in the Republic of China" and "An Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture in the Republic of China" hosted by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM). In 1998 the Taipei Biennial became an international event. Between 1995 and 2000, TFAM organized the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

10 My visit of the biennials in question coincided with the XLVII AICA International Congress in South Korea (Seoul and Suwon), and the post-Congress in Busan, Gwangju, and Taipei, in mid-October this year.

11 Arthur Danto, "Mapping the Art World," in *Africus: Johannesburg Biennale*, (20 February - 30 April 1995), exh. cat. 24-27.

12 It is important to note that the first "Asian Biennial" in the 1980s was the Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh launched in 1981. While thinking about the pioneering roles of different biennials, it might be worth noting that the itinerant biennales in Europe, such as "Manifesta," have their predecessor, the Biennial of Arab Art, which began in Baghdad in 1974 and continued in Morocco and Jordan. In the 1990s, prior to the biennials in Korea, the first Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT1) was held in Brisbane, Australia, in 1993.

13 After eighteen editions, the Tokyo Biennale ceased to exist in 1990, which coincided with the collapse of the Japanese economy. The Fukuoka Triennale was launched in 1999, and the Yokohama Triennial in 2002. For the history of Japan's participation, see *The Venice Biennale: 40 Years of Japanese Participation*, ed. Harumi Miwa, transl. Stanley N. Anderson, (Tokyo: Kokusai Kōryū Kikin, 1995). It might be important to note here that Germany, another country that was defeated during the Second World War, established its own art event, Documenta, in 1955, and immediately established close ties with the United States and Western Europe through selecting many artists from those regions to participate.

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as a national pavilion under the country name the Republic of China. However, by 1997 China had started to exercise pressure over the participation of Taiwan as the “Republic of China,” while organizing their own biennials,¹⁴ which subsequently led to the stripping of Taiwan of its national status by the organizers of the event in Italy. This brief recollection of the history of the emergence of those two pioneering “Asian biennials” points to one great similarity between them, that is, their dependence on external forces. Hence, in both cases, their existence (and ultimate fate) must be examined in relation to the foreign policies (which include their use of contemporary art as a tool of influence) of the countries that have had the most direct impact on the sovereignty of Japan and Taiwan—the United States and China, respectively.¹⁵

The second stage of the development of biennials in Asia has been identified with the emergence of the biennials in South Korea in the 1990s, at the time when that country became an economic power on a global scale, which led the critic John Clark to describe these expositions as functioning “in a transnational way that transcended the national/international dichotomy.”¹⁶ But, here again the political aspects of the emergence of biennials in South Korea must be stressed, and here again, they concern both domestic and foreign affairs.¹⁷ Although this subject requires further investigation, what I would

14 The Shanghai Biennial was launched in 1996 and the Beijing International Art Biennale in 2003.

15 John Clark argues against this position by stating: “it would be premature to attribute all of the phenomena of new ‘international’ biennials and their relations with ‘local’ art worlds to ‘globalism,’ or to link these phenomena to changes in inter-state relations or to the nature of the state unit itself in order to understand international relations. There are far too many art- and art-institution-specific phenomena in play at biennials to make such a theory-down approach sensible.” John Clark, “Biennials as Structures for the Writing of Art History: The Asian Perspective,” in *The Biennial Reader*, 174. However, my very limited exposure to recent biennials around the world, including those in Asia, shows the growing awareness of the national governments and the business communities they represent of the power of contemporary art and art events, such as biennials, on the image of a given country. That position seems to be backed up by the recent controversies prior to the 2014 biennials in South Korea that resulted in several resignations. For a discussion of some past biennials in Asia see also, Marian Pastor Roces, “Cristal Palace Exhibitions (2005),” in *The Biennial Reader*, 50-65; and Richard Vine, “Asian Futures,” *Art in America* 86. 7 (1998), 34-41.

16 Clark, “Biennials as Structures for the Writing of Art History: The Asian Perspective,” 165. South Korea has participated in the Venice Biennale since 1995.

17 In fact, the history of the biennials in South Korea and Korean participation in the international art events has been increasingly linked to the key political events in this country that reach back to the late 1950s. In *Voyage to Biennale—50 years of Korean Contemporary Art in Overseas Biennales*, which accompanied the exhibitions with the same title, curated by Gunsoo Lee, Lee Ken Shu traces the beginning of the Korean participation in the international biennials to the 5th International Biennial of Contemporary Color Lithography at the Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1958 and the IIe Biennale de Paris at the musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1961. To put the artistic transformations into a broader context, Lee Ken Shu mentions a popular uprising led by labor and student groups in April 1960, known as the April 19 Revolution; the 16 May 1961 military coup d’état; and the October Yushin, or October Restoration, which led to the restoration of the dictatorial powers in 1972. Lee Ken Shu, “Meta-Biennale, Restructure of Biennale,” in *Voyage to Biennale—50 years of Korean Contemporary Art in Overseas Biennales*, exh. cat. (Busan: Busan Biennale Organizing Committee, 2014), 8.

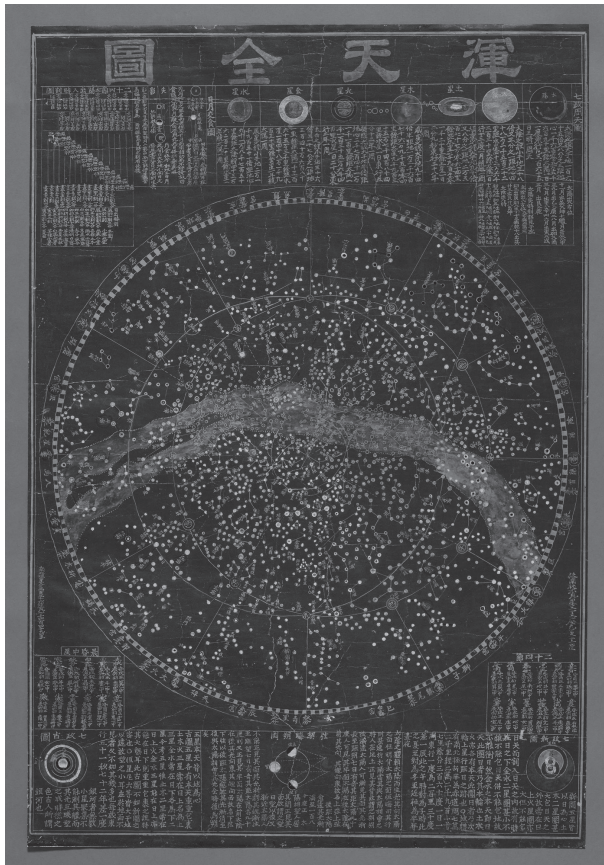


Fig. 1 *The Complete Map of the Celestial Sphere* (Unknown), 19th century, traditional paper, replica, 86.7×59 cm © SeMA Biennale MediaCity 2014

like to underline here is the fact that the birth of those mega-art events coincided with the ending of the Cold War, which, as recent military escalations, particularly in the Ukraine, show, turns out to have been short-lived. And, in the case of South Korea, it did not lead to the unification of the country with its communist counterpart in the North, as happened with Germany.

The connection between the surge of biennials in South Korea and the country's political turmoil has been implied particularly strongly in the founding program of the Gwangju Biennale, established in 1995, by linking the place to the civil uprising of 1980 in reaction to the repression of the Gwangju Democratization Movement (also known as Gwangju Uprising).¹⁸ Enhanced political awareness in relation to the tumultuous history

18 The birth of the Gwangju Democratization Movement is linked to the students demonstrations against the military rule that took place on May 18, 1980, which led to a bloody confrontation with the police that left some 200 people dead and many injured.

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Fig. 2 Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *The Ozymandias Parade*, 1985, mixed media tableau 386.1 x 886.5 x 457.2 cm
Photo Marek Bartelik

of Korea has become, in fact, an important factor for the other two Korean biennials under investigation as well, the Busan Biennale and the Seoul International Media Art Biennale (or the Mediacity Seoul), although their connections to politics have been spelled out much less programmatically than in the case of the Gwangju Biennale. This year's SeMa Biennale Mediacity Seoul is a good example. (It is important to mention that this is the only biennial in South Korea this year under the artistic directorship of a local curator, the filmmaker and artist, Park Chan-Kyong.¹⁹) The event carries an evocative title, "Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers," and, as the biennial's website explains, takes "Asia" as its main theme. But, this is an Asia steeped in tragic, divisive history, the impact

19 In 1995, Park Chan-Kyong graduated from the MFA Program in Photography at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. He has the artistic connections outside of Asia, especially in Germany.

of which continues to be felt today all around the continent.²⁰ Paradoxically, this most “Asian” of biennials in terms of its subject matter turned out to be the most involved with “intellectual capital,” in large part because of the heavy representation of works in the medium of video, many quite didactic, which inspired one critic to speak about a “lack of reckoning of knowledge in our vision.”²¹

This observation brings me to the subject of the curatorship of biennials and its overriding model, which seems to me quite similar regardless of the nationality or cultural alliance of any particular artistic director. In fact, the lack of, or limited, criticality toward the reliance on the conceptual lingua franca as a theoretical superstructure, or *the* text, as practiced in the West, in this year’s “Asian biennials” might constitute their major weakness. One might argue that, when adopted by the local curators, it reveals a fundamental gap: the historical absence of the first stage of development of biennials between the late 19th century and the 1950s in Asia, which reflects the dynamics of colonialism and its sudden treatment of modern and contemporary art as a tool of influence—political, economic, cultural, and artistic. Subsequently, the fading of Western influences in Asia, or, more accurately, the growing presence of modern and contemporary art and cultures with national and regional ambitions, doesn’t produce a new “paradigm”; in fact, it mostly reveals the absence of the foundations that make biennials what they *are*: enlightenment projects par excellence, not devoid of their own peculiarities and contradictions.²²

This point has been emphasized by, among others, Caroline A. Jones who has argued: “But if they [Biennials] are marked by this original episteme [the biennial is an

20 “The continent of Asia has shared experiences of intense colonization, the Cold War, rapid economic growth and social change in a short period of time, but rarely were there any exhibitions that took this theme as their main subject.”²⁰ Hence, through the keywords of ‘Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers,’ this exhibition will look back on contemporary Asia.” The “ghosts” embody the “forgotten history and traditions of Asia,” the “spies”—“the memories of the Cold War,” and “grandmothers”—the presence of woman in the society and their impact on the passing of time. <http://mediacityseoul.kr/2014/en/introduction/2014theme/ghost-spy-grandmother/>

21 In the context of the biennials under the investigation here, Jean-Louis Poitevin presents it as a stimulating phenomenon, referring to the writings of Vilém Flusser is evoked by in his paper delivered during a conference in Busan: “In the chapter entitled ‘Moon’ from his book ‘Essays on nature and culture’ he [Flusser] brings up the fact that the moon has become a satellite belonging to NASA whereas we still see in it ‘a natural satellite of the earth’: my vision doesn’t take my knowledge into account. This lack of reckoning of knowledge in our vision is a feature of certain situations called ‘crisis.’” Transcripts of papers presented in conjunction with the Busan Biennial, n.p.

22 For a discussion of the Enlightenment in Asia see, J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* (Abington and New York: Routledge, 1997).

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enlightenment project that secures a kind of nationalism in the very act of transcending it] the biennials of the world are no longer dominated by the Euro-American vision of enlightenment. Indeed an invocation of ‘enlightenment’ may seem perverse when we consider the recent proliferation of the exhibitionary form in part-state systems (China) or autocracies (United Arab Emirates).²³ Despite, or because of, the fact that the selections of works featured in the East Asian biennials under investigation recall for me Foucault’s “Chinese encyclopedia” (a “non-Cartesian epistemology”) at best, and some kind of new Esperanto at worse, the spirit of enlightenment, as the expression of universal order and philosophy, seems to pervade them. This might be particularly evident in the statements of the Korean curators in conjunction with the Busan Biennale. “[B]iennale is a book... Thus, biennale is not a subject to seeing but to reading,” wrote Lee Ken Shu in his text in “Voyage to Biennale—50 years of Contemporary Art in Overseas Biennales.”²⁴ But the reliance on the overriding concept was understandably visible in the two biennials under the artistic directorship of two Frenchmen: Olivier Kaepelin (Director of Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul de Vence, France), who curated the Busan Biennial; and Nicolas Bourriaud (Director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris), who curated the Taipei Biennial. The former event carried the title “Inhabiting the World”; the later—“The Great Acceleration: Art in the Anthropocene.”²⁵ Both stress the impact of technology and science on our lives, while privileging—to put it simply—“idea” over “form.” But Bourriaud’s take on these themes seemed more visually coherent, at least in terms of his vision of what amounts to an engaging aesthetic experience, whereas Kaepelin’s “vision”²⁶ was much more conventional. Jessica Morgan, who served as the artistic director of the Gwangju Biennale, also produced a coherent and highly engaging visual experience, but her written

23 Caroline A. Jones, “Biennial Culture: A Longer History,” in *The Biennial Reader*, 76. In the same book, John Clark connects the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment to “the developing educational and ideological structures of the modern state.” 174

24 *Voyage to Biennale—50 years of Korean Contemporary Art in Overseas Biennales*, exh. cat. (Busan: Busan Biennale Organizing Committee, 2014), 9.

25 As Bourriaud explains in a brochure accompanying the exhibition: “this exhibition is organized around the cohabitation of humans with swarming animals, data processing, the rapid growth of plants and the slow movements of matter. It presents a world before human consciousness, mineral landscapes, vegetable transplants or couplings between humans, machines, and animals.” Quoted from, http://www.taipeibiennial2014.org/images/press/Taipei_Biennial_2014_Guide_Book_en.pdf

26 He has explained: “The artworks are not that ‘optimistic,’ but they will not express disenchantment with the world even in one ephemeral moment. Artworks are complex. As they will develop questions about the universe, bestiality, architecture, and war..., they will call visitors’ attention to the idea of “inhabiting the world” from a different perspective. Residing in the world ‘poetically’ is a kind of residential mode. That is one kind of position that can be taken under the basic premise of residence.” Quoted from <http://artmu.mmca.go.kr/user/sub/engView.do?contentsNo=516&magazine=201409>



Fig. 3 Gilles Barbier, *Man Still*, 2013, Mixed media (resin, oil paint, plastic plants, etc.) 157.5×141×114cm © Busan Biennale 2014

statements contain overloaded and vague statements.²⁷ In all three cases, the theoretical base determined the artistic content, and it seemed to be highly *logical*.

So was there anything particularly “Asian” about the biennials in question? Perhaps returning to Jones’ argument might offer a partial answer to this question, as it points to the sources of nationalism as an “internal affair” with a mission to reinforce nationalism by pretending to “transcend” it, or perhaps making it acceptable within, while adapting it to the current world, including the art world. In fact such nationalism as exercised in connection to the Asian biennials is both an internal and an external affair, and a Janus-like phenomenon overall. In consequence, more and more curators (and artists) search for grounding their practice local contexts while they continue to rely on the strong

27 Here is what she wrote in the opening line in her Introduction: “*Burning Down the House* explores the process of conflagration and transformation, a cycle of obliteration and renewal evident in aesthetics, historical events, and in increasingly rapid exchange of redundancy and renewal in commercial culture.” *Burning Down the House: Gwangju Biennale 2014, Exhibition Guide*, 8.

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Fig. 4 Po-Chih Huang, *Production Line – Made in China & Made in Taiwan*,
Photo Marek Bartelik

intellectual presence of Westerners, who, in return, continue to propagate the Euro-American vision of enlightenment.²⁸

To conclude by returning to the theme of my presentation assigned to me: to change or even challenge the emerging paradigm from the Asian biennials as it still remains at a “paradigm-testing” stage may require breaking the connection with the principles of enlightenment first, as it continues to define the philosophy of curating, exhibiting, and participating in the biennials around the world.²⁹ It may also require a new “biennialogy.” Otherwise, our discussion risks staying on the level of supporting and perpetuating “normal science” for quite a while.

28 There are significant cultural and historic differences between the approach to the Enlightenment in Taiwan and South Korea. However, today the nationalists in both countries seem to me use European Enlightenment as a form of “philosophical shield” against Communism, the main ideological doctrines in China and North Korea.

29 A further discussion of the transformations of the biennials in Asia might be put in the context of Michel Foucault’s use of the term *episteme*, or Judith Butler’s take on “speech-act theory.” However, considering how much their ideas are rooted in Western discourse, it might still be “wrong” direction to follow and apply to the case of biennials in Asia.

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