

The Significance of Biennales, Roles and Influences

Focus on Cheongju International Craft Biennale (CICB)

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Toward the latter part of the twentieth century, there were rapid changes taking place in the outlook on the world in terms of presenting art. Different cultures began to focus on globalization, with increased interest in promoting local culture through a broadened perspective, namely the co-existence of both local and global identities. With transitions taking place in art after modernism, exhibitions began to take on a different character. Evidently the [Venice Biennale](#) in Italy and [Kassel Documenta](#) in Germany have been influential in enhancing such phenomenon. Exhibitions no longer remained solely in white cube environments but rather they were becoming more site-specific, with many experimentations taking place. In the modern and contemporary art scene Harald Szeemann is said to have been largely responsible for changes in the paradigm of exhibitions, bringing more spotlight to the person in charge of artistic directions rather than institutions and even artists. After the 1970s exhibitions changed considerably in terms of structure, many were organized in alternative spaces such as palaces, hospitals, parks, historical sites and more. The root of such phenomenon is clearly proven today as exhibitions take place in almost any type of space. Furthermore, the global outlook in our lives brought about the need for organizing bi-annual art events. After the 1990s, about 20 or more biennales developed around the world, with Gwangju being one followed by Shanghai, Florence, Berlin, Yokohama, Singapore and more. According to Pascal Gielen, globalization saw the increase in biennales because they are a kind of a neo-liberal urban marketing strategy. The notion of art criticism and strict boundary in terms of exhibiting art soon changed to take on a more socio-political outlook.

Although nothing in Korea advanced in full consciousness, it too followed the global trend. By the beginning of the new millennium the country already had more than ten different bi-annual events. Among them Gwangju was the first to be established as an event focusing on contemporary art in a city that centered around the fight for Korean democracy - the Gwangju Massacre which happened during the military dictatorship of 1980. This was then followed by the [Cheongju International Craft Biennale](#) in 1999 and then the [Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale](#) in 2001. Like many of the international bi-annual events Korea too wanted something that could promote culture around the entire country simultaneously as attracting international attention. The country aspired for its bi-annual events to become something similar to the [Venice Biennale](#), hoping desperately to gain international recognition. The government believed that introducing bi-annual events was an effective way of boosting the nation's economy through culture and tourism. By the end of the 1990s, policies in Korea were set up by the central government for regional governments to think of ways to promote its own regions. Therefore they began to investigate on effective ways to promote culture at the same time as increasing the economical status.

This study aims to examine the significance of the [Cheongju International Craft Biennale](#), its role and influence, based on the experience gained with the 2015 event. The study looks at the structure of the organization, the themes and also the objectives behind the event. To conclude the study endeavored to analyze the international status of the [Cheongju International Craft Biennale](#).

The Choice of Location: Why Cheongju

According to government assessments on choosing the location, it states that Cheongju is located 128 km south-east of the capital city Seoul. It takes just over two hours to drive to Cheongju from Seoul therefore it is a connecting point between the different provinces of Korea. Since the ancient times the area has been known for its iron culture which brought about the development of the moveable metal printing method (Cheongju is famous for this and it is said to have lead the printing culture in the ancient times). Nearby there are also many historical kiln sites and paper making plants. To add to this, Korea's oldest ceramic manufacturing company is located in Cheongju – Hankook Chinaware. Taking all these aspects into consideration, the government of Chungbuk Province decided to focus on craft. Although there does not exist a direct link to the field the potential for development seemed to have been enough for craft to root down in this city. As a result, since the 1990s, many artists have decided to set up studios in and around Cheongju with internationally renowned ceramicists such as Kanghyo Lee, Seunghee Lee and Eunbum Lee working there.

The Objective behind the Cheongju International Craft Biennale

The Cheongju International Craft Biennale was first established in 1999 by the Chungbuk Province and the City of Cheongju. The introduction of this large scale craft event had three main objectives with the first being, the cultivation of art and culture, with the hope of developing cultural businesses at the same time as introducing Korean craft to the world. The second looked into promoting tourism. Outside of Seoul, tourism remained inactive with the exception of few historically or naturally well known sites around the country. Therefore the central government wanted to find measures to attract tourism in all parts of the country. Introducing the biennale was a means to attract tourism and people. The third relates to local craft communities and finding ways to boost this industry (Lee 2012).

With all these three aspects in mind, the establishment of the biennale was to implement new social and cultural changes at the same time as elevating the living standards of the population living in and around Cheongju. By including the word “international” the event was more than a local one. A global outlook was and is important.

The Organizational Structure of the Cheongju International Craft Biennale

The event operates every two years taking place in the odd number years. Since it was first founded in 1999, seventeen years have passed with nine biennales taking place. The main organizing body is the Cheongju Cultural Industry Promotion Foundation and the administrative head is the mayor of Cheongju city. The actual working head of the organization is the secretary general who works with the main working body - government affiliated officials. In total there are about 50 staff members. Until recently there were no in-house curators or specialists in the different aspects of operating the event but after 2015, the foundation felt the need to hire in-house curators and specialists. When the biennale does not take place, the foundation organizes craft fairs, small exhibitions and other events mostly to promote the craft makers of the region.

In actuality, with the help of the main working body namely the foundation, the biennale is operated by a temporary body of specialists. Each time it takes place, the foundation selects a group of specialists to form a temporary organizing committee to choose the art director and the theme. Once the two have been decided, the art director forms his or her own team (lasting usually for about a year). Once the biennale terminates, the committee is disassembled together with the art director and his or her own team. Only the foundation staff remains to assess and report the outcome of each biennale.

The Effect of the Cheongju International Craft Biennale

As mentioned earlier, the Cheongju International Craft Biennale has already held nine events and in 2017 it will celebrate its tenth anniversary. Until now the event has undergone many changes constantly finding ways of continuing the momentum. The first ever biennale was a feast for the Chungbuk region inviting all craft related specialists not only from the province but also from the entire nation. The biennale generally comprises of exhibitions – main exhibition, special exhibition – together with the international craft competition, academic symposiums, demonstration-workshops, craft fair, venues for children and recently art fairs. Each time the biennale takes place, it is assessed carefully taking into consideration successes and failures in order to prepare for following ones. The first two events took on similar characters, taking into account the requirements of the region more than anything else.

The budget for the two were the largest ever with a sum of about 10 billion Korean Won. Since then it has been reduced to 7 billion Korean Won with 2017 seeing a further decrease. The event is funded by the Cheongju City, Chungbuk Province, the central government of Korea and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. The budget is divided so that it is spent on recruiting specialists, committee members (both national and international body of specialists), exhibitions, international competition prize money, academic symposiums, workshops and also largely on maintenance.

Until 2011, the event took place in the heart of Cheongju city at the Arts Complex. This changed in 2011 with Joonmo Chung appointed as the art director. He initiated the change of location from the Cheongju Arts Complex to the old tobacco processing plant that was left empty since the turn of the millennium. This 5 storey plant was built in the middle of the 1940s and it was in operation until 2002. The building was to become part of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Korea to be used as storage space for its collection. Joonmo Chung who served as curator at the museum was able to convince Cheongju City to host the biennale in this particular location. This proved to be effective as the space itself is attractive. In reality the space is huge (4, 900 square meters as exhibition space only) for exhibiting craft works however it offers challenge to anyone working on the project, suggesting new ways of exhibiting.

Although Joonmo Chung was effective in giving the biennale a different look by changing the exhibition space, he pushed his boundaries to the limit and since then the single-handed position of creative director changed to art director, hiring more than one in order to spread responsibilities. As a result the 2013 biennale suffered, two art directors were hired instead of one. The regional government felt threatened by a single outsider dominating the entire event. The 2013 biennale was organized by two directors – one, Japanese and one Korean. Communication between the two proved to be disastrous. The 2015 biennale was no exception. Instead of two this time the foundation wanted three, one for the façade of the building additionally as introducing a video-media effect of some sort, the other was to take care of the main exhibition which is the core of the biennale together with the conference, and the third was responsible for giving the event an attraction, namely a brand name as such. The third was absent for the most part which made communication between the three directors impossible.

Over the years, art directors who were hired for organizing the biennale came from either modern-contemporary art training or from art history. The 2015 biennale was the first to hire an art director with training in materials (ceramics major). The background of art directors made a difference in the nature of exhibitions. Those who came from either an art history or contemporary art training selected works that were no different from contemporary art, taking on the characteristics of installations. Many were conceptual and difficult to understand. It is important to take into consideration that people living outside of Seoul, although this is a generalized point of view, are not as sophisticated nor as educated as those living in the capital city. It has always been the dilemma of Cheongju to introduce works that could relate to the audience. Until 2015, many of the general public who visited stated that the works on show were too difficult to understand, much of it being previously introduced in art museums or commercial galleries around the country.

Therefore the focus for the 2015 main exhibition had to remain true to craft, concentrating on material at the same time as suggesting a future outlook - craft is no longer what it used to be – the age of digitalization. Also the academic symposium had to take on a different approach as Korean people nowadays do not have the patience to attend or listen to lectures.

Until now Cheongju has taken on many different approaches because attracting visitors is the most difficult task confronted by the event. All cultural venues in Korea take place in Seoul or Busan (the two largest cities in Korea), therefore anything taking place in regional locations attract less people. Fortunately Cheongju has built a following, particularly among those studying craft. However the number is considerably low. Each time it takes place the foundation is responsible for securing a minimum of 150, 000 people. Therefore in order to secure this number, promotion of the event is crucial. Quite a large sum of money is spent on advertisements on TV and daily newspaper and of course the internet. The 2015 event saw a recording breaking number of some 310, 000 people even with the MERS epidemic.

Naturally Cheongju is always finding ways to promote the event by using different strategies. In 2015 Alain de Botton, Korea's most loved writer was invited as art director in charge of combining craft with philosophical thoughts. Although the outcome of the exhibition was not as effective as expected, in terms of publicity, Cheongju achieved huge success. The international craft competition was the worst among all that took place until now as the announcement for the event was left too late to attract enough applicants. One of the drawbacks of the biennale is that everything is given insufficient time for preparation. There was less than six months to research on past biennales in order to organize and plan the main exhibition.

Concluding Comment

The Cheongju International Craft Biennale is definitely the largest of its kind in the field of craft. However I have yet to question whether it is entirely an international event as the people in charge of organizing it seem more focused on internal issues. The situation is a complex one as it has to embrace the needs of Korea at the same time as remaining aligned with international trends. Evidently international artists and specialists look toward the biennale to set new paradigms. The core of the matter lies in educating the government affiliated officials. It is important for them to realize that the biennale has developed to secure an important position in contemporary craft worldwide. Then there is the rift between different types of makers, a universal phenomenon – there are the intangible cultural treasures, cultural assets with rare skills, college educated makers and more. All are concerned with their means of making a living. Therefore any opportunity to exhibit work is a way of demanding money. All these are areas of friction further aggravated by art associations, craft groups and more. The reaction is a natural one as craft events are few and with any given chance they have to succumb to their reality. The 2015 biennale, attempted to remain true to the global nature of the event, at the same time as implementing new changes by connecting it with international organizations such as the craft council of the UK and the Making Futures conference organized bi-annually by Plymouth College of Art again in the UK. I sincerely hope ties that are established by myself and predecessors can continue into the future for further advancement, as it is crucial for the Cheongju International Craft Biennale to root its mark in the field of contemporary craft.

I am not certain how it will change in the future but one thing that is clear is that it has taken seventeen years to set the foundation for what it is today and perhaps another ten years to truly develop a craft community embracing all the different types. There is much potential for development with craft and the government has been effective in continuously funding the event to establish a strong industry promoting Korean craft at the same time as leading the craft world internationally.

Bibliography

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Harald Szeemann was a Swiss curator, artist and art historian who is said to have curated more than 200 exhibitions, many of which have been groundbreaking. Szeemann is known to have redefined the role of an art curator.

Pascal Gielen, professor of cultural sociology, Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA). His research is mainly on cultural politics and the institutional context of the arts.