

Park, Jaeyong, 10 Standout Artists at the 14th Gwangju Biennale, artsy, 24 April 2023

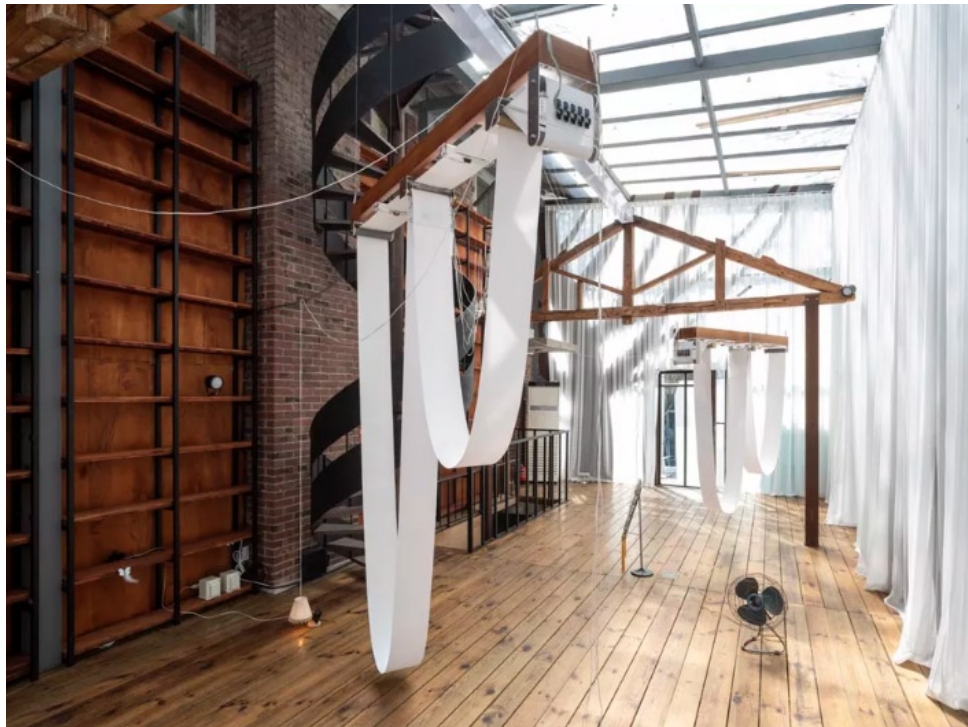


Art

10 Standout Artists at the 14th Gwangju Biennale

Jaeyong Park

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Yuko Mohri, installation view of *I/O*, 2011–23, in “soft and weak like water” at the 14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023. Courtesy of the Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

As a recurring art event, the Gwangju Biennale carries a heavy burden: to deal with the legacy and trauma of the democratic uprising and the massacre that followed in the city in May 1980, a recent historical event that has not reached its closure. Indeed, only a week before the opening, a grandson of the now-deceased South Korean dictator paid an unexpected visit to Gwangju, a city 270 kilometers away from the country's capital. He flew in from the United States to confess the wrongdoings of his family and apologize to the victims of the massacre in public, stirring the citizens of Gwangju to reflect on their memories of the incident.

Indeed, the Gwangju Biennale was inaugurated in 1995 under the country's first democratically elected president after decades of military dictatorship, as a way to commemorate the event. This year's artistic director, Sook-kyung Lee, who also serves as the senior curator of international art at Tate Modern, said that she also wanted the participating artists to “understand where the biennial came from” and not to “touch upon very slightly or on the surface” of the issue of direct actions's importance for liberation movements.

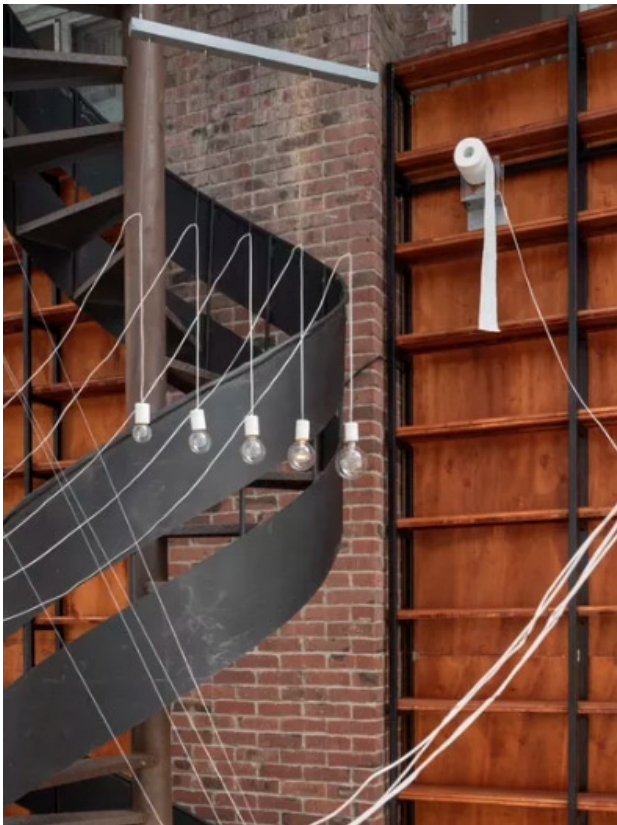
The 14th iteration of the Gwangju Biennale, “soft and weak like water,” borrows its title from a line in *Tao Te Ching* with an emphasis on the water's capacity to permeate seemingly impenetrable things. The exhibition, which comprises the main exhibition hall building, four satellite venues, and nine additional national pavilions, proposes a planetary yet local perspective on what art means in our time of automated and enhanced bias, division, and conflict. With 79 artists and collectives from predominantly non-Western or Global South countries, this year's biennial offers in part a view of artistic practices that have been disregarded by a Western, Eurocentric perspective.

As such, one might consider “soft and weak like water” as an exhibition that fulfills its title both in positive

and negative ways. But true to its reference to a Taoist classic *Tao Te Jing*, the biennial nudges the viewers to expand their view of today's world, by juxtaposing practices of so-called "indigenous" origin with a mediated reflection on the sufferings that took place in its host city, Gwangju.

Here are some of the artists from this year's Gwangju Biennale who deal with the complexities of different histories through artistic practice and speak to the conditions of our time.

Yuko Mohri



Yuko Mohri, installation view of *I/O*, 2011–23, in "soft and weak like water" at the 14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023. Courtesy of the Gwangju Biennale Foundation.



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Inspired by Han Kang's novel *The White Book*, at the Gwangju Biennale, Yuko Mohri restages her installation *I/O* (2011–23). The work represents a responsive, organic ecosystem, made up of objects collected in Gwangju that "reads" the environment of the exhibition space as musical score. For Mohri, Han Kang's novel allowed her to access stories of oppressed people that have been previously lost. The novel is not necessarily a coherent narrative depicting a particular historical event. Rather, it is a fragmentary, poetic meditation on life and death and the past and the present.

I/O, she said, narrates a "tone of history that was never written before" without words, but by animating objects, using the sound they generate, and reverberation of air. In the same way that the biennial's theme "soft and weak like water" offers a way into the difficult issue of truth and reconciliation, Mohri's work expands into a planetary perspective that is more contemplative if not poetic.