



제8기후대: 예술은 무엇을 하는가?



광주비엔날레  
GWANGJU BIENNALE



GB

The 11th Gwangju Biennale

제11회 광주비엔날레

The Eighth Climate:  
What Does Art Do?



A woman in a dark jacket and light pants stands in a hallway, holding a large green card. She is smiling. To her left, a young boy in a green shirt is looking at the card. In the foreground, the back of a person's head and shoulders are visible, looking towards the woman. The hallway has white walls, a grey baseboard, and a light-colored floor. There are several doorways and a poster on the wall in the background.

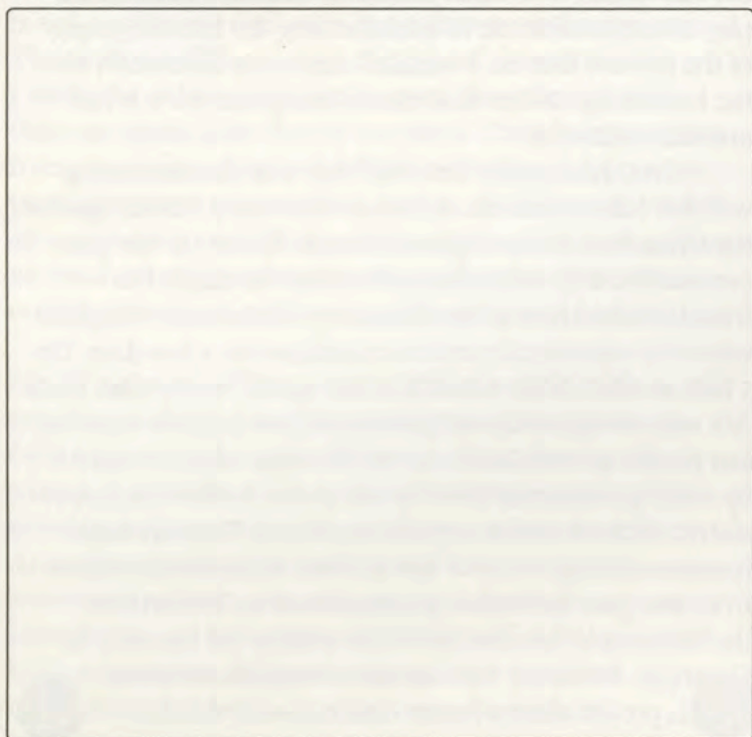
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# Right To Opacity

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the mechanisms and bureaucracy that so often govern, condition, and control our activities as societal subjects. Is abstraction then a withdrawal (from the Latin *abstrahere*, to withdraw) of subjectivity and agency, or a form of subjective empowerment?

**Doug Ashford** — It is a complicated question, because just as there is a bright abstract response in the production of art, it is generative also to think about the dark and limiting abstraction that opposes it in a built society. This in a sense is two kinds of withdrawal; one we make and one given to us on false terms. I like the term “the right to opacity” because it implies a withdrawal from imposed forms of social utility. But I would hope to be present in a way in which it would accept the fact that it has to exist in some sense outside of the recognition of the present order, outside of time.

The bright abstraction I am thinking of suggests a withdrawal from the assigned conditions of subjectivity. It accepts failure. So one could be present in a way in that one would not be recognized as related to “reality.” We know from aesthetic experiences of abstraction that a form could be present with us and that we could be experiencing this form in great specificity without knowing what the form is or what purpose it serves society. But the way in which you would take on meaning would be open to new contexts.

One of the principles around earlier ideas of Western modernist abstraction is that through it we can gain certain kind of autonomy and relationship to pure subjectivity. The difficulty for me is that that this “autonomy” often works into already established ideas of the coherent and functional self. It reduces the potential subjective ruptures that art can provide to a controllable, seemingly mysterious, commodity

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**Michelle Wong** — While post-World War II abstraction may have been predominantly viewed from a Euro- and US-centric perspective as a way through which US influence was spread globally in an effort to curtail communist ideology and forms of social realism at the height of the Cold War, abstract artistic practices have in fact been results of and responses to specific cultural contexts and times. In contexts other than those of Europe and the US, abstraction is often a currency of circulation that is in dialogue with nationalism, cosmopolitanism, sociopolitical movements, institutional critique etc. To name a few examples: Vicente Manansala (1910–81, Macabebe/Manila) and Fernando Zóbel (1924–84, Manila/Rome) of the Philippines, Park Seo-Bo (b. 1931, Yecheon/Seoul) of South Korea, Gutai (founded 1954, Osaka) in Japan, Affandi (1907–90, Cirebon/Yogyakarta) in Indonesia, Ahmed Parvez (1926–79, Rawalpindi) and Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928–95, Shimla/Stafford) in Pakistan, the Modern Literature and Art Association in Hong Kong (1958–64), and many more.

In GB11, there are various strands inside the exhibition, which offers possible readings for the works on show. One of the strands is “right to opacity,” in which Doug Ashford and Suki Seokyeong Kang can be placed. Amalia Pica’s work also pertains to “defiance.” “The right to opacity” is borrowed from the late philosopher, writer, and poet Édouard Glissant, who argued for opacity as necessary for colonized people to defy constant scrutinization and representation imposed by the colonizer. Strategies of abstraction in artistic practices, on the other hand, play a vital role in producing other kinds of space to maneuver through, in which possibilities otherwise unimaginable can be conjured up, even realized. Abstraction can also be deployed as a tool to defy, navigate, subvert, and zoom in and out of



status. I think there is a more concrete way to discuss rebellion against this transparent and functional role of art as a kind of human right. The right to be opaque is perhaps also the right to hardly be recognized as human. Then maybe the definition of the “human” can be re-positioned, re-occupied, as a relationship within the social dynamics of everyday life.

**Amalia Pica** — I was thinking about this idea of occupancy, or inhabiting abstraction, so that as you said it is not necessarily a withdrawal but an occupying of a space in which thought can be abstract. Thought is abstract and we sort of fill it in. But in that sense it could be a meeting point in which opinions and ideologies are not yet made up, a place for subjectivity rather than the abstraction or subtraction of subjectivity.

Growing up as a Latin American artist, abstraction never seemed decontextualized to me, necessarily. Because a lot of the abstract painting and sculpture in Latin America was related to social practices. A better known example would be the Brazilians, such as the Lygias (Lygia Clark, 1920–88, Belo Horizonte/Rio De Janeiro) and the Oiticicas (Hélio Oiticica, 1937–80, Rio De Janeiro). They used abstraction in a way that was often a tool or a movement towards social complicity, not necessarily in a specifically political sense, even though it was at different times. It was always a move towards the social. It wasn’t an isolated entity. Abstract paintings would become things worn by a group of people, for example. Here abstraction is a possibility of extending a social narrative, rather than withdrawal.

**Suki Seokyeong Kang** — For me, subjectivity and agency are slowly suspended in abstraction. Subjectivity and agency



arise from unbalanced contrast and uneasiness scattered in our surroundings. Then they concretize (or become visualized and visible) into shapes of abstraction. The visual form may seem like a reduction of subjectivity but it remains like a thin and transparent bone in the shape of abstraction.

**MW** — As our conversation goes along some notions of time have emerged. Whether it is a historical time, or a cultural time, or I would also argue a bodily time, as your projects all involve either yourselves as an actor or actual actors engaging with the work over a certain period of time. For example in Amalia's *Joy in Paperwork* with the laborious stamping, photocopying, and filing, in Doug's work with actors repeatedly staging photographs while holding an abstract painting in the streets of Gwangju, and for Suki the dance by two actors with *Jeong* sculptures that revives and reenacts the ancient Korean musical notation of *Jeongganbo*. I wonder what are the temporal registers that you are either already aware of or are made aware of when making work?

**SSK** — I think multiple temporal registers are experienced in my work, as the sculptures fold and unfold, and people move back and forth through them. To me it is a spatial-temporal balance of restraint and spontaneity, void and abundance, allegorical figurations and their vestiges. My works are my attempts to reconcile dissonance and paradoxes into an integrated visual whole.

Slowly thinking with awareness → complicatedly intercrossing each other with narrative + materiality + performativity/action → then to be simple.

**AP** — Doug said something about the impossibility to define the present. I think just as it is that while



make with that idea. So in that sense the "things would be us," would also be already what is possible to exist, rather than just pure utopia.

**DA** — Maybe that's why the material and formal aspects of the production of things, at least within the realm of art production, are always already challenging us subjectively. Because the work has to be made to stay on its own: if the thing is bigger than it should be, if it leans or rests on another thing, if it should fall over, if it doesn't fall over, all this produces an identification with that negotiation of the laws of physics and optics. Of course the analogous experience is to what else you or I could be, upon what do we lean; what keeps us from falling over? And that could be a set of ideas, or a kind of a law, or the way that you and I could look, or dress, or perform, or the way that you and I could be.

**AP** — And that is when I think the right to opacity is interesting as an idea, because it refers not only to the possibility of things that we make (and make us), but also the things that we think about what we make, which are both being constantly redefined as we negotiate what is possible. The idea of opacity here can count as potential, as for us to think about what we make, there must be things that are beyond what we think we make (that make us, following from what Doug is suggesting) today, which might be different tomorrow as we negotiate a new reality.

**MW** — There has been an outcry for transparency in politics, especially in Korea, but in other nations and regions too. In this particular sociopolitical context, as well as in the context of art, is transparency the opposite of opacity?



inhabiting abstraction or abstract structures we attempt to define them, there is the same inability to completely define the present moment as we inhabit it. And this may be something that both Doug's and my work try to make linger as a way of resisting monumentality and memorialization.

**DA** — I am not sure about the relentless repetition of public memorialization. I am only a little bit sure about the presence of human labor, or the presence of work, in the sense that there is some factual experience made another, that interrupts the regime of false concrete abstractions of a built society. This labor is related to craft, but it is not as simple as craft as an antidote to destruction. In the past, in the presence of the hand, its manipulations of the material world suggested something of both an economic and cosmological rupture. The object that someone else works on always makes that person a subject of the process of production. An interruption into the context of labor that produces us, allows for the projection of self into things, and then the projection of things into humans, which is still a sustaining proposition of socialist revolution. During the Paris Commune they named themselves according to what they worked on. We named ourselves what we did. The work became us.

**AP** — In this context it might also be helpful to think about the process of making something as a negotiation with what is possible. Let us consider a formal example: imagine someone making something (anything) out of clay. There exist different constraints, such as how tall it can be before it falls, and how this material might or might not allow for certain things. So you might have an idea that materializes as you try to make it come to existence, and it is no longer your idea but it is what you can



**SSK** — It is hard to address transparency as a form of existence. It seems to me that, when talking about degrees of transparency, we must be aware of the fact that things are seen as transparent, rather than being transparent. We can only see through the partial transparency of politics because we only come to know what is happening in politics through the depiction of mediators such as media as well as politicians. These mediators manipulate the levels of opacity—both of information and events—to make the transparency visible, so that they can be seen as transparent. But that is not total transparency. So opacity here is not the complete opposite of transparency, it is a mediator that makes transparency visible, and seen.

In my own practice, it is difficult to differentiate opacity from transparency. Again it is difficult to see them as complete and direct opposites. The word transparency reminds me of layers to tear through, like a wall with a shiny transparent surface that I can walk towards. Opacity to me is a visual volume that can be seen, which then can become in dialogue with layers of transparency to create a more complex volume of visibility.

For me my work is to tear through transparency, and through that process shape and bring into being an abstract form. This is what I mean by working through the volume of opacity through layers of transparency, to find the right visual context and form for both.

**AP** — Transparency and opacity are these large concepts and when we attach them to specific things, they could maybe be opposites for a moment. Dialectics can be a generative way of thinking about the world as long as is transitory. Transparency can be offered as a way to oppose opacity but, at the same time, they could go hand in hand. So it is our relationship with these concepts as we attach them to things that is constantly being defined.





I think this is one of the potentials of abstraction: that in a sense it is never totally defined.

I think we need to recognize qualities as attached to a context, especially when it is about assigning sides or values to formal concepts such as transparency or opacity. You could say something that is transparent has a lot of positive associations. But then when you start looking at the way that transparency is used architecturally, in corporate environments for example, it can also generate opacity by pretending that there is no confusion or nothing to hide. It actually generates indifference exactly because it offers nothing to see.

**DA** — This is the disaster of the “we.” That very popular situation when people say “we” when they really mean “I.” I think that is why I am attracted to Glissant’s proposition that we are expanding here. Because if we are being opaque, we are understood as not being inviting or generous to others, as not being social. But because of how participation is so linked to the way we must volunteer for our own slavery under financialization, I feel suspicious. In a way the corporation has never been more transparent, and society’s organizers continue to call for a transparent and logical negotiation of public life. But that transparency only further rationalizes the contexts in which citizenship is able to be directed by fear and our love for each other turned into debt. The sovereignty of life itself gets put more and more to the margin. The idea that we would strive to be opaque or even perhaps, secret, seems to me more and more a way to radicalize the way that we might determine our own functioning.

One of the divisions that I have been carrying along recently has been to differentiate generative abstraction from the dark abstraction of civic management (such



as the airport terminal), and the bureaucratic abstraction of citizenship and place, or even of just money itself. These are abstractions that appear to me as real in the sense that I treat them as existing instruments, as things that have an already defined meaning making them inevitable. But we know from language that meaning is always contingent upon cues, and in human time these things could change. So I guess what I am hoping for with the work that I am doing in Korea is that abstraction could also produce a changeability—that any painting could be anywhere, and the painting could stand for something we decide. An artwork might be a way to create again. According to terms we are discussing, this could be a defiant use of abstraction that becomes an investment that reorganizes hope, or that reorganizes social imagination.

**AP** — Maybe the hope is that through that flipping mechanism you make us start in a different way. So instead of starting through the discursive, or the descriptive, or by contextualizing that image, it is by flipping the narrative of the image and making abstraction the starting point that we are made to rethink the context in which that image occurs.



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