

The art biennale as scalar arbiter: Gwangju latitudes

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Abstract

Though the urban question may indeed be a question of scale, the dynamism of scalar negotiations remains bound by a limited vocabulary to address “scaling” as a process as opposed to “scale” as a static category (Brenner 2000). Furthermore, the preoccupation with “politics of scale” has produced an influential body of literature on variously labeled multi-level governance research, largely concerned with state institutions operating at different geographical and jurisdictional scales (See e.g. Swyngedouw 2000). In order to experiment with analytical tools for addressing the difficulty of understanding scaling as a process, this paper introduces the idea of a scalar arbiter. Rather than expounding on the specificities of the city as a scale, it focuses on the role of an arbiter and its multiple, simultaneous scaling activities. To investigate how a scalar arbiter may function, the present exploratory study examines the contemporary art biennale, selecting the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea as an illustrative case. Offering an alternative to state institutions as a nexus of analysis, the Gwangju Biennale’s political history, participating actors, audiences and modes of reference serve to elaborate how cultural events negotiate a variety of scales; it further demonstrates how scaling processes are undertaken beyond the parameters of state institutions. Three analytical focal points, “Korean art,” “art world” and “global Asia,” show how scales are negotiated by the biennale. The complexity of incorporating multiple scales in lieu of a hierarchical scalar ontology is evaluated (Howitt 1998) alongside the need for interdisciplinary understandings of scalar reference. The latter highlights the difficulties in separating scale from a specific sociospatial arena (Moore 2008), for example in showing how the role of a British curator commissioning a Chinese artist to interpret the Gwangju Uprising complicates the idea of “Korean” art, distending the nation-state as scalar reference in art criticism. Reflecting on the activities ensconced in the biennale and considering the implications for the urban question, one outcome of this approach to scalar analysis is to challenge the assumed primacy of global aspirations for cities when hosting cultural events. Moreover, the arbitration points towards an instrumental, perhaps opportunistic implementation of “Asia” in certain practices. Thus, the scalar arbiter reinforces the idea that Asia is an unstable signifier inhabiting an “invented latitude” (Roy 2011: 329, Simone 2010). The art biennale as scalar arbiter begins to unravel how, and by whom, these latitudes are produced.

Keywords: scale, scaling, politics of scale, art biennale, cultural events, South Korea, Gwangju, Asia

Despite the theoretical significance of scale in urban studies, it often remains a neglected aspect of empirical work. Its elevated status as being a primary area of inquiry for the “urban question” is compounded with the challenge of a missing vocabulary to discuss scaling processes (Brenner 2000: 367). The literature around scale continues to be bound by referencing to static scalar categories (local, urban, regional, national, global, etc.) that fail to

capture the dynamic characterization of scaling as a process. As socially produced, however, geographical scale is "... simultaneously a platform and container of certain kinds of social activity. Far from neutral and fixed, therefore, geographical scales are the product of economic, political and social activities and relationships..." (Smith 1995: 61). Like space, scale is relationally constituted rather than fixed, bounded levels (Massey 1984, 1994, 2011). Rather than discussing the urban as a scale, therefore, the implication of a concept of scale as socially produced is to consider the scaling processes embedded in the urban.

The consensus around geographical scale as socially produced has resulted in some conceptual confusion around the fundamental understanding about scale as a category of practice versus a category of analysis (Marston 2000; Moore 2008: 205-206). Moore points out multiple critiques about the theoretical value of the concept of scale (See e.g. Jonas 1994; Marston et.al. 2005), including the issue of conceptual stretching which has blunted its analytical power (Brenner 2001). In particular, researchers need to delimit what exactly constitutes scale, "Geographers are prone to refer to scales when in fact they are talking about specific sociospatial arenas, places, territories or locales" (Moore 2008: 206). This is significant because "the mere *existence* of scalar organization does not, *ipso facto*, result in sociologically or politically relevant *scale effects*" (Brenner 2001: 601). In other words, the existence of Gwangju as a city in South Korea is itself not a scale effect and a discussion of Gwangju does not imply a discussion of scaling process, but sociospatial place.

Perhaps as a result of the missing vocabulary to capture scaling processes or perhaps as a result of the preoccupation with political relevance, empirical engagements with scale are circumscribed to a narrow, albeit influential, realm of research. Largely, this has dealt with the political construction of scale (Delaney and Leitner 1997) and the demotion of the nation-state as a predominant scale of political economy (Swyngedow 1997; Jessop 1997). These investigations analyze issues of governance, authority and power, focusing, for example, on institutional developments such as the emergence of the EU (Swyngedouw 2000), sub-national political parties (Agnew 1997), interest groups like labor unions (Herod 1997) or multi-level governance (MacLeod and Goodwin 1999). In contra-distinction, other empirical scale studies have focused on the "scale jump" that tends to reify the predominance of the nation-state in the context of strong states like China (Shin 2014; Park 2005). They roughly argue that political space is not a stage where politics are played out, but politics is about the division, ordering and organization of spatial scales themselves.

Yet in demoting the privileged status of certain scales of governance, there is a reliance on a globalization discourse that obfuscates the socio-spatial struggle implicit in scalar processes through the elevation of alternative scales (Swyngedouw 2000). On the one hand, there is "the 'mythical resurrection of the 'local' or 'regional' scale" and on the other "the pre-eminence of the

‘global’” that marginalize and silence the negotiated nature of spatial scale (ibid: 63-64). The centrality of state institutions in these analyses thus serve to stratify conceptualizations of scale as dominant and alternative, or global and local. State institutions represent geographical and jurisdictional scales, which operationalize certain forms of authority and power. They serve to underline the ultimately static notion of scale rather than a dynamic conceptualization of scaling as a process.

The present study attempts to enrich conceptualizations of scale through two contributions. First, rather than focus on the specificities of categorical scales being produced, we introduce the idea of a scalar arbiter. This is an analytical instrument to allow for a more negotiated conceptualization of scale, giving agency to an arbiter and recognizing multiple, simultaneous scaling activities. Second, by selecting the Gwangju Biennale as an example of a scalar arbiter, we explore an arena of scaling processes outside the parameters of state institutions. Through focusing on a cultural event, valuable contributions from cultural studies can provide some guidance in thinking about scaling processes as negotiated and hybridized rather than fixed in a hierarchical scalar ontology.¹ It illustrates how the political history, participating actors, audiences and modes of reference serve to elaborate how cultural events negotiate a variety of scales. This carries the potential to begin differentiating scaling processes from other socio-spatial forms of structuration (Brenner 2001; Marston 2000). The scalar arbiter in the present study helps to elucidate the negotiated process of scaling,² and the uniquely geographic, spatial characteristic of scale.³

The cultural event in the city: from world’s fairs to sporting events, what is a biennale?

Contemporary research exploring festivals as instruments of “globalizing” the cities in which they are located (Kong 2007; Pensa 2012) builds on an enormous body of historical research about the national exhibitions and world’s fairs or expositions. These events always served multiple purposes in terms of representation, in constructing the “world” on exhibition, in establishing the various event hosts within certain industrial, cultural and political frames and through these functions in place-marketing (See e.g. Espuche, et.al 1991; Haussermann and Siebel 1993; Rydell, et. al. 1994; Peer 1988; Hiller 2000; Derrett 2003; Gold and Gold 2004; Getz 2008; Waitt 2008; Benneworth and Dauncy 2010; Moeran and Pederson 2011.)

In a similar vein, the function of large sporting events in shaping cities has recently received wide attention given the attendant human and social costs of violent urban transformation accompanying international sporting events such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup (see

¹ Howitt borrows from musical scales to develop a metaphor for multiplicity rather than hierarchy, for instance (1998). His work valuably highlights thinking about scales in terms of simultaneous multiplicities as well as the need for analytical tools in order to concretize some of these modes of conceptualization.

² For a discussion on the ontological status of scale, see Herod and Wright (2002). This article seeks to shift the discussion of scale from a question of its materialization towards its enactments.

³ For a discussion on the role of scale in geography, see McMaster and Sheppard 2004.

e.g. Preuss 2007; Pillay and Bass 2008; Steinbring, Haferburg and Ley 2011). Research about the FIFA 2010 in South Africa, FIFA 2014 in Brazil and the Beijing Olympics in 2008 have specially instigated a diversity of research about the impact of mega-events (Broudehoux 2007; Alegi 2008; Zhang and Zhao 2009; Prouse 2013). Perhaps most useful for the present study, event-led spatial restructuring is the focus on Shin's work on the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou. It points to form of intra-regional positioning of Guangzhou within south China and a "negotiated scale-jump" with a broader "world" (2014).

In contrast to the world's fairs and sporting mega events, the biennale has been a relatively understudied event, especially outside of art criticism (Deliss 1993; Alves 2007; Belting 2009; Filipovic, van Hal and Ovsteg 2010). There has been a long-standing call for more social science research about arts festivals:

With all that the arts festival hints at in notions of transformation of landscape and place, in elitism through the inclusion and exclusion of certain groups from the event and the experience, in the production and consumption of culture, and in the symbols and transmitted meanings of the festival, it has been almost entirely neglected not only by geographers but also by social science as a whole. (Waterman 1998: 69).

There are some important distinctions from both of these types of widely studied events. Perhaps most importantly, the biennale does not move to new locations. The art biennale (with few exceptions⁴) is a place-based project. Therefore, the city usually has a stake in its success and often serves as a co-founder, major funder, etc. Despite these local origins, the characterization of the contemporary art biennial is hardly a celebration of localisms. The event encapsulates a confluence of actors with different interests and goals in terms of scalar references and aspirations. Indeed the referential aspect deals with perennial art issues of authenticity and contemporaneity, each with its scalar associations. Contextual specificity furthermore negotiates the scope of context, historical and social. These abstract issues become more concrete through an empirical case. This exploratory study is based on interviewing with Gwangju Biennale staff and exhibiting artists, and embarking on multiple tours in 2014 as well as reviewing archive material.

Gwangju Biennale as Scalar Arbiter

In 2014, the 10th Gwangju Biennale in South Korea opened under a cloud of political controversy. One of its co-founders, and the sitting president of the Biennale Foundation that produces the contemporary art event, resigned in protest to a case of apparent censorship at the adjacent Gwangju Museum of Art. Lee Yongwoo had been a key figure in establishing the

⁴ Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, is a counter-example in its nomadic structure being located in a different European city in each of its editions.

Gwangju Biennale as the oldest and one of the most influential art events in Asia. The New York Times claimed the event was the art world's new destination, boasting that the Gwangju Biennale had put the city "on the map" (McGarry 2014). The 2014 Gwangju Biennale enjoyed profiles in Al Jazeera, The Economist and The Guardian. Lee was departing from an international cultural destination that drew comparisons to the Venice Biennale and Dokumenta in Kassel, Germany.

Beyond the international media attention that elevated the importance of this art biennale as a travel destination, the controversy around Lee's resignation reflected two views on the biennale as a format. On the one hand, Lee's insistence on the paramount importance of autonomy for the biennale cast the event in direct contrast to the Gwangju Museum of Art where the censorship case took place. Whereas the museum represented an institution beholden to the government that funds it, the biennale represented a space of autonomy in spite of its government funding. "The autonomy of the Gwangju Biennale is strong" Lee declared in one of few interviews since his resignation (Baumgartner 2014). Furthermore, "it is vital that art move past efforts to normalize and standardize. This has to start with freeing itself from a self-censoring attitude that excludes ethical and moral self-examination. The Gwangju Biennale has upheld these principles for the last 20 years" (ibid). The biennale as an event represented an autonomous space, not subject to state censorship; unlike the museum, it was outside the jurisdiction of the state, even as it receives state funding.

On the other hand, the principled autonomy defining this cultural space is mediated by a broader critique of the economic implications of being "put on the map." As part of a much larger program of urban regeneration in Korea, the art biennale serves as an instrument of what Lee Kwang-Suk describes as the "economic reductionism of culture." It is a process by which "the historic city of Gwangju, once a democratic 'commune' of local citizens resisting the military regime of the 80s, has lost its spirit, and how the Korean government has redesigned a city in an attempt to make it a powerhouse in the global economy" (Lee 2007: 335). Indeed, critical reflections on the art biennale have questioned whether it serves as a spectacle of neoliberalism, especially for cities outside of Europe and North America where the event format has proliferated (Enwezor 2008).

Yet a closer analysis of the biennale reveals a more relational negotiation of what the event is, and what is implied for its host. The art biennale is not just an elitist escape from local politics and strictures of institutional arrangements, nor is it simply a global marketplace, promulgating a vision of creativity-led urbanism. A study of the Gwangju Biennale illustrates how the event serves as a scalar arbiter, affirming multiple, simultaneous scaling processes. Put simply, the biennale is not about marketing a cosmopolitan global city or selling an exotic local destination. As a scalar arbiter, it is an instrument of negotiation between scales.

Rather than presenting the Gwangju Biennale through a narrative of event production, its role as scalar arbiter is better analyzed through presenting several arenas of arbitration. These arenas are simultaneous and sometimes overlapping and they help to show how different types of scales are negotiated. Rather than conceptualizing the city of Gwangju as a node within various fixed scales, for example, the scalar arbiter reveals how the city itself is rescaled, transformed and stretched. It undermines the fixity of the city scale, and while it unsettles the scale as category, the arbiter also reinforces the importance of scalar analysis in understanding the city.

In three arenas related to commissioning and production of “Korean art,” the “art world” audience and the concept of a “global Asia,” the Gwangju Biennale serves as a scalar arbiter in its artistic substance, through its constellation as an event and in the course of urban regeneration schemes. As an instrument of scalar arbitration, the biennale is promiscuous in its application of scalar terminology in each instance for different interests. Its success is evidenced in this flexibility.

“Korean art”

The Kwangju⁵ International Biennale has quite a different purpose compared to other biennales of the West. While the Venice Biennale was about tourism promotion and cultural nostalgia, drawing upon European sentiment and the grand tour of one hundred years ago, Kwangju International Biennale is about probing Korea’s modern history and treating its wounds.

-Lee Youngwoo, Director General of Visual Arts (Lee 1995: 14).

The inaugural Gwangju Biennale in 1995 welcomed more than 1.6 million visitors, marking an unprecedented event for the southern city of 1.4 million people. Located in the Biennale Hall in Jungoe Park alongside several museums, different curators have been selected by a board for each subsequent edition of the event. While there have been thematic variances and different curatorial approaches, the Gwangju Biennale distinguishes itself from other biennales by safeguarding an enduring role for the city’s recent history at the festival.

Gwangju is often considered the birthplace of South Korean democracy, as it is the location of the May 18th Democratic Uprising in 1980 (also known as the Gwangju Uprising). People were arrested, killed or went missing, and it provoked the political impetus for democratic reform, ultimately establishing the governing structures that remain in place today. To date, the exact

⁵ The McCune-Reischauer romanization of the Korean language was replaced in South Korea in 2000 with the Revised Romanization of Korean. Under this reform, “Kwangju” is now more commonly spelled “Gwangju.”

number of victims remains in dispute and the biennale was initiated as a means to deal with this trauma. Thus, the uprising has served as a consistent theme to differing degrees throughout the event's 20-year history. For some, the biennale has helped reimagine the city from a "city of resistance" to a "city of art" (Shin 2004), but in any case the uprising serves as a key characteristic of the biennale.

At first glance, the Gwangju Uprising and its place in Korean history seem to delimit the biennale as a primarily national event. Indeed, former curator Enwezor made a case for comparing the universalizing tendencies of the political movements in Paris in May 1968 and with what he argues are more particularizing tendencies around Gwangju in May 1980:

I do not so much wish to read the Gwangju Spring against that of Paris, however, as much as to draw some important contrasts between their respective narratives. May 18, in Gwangju and, by extension, in South Korea as a whole, is justifiably commemorated as a specific localized and national event founded on Korean experience and responses against oppression. It did not aim for anything so grandiose and pompous as the liberation of humanity or overthrowing the bourgeoisie...May '68, on the other hand, was as grandiose as it was inflated in its assumptions of changing the world order. Thus that event is often narrated under universal rather than local, or even continental principles. (2008: 26)

While this may be true on a discursive level, the production of the biennale reveals some rival narratives. A closer look at the function of this history reveals that far from being a particularizing, localizing, shrinking characteristic that reduces the scale of artistic referentiality, the theme serves as a launching point for rescaling the impact and relevance of the Gwangju Uprising.

Considering the experience of the 2014 Gwangju Biennale, the role of history was neither particularizing nor universalizing, but served to distend the realm of the historical reference point. It was a negotiated, re-interpreted history, central to many of the works being shown. To start, 2014 curator Jessica Morgan from the Tate Museum in London commissioned a number of works from artists, some that dealt very specifically with certain aspects of the uprising. The work of interpreting Gwangju's history was expanded, for instance, through Morgan's commissioning Liu Xiaodong for a painting. Liu Xiaodong, a renowned Chinese artist based in Beijing, spent several months in Gwangju to paint students arranged in a picnic tableau at the site of the protest from 1980. Reading the narrative of the Gwangju Uprising through the artistic commission from a British curator of a Chinese artist, Gwangju's history becomes representative of student movements across time and national contexts.

Thus, treating Korea's wounds is tasked to a curator who is invited from outside Korea and to the various artists their team selects for the exhibition. The theme does not serve as an exclusionary, reductive characteristic delimiting what counts as "Korean art" but rather complicates the notion completely. Is the Chinese artist commissioned by the British curator painting a scene about a moment in Korean history making "Korean art"?

As a scalar arbiter in dealing with historical theme, the Gwangju Biennale offers a space for distending the limits of a particular history. In Liu Xiaodong's work, it is difficult not to interpret the relevance of violent suppressions of student unrest for the artist's home in Beijing. Though it might not be a universalizing narrative about democracy, as Enwezor claims of the '68 movement in Paris, the thematic focus on the Gwangju Uprising becomes a relevant reference point beyond Gwangju or South Korea through the arbitration being done by curators and artists via the biennale. The theme of the uprising serves as a starting point in dealing with broad themes like resistance and democracy that is not limited to a particular nation-state context.

Moreover, the function the Gwangju Biennale as a means to heal from trauma, considered a particularity, became a blueprint or model for other events. In Kobe, Japan, following a natural disaster, they similarly initiated an art biennale in order to help recover. An official agreement was established to foster exchange among the organizers, and Kobe organizers came to Gwangju to learn from their experience. This is important to establish its distance from models like the Venice Biennale and foster proximity to other biennales who have used Gwangju as a model:

Even if you look at the granddaddy of all biennales, Venice, it's- we don't really have similarities. We don't try to do national pavilions or anything like that. I feel like Gwangju Biennale just does its own thing. If anything, I understand Kobe Biennale, which was started in 2007, after they had a really big earthquake that sort of really shattered the town, I understand that they looked to us, to the Gwangju Biennale, and sort of created their own as a form of catharsis for the people. (Min 2014)

The Gwangju model offers a distinct form of redevelopment, qualitatively different from the urban regeneration strategies focused exclusively on economic development (See e.g. Shin and Stevens 2013) and serves as a contrast to analyses of the Gwangju Biennale as something fostering a subnational, regional identity (Shin 2004). The transplantation of biennale function, thought unique to Gwangju, is expanded to Kobe. In doing so, it recalls Roy's claim that "to read Asian urbanism requires ... a tracing of 'models-in-circulation,' of the material and discursive practices of inter-referencing through which cities are made and inhabited" (Roy 2011: 329).

Thus the Gwangju Biennale's dealing with the uprising doubly arbitrates this history as a reductive scalar trait. Thematically, its curators and artists expand its realm of reference, interpreting the history from their own various perspectives and positions. The resulting art works are read not just as commentary about democracy specific to a nation-state scale, but about democracy more broadly. Dealing with traumatic history a function of the art biennale also becomes a model, a point of reference for other cities. The Gwangju Uprising is not an isolating experience, but rather the Gwangju Biennale as scalar arbiter facilitates the relevance of history for a broader frame of reference. It negotiates the themes thought to the particular to a Korean national identity and particular to a city through its commissioning work and through its transplanted form.

“Art world”

Until now, the focus of art internationally has been on Europe and the U.S. From this region arose the major theories and movements of modernism which have had such a great impact on developing countries. In other words, international art trends have much to do with the fact that culture and arts originating from Europe and America have spread out into the world community. It is quite significant that under such circumstances the Kwangju Biennale will take place in the City of Kwangju, Korea, in Asia. In fact, the Kwangju event, bringing together art of the Western world with the art of the Third World, will form a new cultural axis whose ideals may promulgate throughout the global village.

-Lim Young-Bang, Chair

Kwangju International Biennale Organizing Committee (Lim 1995: 9)

Since the first edition, the Gwangju Biennale has established itself as one of the largest cultural events in Asia. Though more recent curatorial statements no longer take the “Western world” and “Third World” as static reference points between which to position the Gwangju Biennale, the message of Lim Young-Bang about the influence of Europe and U.S. in setting theories, movements and trends signifies a kind of straw man that the Gwangju Biennale has been assailing ever since. Perhaps the most prevalent instrument of arbitrating the hegemonic “Western” art worldism has been in facilitating access.

The Gwangju Biennale invites star curators, a typical practice among most biennales. Art biennales serve as an established a circuit for these select curators, many of them have curated the same events. For instance, Gwangju Biennale curators Massimiliano Gioni (2010) and Okwui Enwezor (2008) both served as the artistic director of the Venice Biennale in 2013 and 2015, respectively. These curators are important in gaining international attention in the media, securing corporate funding, gaining access to artists and collections in their networks and,

especially around the time of the opening, bringing in the “art world” to Gwangju. This includes collectors, curators as well as visitors.

Alongside the Gwangju Biennale’s active courting of the “art world,” a core element of their audience is comprised of Korean school groups. The staff at the biennale expressed a sense of pedagogical responsibility and accessibility:

I think because Gwangju has such a particular history, and there is a lot of funding that we receive from the government, it's hard to just go off in the deep end of art and go completely obscure. There's a sense of obligation in terms of- we have a duty. We are responsible for this city. And we want to have- want to put on these amazing biennales, but we don't want to isolate our main audience, which is the locals. (Min 2014).

Indeed, international media coverage of the biennale often thrill at declaring how the visitor numbers of the Gwangju Biennale rival the biggest art festivals in the world. And Min’s reference to “locals” makes clear that the city of 1.4 million does not provide the majority of the audience. Rather, school and university groups comprise a large portion of the audience. Especially in a context where there is little arts education in the primary system, the biennale as an educational tool serves to expand the “art world” from its elitist stance.

Alongside the issues of access and audience, the scalar negotiations around “art world” are also evidenced in the commissioning practices that undermine the Western biases entrenched in the contemporaneity of art world discourses. The art world as an “elitist elsewhere” embodied in curators is mediated by their interaction with Gwangju history and commissioned artworks. There is no easy framing of “local authentic” and “international contemporary” art. For instance, the Seoul-based artist Xooang Choi was commissioned by Morgan in 2012 to develop works she had seen of his for a room to be shared with the Japanese artist Tetsuya (Choi 2012). Her “heavy hand” closely working with him on these works, as well as Choi’s familiarity with Tetsuya’s work influenced the resulting pieces. Both artists’ works referenced the anomie and malaise experienced during the post-industrial economic malaise of the 1990s in Asia. The interactive reading of Choi’s sculptural installations with Tetsuya’s paintings and Morgan’s commissioning practices renegotiates the elitist Western-biased scales of “international contemporary.”

The “art world” is expanded through access and education with regards to the audiences of the Gwangju Biennale. The biennale built up straw men figures of contemporary art of the “West” and the “Third World” in the statement from Lim, which it has insistently complicated.

“Global Asia”

Kwangju intends to be at the forefront of artistic production into the 21st century, not only in Korea but in the Asia-Pacific...it will highlight Kwangju as a world-class center for the arts even as it symbolizes the promise of de-centralization.”

-Song Eon-jong, Executive Chairperson, Mayor of the City of Kwangju
(Song 1995: 7)

Although seemingly a contradiction in terms, the discourse about Asia is intricately entwined with a conception of the “global.” In discussing the “Asian Century,” for instance, Enwezor exalts the “the emergence of the global Asia” (Enwezor 2008: 15). This is evident in various descriptions about the production of the Gwangju Biennale. Asia serves as a signifier of global importance, and is reflected in the plans for the construction of the multi-billion dollar construction of the “Asian Art Complex” in Gwangju. The biennale served in part as a means to leverage influence to locate the complex in Gwangju, having established a precedent as an art destination despite its modest size. Indeed, with a view to the future, the Mayor of Gwangju stated in 2004 this goal: “our establishment of Gwangju as the ultimate pan-Asian cultural nucleus of the future” (Park 2004: 1). “Asia” in Song’s description above represents “world-class” and reflects not only de-centralization, but the de-centering of dominant centers of artistic production. Thus the scalar arbiter expands “Asia” not as a geographic location, but as a scale of influence conceived of as global.

Reflection

Unlike exhibitions staged by museums, with their often hegemonic cultural policies and interest in denoting legacies and traditions, the biennale is a mobile and flexible event that offers a spectrum of creative expressions that are immediate, contemporary and topical, making the debate of art as movement fitting for the space of Gwangju – both geopolitically and as an institutional alternative

-Jessica Morgan, Curator, Gwangju Biennale 2014
(Morgan 2014: 8)

Perhaps also as a result of this flexibility, the art biennial undermines the fixity of the city scale. While it unsettles the scale as category, the arbiter also reinforces the importance of scalar analysis in understanding the city. Studying the art biennale as an arbiter of scale (and, thus, of the city): 1) attempts more process-oriented language rather than reifying pre-existing scales and 2) challenges the assumed primacy of global aspirations in city-making. Connecting these to findings, the art biennial makes more evident scaling as a dynamic, negotiated process and in doing so makes more evident the simultaneity of multiple relevant contextual frames. Challenging assumptions about the scalar arbiter as necessarily negotiating towards global (globalizing Gwangju), these aspects of the art biennial illustrate how multiple scales and

contexts are relevant at the same time. The scalar arbiter can be employed by different interests, in different ways. Sometimes, with material results in terms of the nature of the commissioned art works, sometimes more discursive in terms of the framework used to describe the Gwangju Biennale. Yet ultimately, the art biennale is a city project. The city remains the primary funder, a co-organiser and its host. Given this, how can these scalar arbitrations be seen as projects of city-making?

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