

THE ARCHIVE AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Alex Burchmore, Seoul

On the top floor of Korea's National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), with a view of the iconic mountains of Bukhansan National Park at his back, Yun Bummo formally welcomed us to Seoul. Yun was appointed Director at a crucial moment of transition for the museum and has distinguished himself from his predecessors with an ambitious plan to renew its founding aims. These were comprehensively addressed in his first major project since his appointment to the role in February 2019: 'The Square: Art and Society in Korea 1900–2019', a monumental survey of almost 450 paintings, sculptures and installations exhibited across three of the four MMCA branches from September/October 2019 until February/March this year.

As the first group of overseas writers officially invited to tour an MMCA exhibition, our presence alone fulfilled one of Yun's ambitions – to increase the international visibility of Korean art and promote MMCA as 'a globally open museum'. The chronological scope of 'The Square' reflected another – to 'rewrite and reinterpret Korean art history' – while its multiple venues realised Yun's hope for each MMCA branch to develop an 'individual identity'.¹ Beyond these corporate aims, however, he also recognises the pressing need to heal the trauma of colonisation, war and division in a nation caught between powerful and unpredictable neighbours. As our meeting concluded, a siren broadcast over the PA system awakened thoughts of these anxieties but was soon ignored – just a monthly civil defence drill, no cause for alarm.

Earlier that day, touring 'The Square: Part 1, 1900–1950' at the oldest venue in Deoksugung Palace, we received a historical grounding for the exhibition and its three venues. The museum relocated to this former imperial residence four years after opening in 1969, gaining a permanent home in 1998 in Korea's earliest European-style building. Although dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of this founding, 'Part 1' surveyed the preceding half-century with 130 works of art and 190 archival materials, adopting an essentially didactic curatorial perspective.

Flanking the entrance, the two first-floor galleries introduced the isolationist literati and

cosmopolitan *Gaehwapa* (Reformists) of the early twentieth century. To the right, dark blue walls, dim lighting and hangul labels evoked an unapproachable austerity perfectly suited to the 'Records of the Righteous': portraits of scholars who advocated the exclusion of foreigners, with examples of calligraphy and bamboo paintings demonstrating their Confucian moral rectitude. To the left, a lighter display of paintings, prints, newspapers and magazines celebrated the meeting of 'Art and Enlightenment' from the mid-nineteenth century, culminating with the Korean Declaration of Independence on 1 March 1919. The second-floor galleries completed this linear chronology with Soviet-inspired expressions of the 'Sound of the People' in the 1920s and 1930s, and efforts to reclaim the 'Mind of Korea' during and after Japanese occupation. Both levels presented viewers with a choice between divergent historical tendencies – between a conservative nationalism on one hand, and an internationalist cosmopolitanism on the other.

The substantial inclusion of archival material in 'Art and Enlightenment' and 'Sound of the People' reinforced this foregrounding of viewer responsibility and established one of the key curatorial innovations in 'The Square'. Rather than presenting a seamless genealogy of nationhood, the curators at each venue deconstructed their sources and exposed primary documents to public scrutiny. Recalling Hal Foster's assertion of an 'archival impulse' in contemporary art at the turn of the millennium, their championing of the ephemeral showed a desire 'to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present' and 'to fashion distracted viewers into engaged discussants'.² While the encyclopedic ambition of 'The Square' could have rendered it vulnerable to critique as an exercise in nation-building, this open-ended approach guarded against such accusations by encouraging viewers to find more idiosyncratic pathways through history.

Archival materials were given even greater prominence in 'The Square: Part 2, 1950–2019' at MMCA Gwacheon, the first satellite branch of the museum opened in 1986. Although chronologically arranged, the 300 works of art and 200 ephemera

Shin Meekyoung, *Translation Series: Venus*, 2006–13, installation view, 'The Square: Part 2, 1950–2019', National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Gwacheon, 2019; soap, colour pigment, varnish; MMCA Gwacheon; photo: Alex Burchmore





Jewyo Rhii, *Love Your Depot*, 2019, installation view, MMCA Seoul, 2019; © Jewyo Rhii; photo: Alex Burchmore

on display were subdivided into seven thematic sections borrowed from Korean literary icon Choi In-hun's harrowing account of the suffering that followed the Korean War, *The Square* (1960), from which the exhibition derived its name. This citation of cultural touchstones recurred throughout the museum, from the reconstructed interior of a 1950s textile factory and displays of commercial advertising, to models of the 1988 Olympic Stadium and the original 1978 Kia Brisa used for Jang Hoon's *A Taxi Driver* (2017), a cinematic retelling of the Gwangju Uprising in May 1980.

Adhering to the logic of the archive, these artefacts and installations appealed to viewers' desires 'to probe a misplaced past, to collate its different signs [and] ascertain what might remain for the present'.³ Their display in densely arranged cabinets and tiers of shelves, however, brought to mind a second curatorial approach championed at the newest MMCA in Cheongju and endorsed by the presentation of last year's Korea Artist Prize to Jewyo Rhii's *Love Your Depot* (2019): the increasingly fashionable concept of 'open storage'.⁴ While recent forays into this display style at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and Rotterdam's Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen have attracted headlines, curators have experimented with open storage since the 1980s. Like the archival impulse, their efforts reflect a desire for discussion, 'making primary documents available [and] the level of mediation visible so that visitors can choose the ... interpretation they desire'.⁵ At Gwacheon, the density and volume of archival material compelled viewers to chart their own course through a complex web of competing histories.

In comparison to Parts 1 and 2, 'The Square: Part 3, 2019' at MMCA Seoul was more conventional

and less expansive in scope. Comprising only 23 works by 12 artists, including several born or working outside Korea, this exhibition foregrounded contemporary global understandings of community, identity and democracy. Without an archival element, however, opportunities for independent interpretation of the often highly conceptual works on display were limited. Walking from gallery to hotel after our final tour, the opening of national narratives at Deoksugung and Gwacheon returned to my mind as the streets around me filled with chanting protesters, holding up traffic and transforming avenues created for state ceremony into a seething tide of humanity. It was this unsettling yet empowering potential that Yun perhaps hoped to emulate by bringing the idealistic populism of the public square within the walls of the gallery.

1. The author spoke with Yun Bummo for this article on 29 October 2019.
2. Hal Foster, 'An archival impulse', *October*, no. 110, Fall 2004, pp. 4–6.
3. *ibid*, p. 21.
4. See the *Art Monthly Australasia* blog for the author's review of the 2019 Korea Artist Prize: www.artmonthly.org.au/blog/korea, accessed 8 April 2020.
5. Kimberly Orcutt, 'The open storage dilemma', *Journal of Museum Education*, vol. 36, no. 2, Summer 2011, p. 215.

'The Square: Part 1, 1900–1950' was exhibited at MMCA Deoksugung from 17 October 2019 until 9 February 2020; 'The Square: Part 2, 1950–2019' was shown at MMCA Gwacheon from 17 October until 31 March 2020; and 'The Square: Part 3, 2019' was on display at MMCA Seoul from 7 September 2019 until 9 February 2020.

Top:
The Square: Part 1, 1900–1950, exhibition
installation view, MMCA Deoksugung;
image courtesy MMCA



Bottom:
The Square: Part 2, 1950–2019, exhibition
installation view, MMCA Gwacheon;
image courtesy MMCA



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