



## Print Article



Outside the Gwangju Biennale, Sept. 2010



Curator Massimiliano Gioni at the official press launch of the Gwangju Biennale 2010



**Sanggil Kim**  
off-line\_burberry internet community  
2004  
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# GWANGJU RULES by Ben Davis

**Gwangju Biennale 2010**, "10,000 Lives," Sept. 3-Nov. 7, 2010, at the Gwangju Biennale Hall, Gwangju Museum of Art, and Gwangju Folk Museum, South Korea

Gwangju is a quaint little Korean town of 1.4 million souls that most people in the U.S. have never heard of. Its name bears the association, primarily, of the 1980 Gwangju Massacre, which helped impel the country's transition from crusty (U.S.-backed) dictatorship to the high-tech democracy it is today. In the art world, the name also brings to mind the Gwangju Biennale, founded in 1995 to commemorate the spirit of the Gwangju dissidents, and spur development.

This year, the Gwangju Biennale is helmed by New Museum curator Massimiliano Gioni; it is called "10,000 Lives;" and it is one of the best such shows that I have ever seen.

To quote the tagline of the recent movie *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, "10,000 Lives" is an epic of epic epicness. It sprawls across five giant galleries in the Biennale's own dedicated exhibition hall, plus three substantial satellite spaces. Some 134 artists make the cut. These include Koreans like **Sanggil Kim**, who opens the show with his staged photographic tableaux featuring members of various online communities (*Star Wars* fans, lovers of Burberry plaid, etc.) brought together in real life, and Seungtaek Lee, whose odd scatter piece of old clothes and puppet heads greets visitors to the section at the Gwangju Museum of Art, as well as a genuinely eclectic cast of international art stars, from **Carl Andre**, **Jean Fautrier** and **Bruce Nauman** to **Taub Auerbach**, **Cyprien Gaillard** and **Danh Vo**.

The show includes a number of feats of genuine curatorial bravado: A complete transplantation of Canadian collector Ydessa Hendeles' *Teddy Bear Project*, consisting of several two-story chambers hung floor-to-ceiling, salon-style, with vintage photos of people with their teddy bears, shipped whole from Toronto; the complete original set of sculptures from the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, a landmark work of Chinese Socialist Realist sculpture known in the art world as reference point for artists (most famously, **Cai Guo-Qiang**); a wall full of **Sherrie Levine** re-photographs of **Walker Evans**, hung mirroring a wall full of Evans' original images. It is hard to doubt that this is the most ambitious collection of art, anywhere on the planet, at this moment.

Gioni's theme for "10,000 Lives" is the overwhelming power of images in contemporary society, which leads him to include lots of works that involve massive banks of screens (**Dieter Roth's** *Solo Scenes*, 128 monitors chronicling the quotidian details of his last years on earth; multimedia pioneer Stan VanDerBeek's cacophonous multi-projection installation *Found Forms*), and long ribbons of images (**Fischli & Weiss'** vast lightbox catalogue of banally beautiful snapshots, *The Visible World*; **Philip-Lorca DiCorcia's** career-summarizing ribbon of Polaroids). A lot can be said about taking the over-saturated mental landscape as a starting point -- but one

Installation view of Saungtaek Lee's *The Artist To Be Out of Breath* (1991) in the Gwangju Biennale



Installation view of Carl Andre's *War and Rumors of War* (2002) [front], and Gu Dexin's *2009-05-02* (2009)



Visitor views Ydessa Hendeles' *Teddybear Project* at the Gwangju Biennale 2010



Detail of the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, in the Gwangju Biennale 2010



important thing is that it effectively thematizes the anxious, overcrowded feeling of being at a biennial itself, where the codes of different artworks clash, overwhelm one another, cancel each other out. So, in some understated way, "10,000 Lives" becomes about what a biennial can and should mean today.

The fact that despite its sheer volume, this spectacle doesn't sink under its own weight is due mainly to the distinctive sensibility that Gioni brings to the job. For those who saw "After Nature," his 2008 show at the New Museum, "10,000 Lives" is "After Nature" on steroids, given room and budget to explore. At the opening press conference, Gioni explained that he wanted to curate the show as a "temporary museum," rather than as a biennale -- but "visual novel," his description of "After Nature," is even more apt. The show is organized around a single path, which makes it read as a journey instead of a labyrinth. This sounds like a simple device, but in context it reads as a statement, about taking back some kind of human relationship to images, rather than caving to their cacophony and being overwhelmed by them.

As with "After Nature," "10,000 Lives" contains a deliberately bizarre and broad selection of objects, with outsider art, documentary, artifacts, found objects and commercial photographs set alongside more conventional biennale fare. This might sound like curatorial shtick, and could well be in different hands -- but here, the show feels less like works were selected because they were eccentric, and more as if Gioni is simply being true to a sensibility that is eccentric to begin with; less about juxtaposing different categories of object, and more about sorting things outside of their normal categories altogether, searching for evidence of a latent, dark spark of energy wherever it might be found.

Thus, in one of the first rooms, a slideshow by Anne Collier of stills of Faye Dunaway's haunted eyes from the 1978 film *The Eyes of Laura Mars* faces off with a video by Dutch artist Arnoud Holleman, incorporating slowed-down found footage of women from a Protestant sect in Holland, fleeing from the camera out of superstition that it will steal their soul. Hung between is a print of a black-and-white 1946 Andre de Dienes portrait of Marilyn Monroe. The latter was part of a series of glamour photos, but fits here because in it the tragic starlet is shown covering her face with a cloth. De Dienes had asked her to act out what "death" looked like; death, for Monroe, is not being seen.

Elsewhere, in the darkened final room of the main exhibition halls, you find Zhou Xiaohu's effectively weird suite of videos, depicting Chinese people drilling themselves in cult-like Amway motivational rituals -- only the longer you look at them, the more it becomes clear that something is off. In fact, the actors are performing on stage sets strapped to the ceiling; they have been filmed upside-down, and are presented right-way-up to create an estranging effect. Arrayed nearby this film installation are cardboard cutouts of imagery from Korean films by Taekyu Park, described as the "only remaining movie poster painter in Gwangju," offering up tributes to his favorite movies. These hand-painted dedications to the culture industry play beautifully against Zhou's world-turned-upside-down metaphor.

As for the more identifiable art-world figures, instead of highlighting artists at their most iconic, Gioni often goes after them at their most singular and weird, as if turning their oeuvres around and inspecting them, then striking at just the right place to hit the note he wants: Roni Horn is represented by her probing self-portrait diptyches; German Pop-Op artist Thomas Bayrle by a rare motorized painting, which slowly alternates mosaic-like tiles, printed on one side with the image of Chairman Mao, the other side with a Communist star, evoking North Korean rituals where the masses hold cards forming a

Installation view of Stan VanDerBeek's *Found Forms* (1969/2010) in the Gwangju Biennale



Visitor inspects Fischli & Weiss' *The Visible World* (1986-2001), in the Gwangju Biennale



Installation detail of Philip-Lorca DeCorcia's *Thousand* (2009), in the Gwangju Biennale



Installation view of Anne Collier's *Woman with a Camera* (35mm) (2009), at the Gwangju Biennale



**Arnoud Holleman**  
*Untitled (Staphorst)*  
2002  
© Arnoud Holleman, Courtesy the Stedelijk Museum

giant image. In the most amazing example of Gioni's procedure, **Andy Warhol** appears, but represented by one of his "time capsules" -- *Time Capsule 27* to be precise, the only one, we are told, that had a "coherent structure," dedicated to artifacts relating to Warhol's mother. The contents -- letters, greeting cards, keepsakes -- displayed in glass tabletop cases, are remarkably humanizing with regard to the iconically ironic artist, evidence of some sad secret world. As Francesco Bonami supposedly quipped on seeing "10,000 Lives," Gioni's show makes every artist look like an "outsider."

Some questions marks do linger over the show. "The electronic age is neo-primitive," Gioni writes in the catalogue, summing up the thread that connects for him the contemporary work with the healing drawings, funerary icons and other totems he includes. Gioni gets the pseudo-mystical take on the contemporary society of the spectacle from "visual studies" guru W.J.T. Mitchell's *What do Pictures Want?*, a book I am **on record** as not being a fan of. Yet the remarkable thing about "10,000 Lives," for me at least, is just the reverse of this sentiment; not that it draws direct parallels between different modes of thinking, but that the free-wheeling sensibility of the show breaks open the work, makes you approach each piece as its own eccentric imaginative universe, rather than as part of the default narrative of the professional art world.

Gioni's slippery syncretism only really becomes perilous in the show's third chamber, what in my head I call the "Political Gallery," where all the most troubling political work -- **Thomas Hirshhorn**, Gustav Metzger, etc. -- is displayed. In particular, I'm made uneasy by the "Tuol Sleng Prison Photographs," a suite of lucid, black-and-white images from 1975 of victims of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime, each taken by a Khmer Rouge photographer before its subject was sent to the concentration camp to have his or her life extinguished. They are undeniably moving, and accorded a special place here -- halfway through the middle gallery of the biennial, essentially the show's heart. The "10,000 Lives" guidebook itself acknowledges concerns about using them as art, minus historical context, pitching them nevertheless as "poignant, though inadvertent, memorials," which they are.

The fact that the "Prison Photographs" are included here testifies to how seriously this show wants to be taken, and it's not as if these images cannot be shown, ever. It's just that I think that part of recognizing the actual reality of these photos, which are actual documents of the Killing Fields, would be to actually have something to say about the realities of the terror under Pol Pot (which, after all, is not ancient history, but in the news **right now**, with war crimes trials set for 2011). Otherwise these documents become simply the avatar of some kind of abstract, universal human tragedy, sapped of specificity and gravity. In a show that Gioni says "cultivates the exercise of memory," the gesture becomes one of forgetting.

Such criticism doesn't mean, however, that "10,000 Lives" doesn't have any social mission. Gioni's achievement in the 2010 Gwangju Biennale is that he gives this massive display an actual personality, building a cumulative sense of reverence, melancholy. If it is least effective when it veers towards politics -- where Gioni's literary sensibility can be interpreted as a way of dodging concrete assessment of history and the taking of political sides -- it is most affecting when the show's sheer esthetic diversity synthesizes into a kind of haunted global humanism. "10,000 Lives" bears the distinction of being the only art show of recent memory to actually bring tears to my eyes. It did it twice.

The first time was before Macau-born artist Alice Kok's 2008 video, *Family Script*. The three-screen video contains simultaneous projections of "video letters" ferried between a Tibetan couple living





Andre de Dienes' *Untitled (Marilyn Shows What Death Looks Like)* (1946/2010), in the Gwangju Biennale



Installation view of Zhou Xiaohu's *Concentration Training Camp* (2007-2008), in the Gwangju Biennale



Installation view of Taekyu Park's movie cutouts, in the Gwangju Biennale



Massimiliano Gioni, with Thomas Bayrle's "kinetic painting," *Mao* (1966)



in India, and their family back home, shepherded back and forth by the artist as a favor. As they testify to their lives apart, sing songs for their far-off relatives, show off their accomplishments, their daily rituals and their kids, the simple videos sketch the details of a very particular experience of migration -- but also play out near-universal dramas of family devotion, affection, and abandonment. Grandmother is brought on. The family asks if she has any message to pass to her wayward granddaughter. Her mouth shakes; she glares at the screen; she says, "Come home." She walks off camera.

The second time I misted up was at the beginning of a ribbon of 62 images of a man called Ye Jinglu. From 1901 to 1968, Ye had himself photographed in ceremonial garb almost every year. The photo album was found by collector Tong Bingxue, and has now taken on life of its own as an esthetic artifact. And, arriving before the first image in Gallery 4, the vivid thought suddenly jumped into my mind -- *Oh my god, at the end of this wall, this guy is going to be dead.* A tremendous sense of personality radiates from these photographic documents of a life, as Ye's face slowly ages, one year smiling rakishly, the next looking a little more weary -- but their powerful effect here owes everything to the associations that Gioni has built up over the course of this show, the sense of human creativity as something welling up in the most unexpected places; the sense that a near-anonymous sign painter in Gwangju and Marilyn Monroe in her darker moments, a Tibetan couple looking for a better life for themselves in India and Andy Warhol in the solitude of his office, despite their different starting points, might have something to say to one another. "10,000 Lives" manages to shake the idea of "art" loose from its more ossified professional pretensions, placing it within the broader spectrum of human creativity -- and it does this in remarkably elegant, unpatronizing way. It is, in this sense -- and despite the sad tone -- a deeply affirmative show.

I spent two days exploring the Gwangju Biennale. I could easily spend two days more. I've left out more highlights than I have been able to include -- Sanja Ivekovic's tableau featuring live actors, humming a sad tune from the Gwangju Uprising; the haunting photos of prostitutes with their faces scratched out by E.J. Bellocq (rescued from obscurity by Lee Friedlander); Aurélien Froment's deft, quirky video depicting a kind of esthetic magic show; a delightfully surreal 1955 film by Japan's Experimental Workshop, originally a promo for the Japanese bicycle industry; Zhang Enli's lonesome tromp l'oil walk-in installation of an abandoned apartment; Rabih Mroué's gripping video lecture about the challenge of making art relating to the Lebanese resistance to Israel's 1980 occupation; and on and on.

But the parts are probably less important than the whole, because "10,000 Lives" succeeds uniquely in being more than the sum of its parts. Which is another way of saying that it makes the biennial form feel necessary, rather than a professional obligation. Gioni's Gwangju Biennale restores my faith, a little, that biennials can be meaningful experiences. I can't wait to see what he does in Venice.

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Detail of the contents of Andy Warhol's *Time Capsule 27*, in the Gwangju Biennale



Selection of the "Tuol Sleng Prison Photographs," in the Gwangju Biennale



Installation view of Alice Kok's *Family Script* (2008), in the Gwangju Biennale



Image from photo album of Ye Jinglu, discovered by Tong Bingxue



Performers executing Sanja Ivekovic's *On the Barricades*



**Aurélien Froment**

*Theâtre de poche*

2007

© Aurélien Froment, Photo: Aurélien Mole, Courtesy Motive Gallery



Installation view of *Ginrin (Silver Wheel)* (1955), by Jikken Kobo / Experimental Workshop, in the Gwangju Biennale



Installation view of Zhang Enli's *Circulez! Il n'ya rien à voir* (with Moshekwa Langa) (2007), in the Gwangju Biennale