

## Research Assessment Exercise 2020

### Impact Case Study

University: **The University of Hong Kong (HKU)**

Unit of Assessment (UoA): **UoA38 visual arts, design, creative media, other creative arts and creative writing**

Title of case study: ***Faultlines*, Gwangju Biennale 2018, Curatorial project by Yeewan Koon**

#### (1) **Summary of the impact**

Dr. Yeewan Koon's co-curated exhibition for the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale, *Faultlines*, presented contemporary artworks that questioned conventional worldviews of borders. She conceived and produced a show that resulted in new cultural experiences and deeper understanding for the Biennale's 320,000 visitors between September and November 2018, engaged with local communities, and developed the exhibiting artists personally and professionally. This was achieved by working with artists to produce art that challenged their practices and provided an international platform to showcase it; by Koon's commissioning of new, site-specific works; and by the production of an interactive library as an auxiliary part of the exhibition that extended audience engagement through self-learning. The Biennale brought visitors from around the world to South Korea and received extensive press coverage.

#### (2) **Underpinning research**

Koon joined the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 2006. Her longstanding research interests have focused on the crossing and breaking of boundaries that reinforce social, political and cultural values in early modern and contemporary Chinese art. Koon's curatorial experience and knowledge is deeply rooted in her 2014 exhibition *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing* [3.3]. The exhibition explored how the internationally renowned artist uses the transformative powers of different materials to examine processes at work when boundaries are crossed, such as China/West and past/present. Koon was both editor of and contributor to the exhibition's catalogue, which featured responses from scholars in different fields and provided multiple perspectives on the consequences of border crossings in Xu Bing's work. Alice Mong, Executive Director of Asia Society Hong Kong Center, credited the success of the exhibition to Koon's "exceptional knowledge and contribution to the [Xu Bing] exhibition, the catalogue and all associated educational programs."

Koon's research interest in the conflicts and consequences that borders produce is also reflected in her book-length exploration of artistic iconoclasm, *A Defiant Brush* (2014) [3.4]. This book examines how the Cantonese artist Su Renshan (1815–c.1850) made artworks in response to the traumatic repercussions of the Opium War. Koon theorises about the function of art in periods of instability and conflict using methods aligned with literary studies and in dialogue with the field of local histories for an interdisciplinary approach to the single-artist monograph.

For *Faultlines*, Koon worked with acclaimed Japanese artist Nara Yoshitomo. Koon began her research on Nara in 2015 when she wrote the first study of the artist's photography that focused on his work in Afghanistan, entitled "No War" [3.2]. This study was later translated into Japanese. Nara produced a new installation work for *Faultlines*, *Tobiu*, which was made in response to the generational boundaries that have led to the slow disappearance of villages in rural Japan. In *Tobiu*, Nara explored the aesthetics of the unfinished by using local Ainu myths to speak about regeneration and childhood in a forgotten part of Japan – a work described by critics as one of his most political to date. One direct consequence of this collaboration is a monograph project on Nara Yoshitomo that Koon is currently researching and which will feature *Tobiu* as a marker of an artistic shift. The publication date of this book is 2020.

The *Faultlines* curatorial project was also informed by Koon's research interest in how art can engage with and transform the cultural context and history of specific sites. For example, her research shows how Luo Ping's *Ghost Amusement* painting, after it moved to Guangdong, was reframed as a response to the Opium War and the shifting relationships between China and Britain

[3.4]. The Gwangju Biennale serves as a memorial to the 1980 civil uprising during which it is estimated that at least a hundred civilians died. *Faultlines* sought to foster relationships between artists and the local community through Koon’s commissioning and curatorial selection of works of art that interact and engage with their context of exhibition and its history. For example, Koon began following the work of Simon Leung in 2010 after reviewing his *Rehearsal for a Squatting Project*. For the Gwangju Biennale, Leung produced a new performance piece, *Rehearsal for 9 Collective Movements* where he uses an iconic newspaper image of a 1967 Hong Kong riot scene from his earlier project to engage in a performative dialogue about “movements” that resonates with Gwangju’s own political past. Koon’s interest in using oral history and archives in her research to collect and produce data on contemporary art is reflected in the Biennale with the creation of an interactive library, *Afterwords*. This was an auxiliary part of the exhibition, featuring tablets loaded with interviews with the artists and encouraging greater audience engagement and self-learning.

### (3) References to the research

- 3.1 Koon, Yeewan. “Faultlines: Stories from the Borders of Imagined Belonging,” in *Imagined Borders: 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale 2018*, Exhibition Catalogue (Seoul: Gwangju Biennale Foundation), 192–249.
- 3.2 Koon, Yeewan. “The Artist Behind the Camera: Yoshitomo Nara,” in *Life is Only One: Yoshitomo Nara*, Exhibition Catalogue (Hong Kong: Asia Society, 2015).
- 3.3 Koon, Yeewan. *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing* Exhibition Catalogue (Hong Kong: Asia Society, 2014).
- 3.4 Koon, Yeewan. *A Defiant Brush: Su Renshan (1814–c.1850) and the Politics of Painting in Early 19<sup>th</sup> century Guangdong*. (U of Hong Kong Press and U of Hawaii Press, 2014).

### Selected Grants:

“Faultlines; Everyday Borders” exhibition at the 12th Gwangju Biennale 2018  
 Arts Development Council, Hong Kong      Value of Grant: HK\$259,600  
 Japan Foundation      Value of Grant: JPY1,500,000 (HK\$104,000)  
 Two private donations support      Value of Grants: HK\$120,000  
 Koon was also awarded an HKU Knowledge Exchange Impact Project Grant 2018/19 of HK\$80,750 for the “Afterwords” section of the exhibition.

Grant Title: “Su Renshan (1814–c. 1850) Template of a Modern Artist”

Sponsor: RGC General Research Fund (GRF) Grant (HKU 745309H)

Value of Grant/Period: HK\$368,072 / September 2009–February 2013

### (4) Details of the impact

#### ***Global Reach and Significance of the Faultlines Exhibition for the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale***

A biennale (<https://www.gwangjubiennale.org/en/foundation/history.do>) is a large-scale international contemporary art exhibition that takes place every two years. The Gwangju Biennale was founded in 1995 and is Asia’s oldest biennale of contemporary art. It was ranked fifth most important biennale in the world by Artnet News in 2014, which further declared that its “budget, attendance, and clout” placed it “undoubtedly in the first rank of world art spectaculars.” Held in the city of Gwangju in South Korea – the symbolically-charged site of the 1980 pro-democracy uprising – the 2018 session ran for 66 days, from September 7 to November 11, 2018, with a total audience of 320,000, more than 21% greater than for the previous biennale [5.1]. The 12<sup>th</sup> Biennale featured 11 curators, seven sectional exhibitions, and 165 artists, all of whom responded in some form to the theme of *Imagined Borders* inspired by the work of Benedict Anderson in a self-reflexive echo of the Biennale’s inaugural edition in 1995. Koon is the first female curator from Hong Kong to have curated an exhibition at the Biennale and was specifically invited to do so as a result of her research in contemporary and historical Chinese art. According to the Biennale’s Director of Exhibition Department, *Faultlines* “served as the anchor in the Biennale’s first ever

expansion into [the Asia Culture Center] as another primary venue. Beautifully installed and well balanced between works that were challenging and those that were accessible to a broader audience, [the] exhibition presented a welcome contrast to the rest of the Biennale” [5.2]. *Faultlines* featured works by 24 artists from Cuba, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Turkey, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea, Bangladesh, India, Japan, Hong Kong and Mainland China. Koon was directly responsible for 12 artists and shared responsibility for three others with her co-curator, Dr Yeon Shim Chung of Hongik University. Some were new or emerging artists on the international scene, while others had already achieved considerable recognition, including Francis Alÿs, Tara Donovan and Nara Yoshitomo. Koon took part in public talks held as part of the Biennale and contributed to its catalogue, of which 21,000 copies were printed. The Biennale was officially opened by South Korea’s First Lady, Kim Jeong Sook. Koon’s curatorial selections for *Faultlines* featured prominently in the extensive international media coverage of the Biennale. This attests to the quality of her curatorial work and was effective in disseminating works of art to broader transnational audiences, contributing to artist esteem, and raising awareness of the Biennale. Three of the artists in Koon’s exhibition were selected in Art Radar’s “Six Artists Highlights from the Gwangju Biennale.” *Korea JoongAng Daily* listed Kcho’s *Para Olvidar* and Byron Kim’s *Bruise* among its “ten must-see works” at the Biennale. In a review for Artnet News, Hili Perlson praised Koon’s *Faultlines* as “brilliantly curated” [5.3].

### ***Impact on Contributing Artists***

Koon’s research for the exhibition resulted in the commissioning of 13 new artworks, accounting for 30% of works shown in *Faultlines*. World-renowned Japanese artist Nara Yoshitomo has credited Koon for her persistence and dedicated research that prompted him to expand what had been a largely private project to the international stage. He is now considering bringing part of this project to his retrospective exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum of Art scheduled for 2020. Of his collaboration with Koon for the Biennale, Nara states: “This really felt like a collaborative conversation between a curator and an artist.” He adds that, “I rarely work in this way with curators – few curators would challenge me quite as much as Yeewan did. I found working with Yeewan on the Biennale very rewarding as an artist in the following ways: her scholarly research, her dedication and commitment to her vision of the exhibition, her appreciation of artists” [5.4].

Koon’s research interest in context-based art influenced several of the artists to engage with the Gwangju community to develop a work for the Biennale. Works by Ching, Motoyuki, Yum, and Leung functioned as an interface between artists and locals in ways that transformed and benefited both parties. One example is Simon Leung’s *Rehearsal for 9 Collective Movements*, in which local high-school students were used as actors in a performance piece that drew connections between Gwangju and Hong Kong through their respective histories of protest. According to Daphne Chu of Artforum, this piece “works similarly to the demonstrations in Gwangju in 1980 [by] changing the civil dialogue of its city.” Leung worked closely with Koon in the implementation of the work and considers his participation in the Biennale “a highlight of [his] 30 year career” and “an invaluable experience in his continual work.” He has “received very positive feedback on the project” and plans to present its next iterations in Hong Kong and various North American cities [5.5].

By encouraging artists to produce works that were personally challenging and including them in the Biennale, *Faultlines* benefited the artists in multiple ways. Post-Gwangju Biennale, Luke Ching states that Koon’s inclusion of his work, “definitely helped to raise [his] international profile” [5.6]. He has been shortlisted for the 2019 Visible Award, the first international production award devoted to artwork in the social sphere. As a direct result of his work at Gwangju Biennale, Ching is currently in discussion with the Helsinki International Artist Programme, Finland. The Director of the Karin Weber Gallery in Hong Kong, which represents Ching, has stated that the artist’s inclusion in one of the most important biennales will add prestige to his portfolio and impress the Gallery’s clients [5.7]. According to Paolo Cirio, having his social-algorithmic art featured in *Faultlines* has helped transcend more restrictive categorisations of his work as digital or media art by placing it within a broader context that “makes it more acceptable.” Koon’s curatorial

work brought Cirio's art into contact with more traditional forms, a process that he feels has affected his work's reception and cultural value [5.8].

***Afterwords: Transforming Visitor Awareness of Issues, Artists, and Contemporary Art***

*Faultlines* included an innovative space for visitors to engage with contextualising materials, reflect on their experiences, and voice their own responses. Called *Afterwords*, this interactive space offered an inviting environment for exploration, contemplation, and engagement. It contained digital tablets by means of which visitors could access and watch (or read) 13 new artist interviews produced by Koon and her team and posted on a specially designed website, which had over 50,250 views during the period of the exhibition [5.9]. Post-Gwangju, the content is being hosted on the Fine Arts Department's website and has entered the Gwangju Biennale's digital archives. In addition to a library of books on art, history, and theory that visitors could read on site or make note of for future reference, *Afterwords* provided various outlets for audience response, including a public survey (print and online) and a visitor's book.

Seventy-one percent of 126 respondents felt that *Faultlines* made them think about borders in a different way [5.9]. The exhibition prompted visitors to extend their perceptions of borders beyond the merely "physical [and] visible" to more abstract forms, and to perceive art as a vehicle for recognising these borders and their effects. Borders, according to one visitor, "can be also 'detected' by looking at norms, and art exactly acts as an intermediary material object that lets us imagine alternative/new realities and rethink the borders that structure our lives." For this visitor, Ching's work "epitomises the idea that imagination can be a tactic in rethinking and reflecting on the politics of borders." The exhibition further highlighted the lived consequences of borders. Cirio's *Obscurity* "made [one visitor] consider [...] the border separating [their] public/digital life from [their] private life – how porous that actually is and the extent to which this porousness makes [them] vulnerable" [5.9]. Eighty-two percent of surveyed visitors discovered new artists through *Faultlines*, and 80% agreed that the *Afterwords* section was helpful in understanding the exhibition as a whole. *Afterwords* allowed audiences to learn directly from the artists, enhancing their appreciation of contemporary art: "I could hear more about the artists' own stories and know more about the process of making their artworks." The library was useful because it "inform[ed] the curatorial thesis thematically," and facilitated visitors' desire "to sit and think" about what they had seen [5.9]. Michelle Wong of Asia Art Archive called *Afterwords*, "a powerful and important reminder of the artists' practices beyond the framing of *Faultlines* as an exhibition," and felt that the materials situated "the selected works into a larger discursive realm and encouraged [her] to link the works on view to larger questions" [5.10].

**(5) Sources to corroborate the impact**

- 5.1 Breakdown of visitors to the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale.
- 5.2 Statement from the Gwangju Biennale Foundation's Director of Exhibition Department, James B. Lee.
- 5.3 Media reports.
- 5.4 Statement from Nara Yoshitomo.
- 5.5 Statement from Simon Leung.  
Daphne Chu, review of Gwangju Biennale for Artforum, September 17, 2018.  
<https://www.artforum.com/diary/daphne-chu-at-the-12th-gwangju-biennale-76642>
- 5.6 Statement from Luke Ching.
- 5.7 Statement from the Director of the Karin Weber Gallery.
- 5.8 Audio statement from Paolo Cirio.
- 5.9 Website statistics and comments from visitors to the exhibition.
- 5.10 Statement from Michelle Wong, Asia Art Archive.