



# ***Faultlines, 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale (2018), curatorial project***

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# Summary of the Impact

Dr. Yeewan Koon's co-curated exhibition (with Shim Chung Yeon) 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. The impact of the project included making an exhibition that transformed audience's understanding of borders - a subject of global importance and relevance; working with local communities and international artists; 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 also brought visitors from around the world to South Korea and received extensive press coverage and substantial international attention.





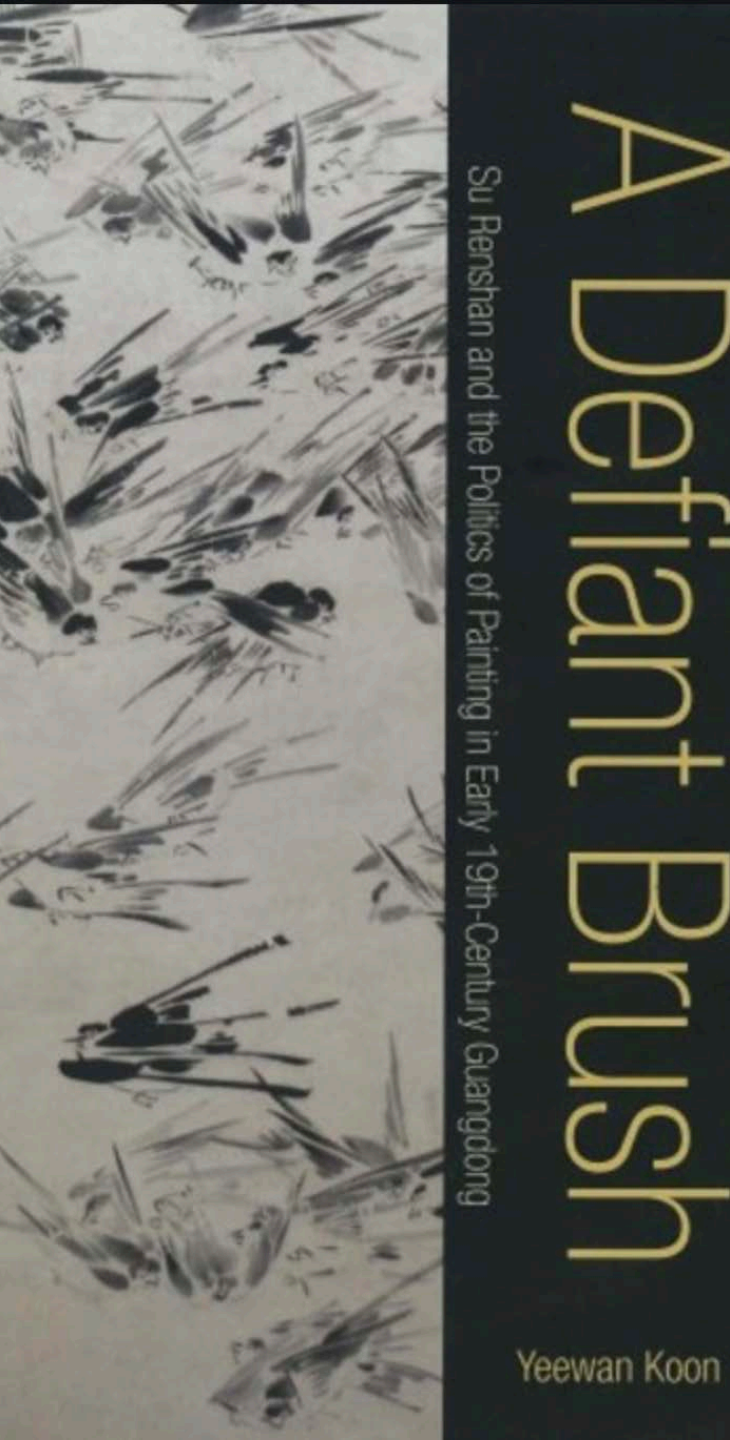


Exhibition images featuring artists (from RH  
clockwise): Nina Chanel Abney (USA), Kcho  
(Cuba), Yoan Capote (Cuba), Luke Ching (Hong  
Kong)





*Faultlines* artists from center clockwise:  
Tara Donovan (USA), Bryon Kim (USA),  
Shilpa Gupta (India), Bryon Kim (USA)



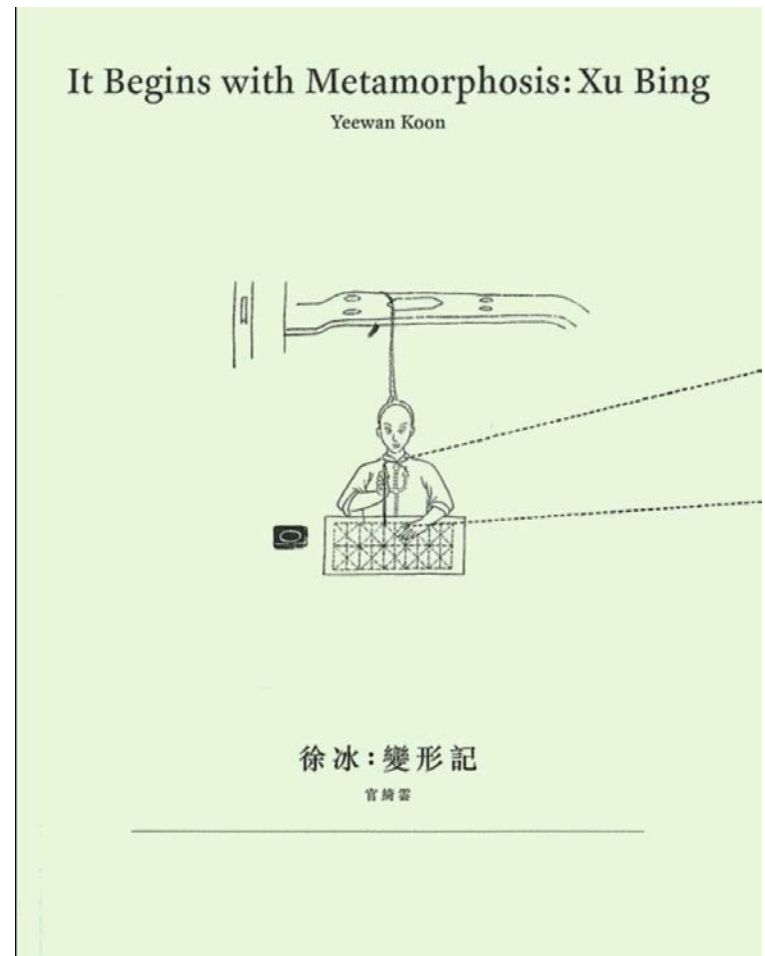
# Underpinning Research

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- This project is anchored by Koon's research interest in the conflicts and consequences that borders produce and reflected in her GRF-funded, book-length exploration of artistic iconoclasm, *A Defiant Brush* (2014). 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.

# Underpinning Research

Koon's curatorial experience and knowledge is deeply rooted in her 2014 exhibition *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing*. The exhibition explored how the internationally renowned artist uses the transformative powers of different materials to examine processes at work when boundaries—such as China/West, past/present—are crossed. Koon was also editor and contributor to the exhibition's catalogue, which featured responses from scholars from different fields to gain multiple perspectives of understanding how Xu Bing examines the consequences of border crossings. The success of the exhibition has been credited to Koon's "exceptional knowledge and contribution to the [Xu Bing] exhibition, the catalogue and all associated educational programs."







# Underpinning Research

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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". 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.



# Underpinning Research

- 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. 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 writing about his *Rehearsal for a Squatting Project* for the *Muse*. 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.

Simon Leung, *Rehearsal for 9 Collective Movements*, Performance 2018

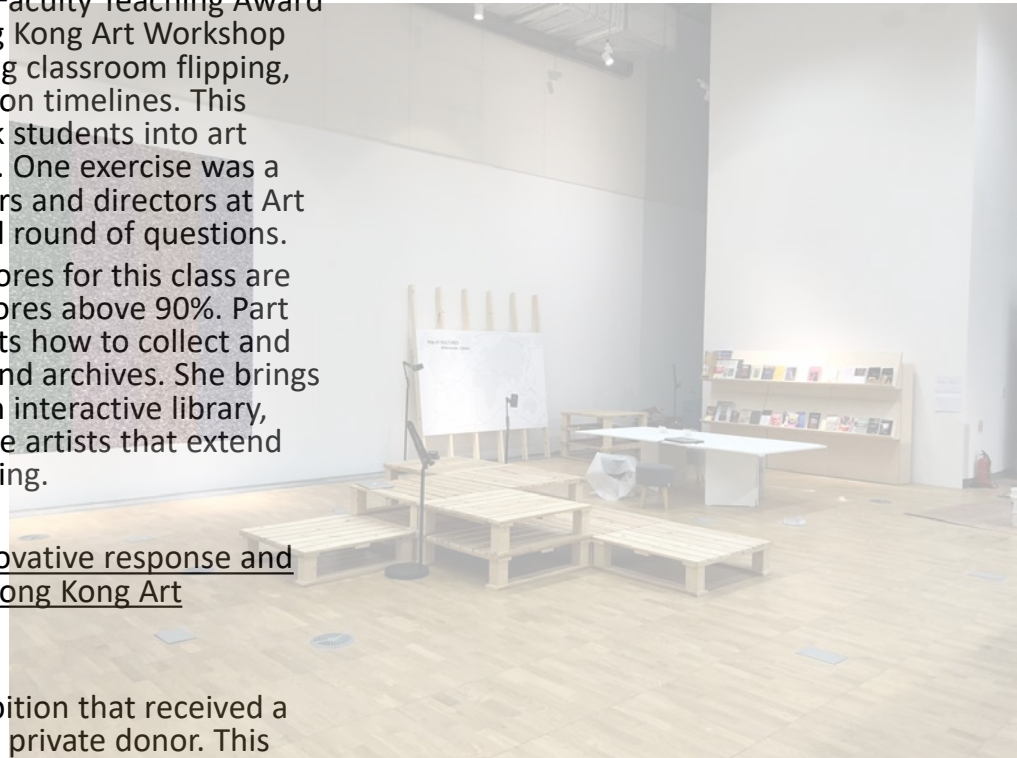


# Underpinning Research (teaching and learning)

Koon has been recognized for her teaching, receiving a Faculty Teaching Award (2013- 2014). In Spring 2016, she revived the class Hong Kong Art Workshop by introducing innovative pedagogical methods including classroom flipping, oral field research and building a new research website on timelines. This course, in collaboration with Asia Art Archives, also took students into art professional environments such as Art Basel Hong Kong. One exercise was a “speed-dating” Q&A session with leading artists, curators and directors at Art Basel, where students quizzed cultural leaders in a rapid round of questions. The Student Evaluation Teaching and Learning (SETL) scores for this class are now among the highest within the department, with scores above 90%. Part of the success of the class is how she has taught students how to collect and make data on contemporary art through oral histories and archives. She brings these methods into the biennale with the creation of an interactive library, *Afterwords*, which includes tablets with interviews of the artists that extend the exhibition space into one that allowed for self-learning.

The inclusion of a research lab in an exhibition is an innovative response and directly drawn from practices from Koon’s teaching of Hong Kong Art workshop at HKU.

*Afterwords* was a sub-project within the *Faultlines* exhibition that received a KE project award from HKU and external funding from a private donor. This sub-project also involved students from Koon’s Hong Kong Art Workshop.



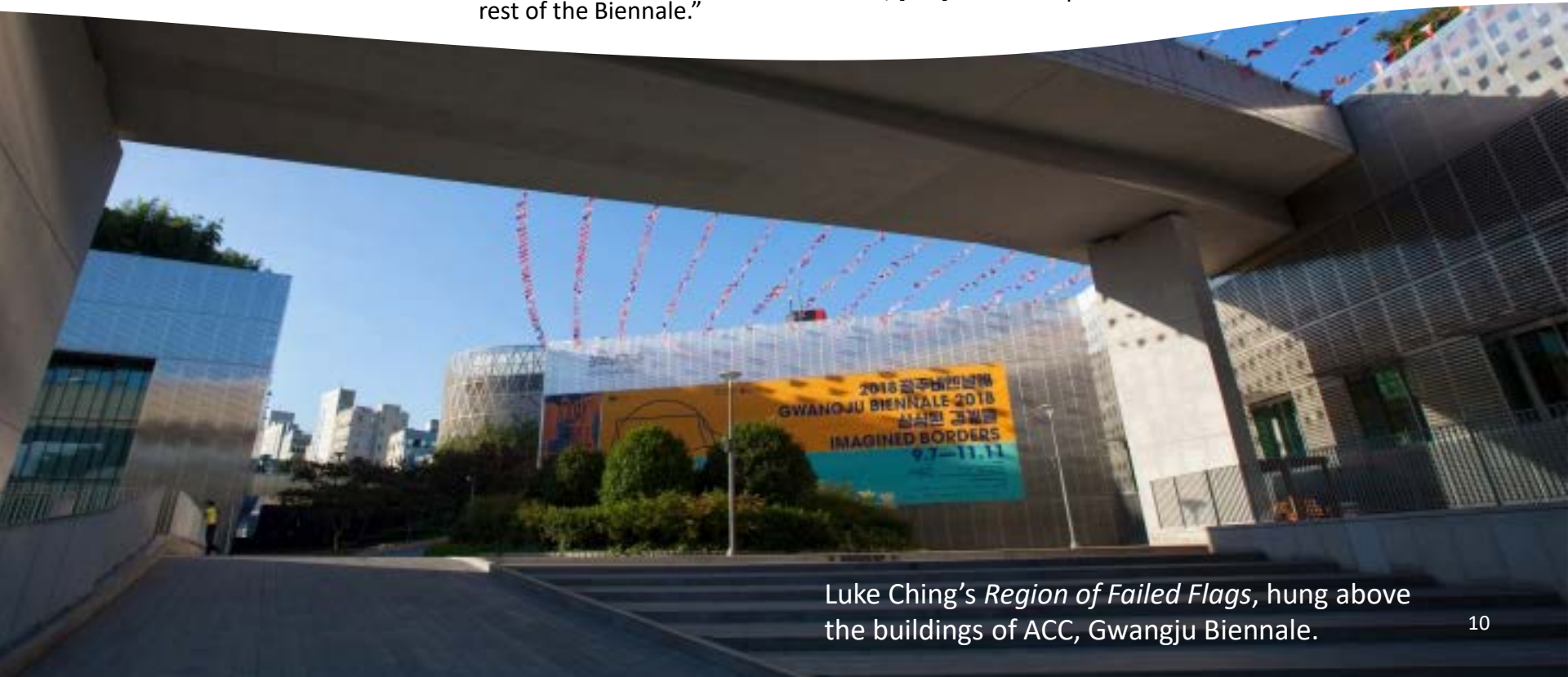
## ***Global Reach and Significance of the Faultlines Exhibition for the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale***

The Gwangju Biennale was founded in 1995 and is Asia's oldest biennale of contemporary art. It is ranked fifth most important biennale in the world by Artnet News. 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.

## **Engagement**

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, and her work on contemporary Hong Kong and Japanese art. As co-curator, Koon was directly responsible for working with 12 artists, and co-curated 3 others in a show of 24. She was also responsible for the design of the exhibition, the catalogue essays, and the production of *Afterwords*.

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."



Luke Ching's *Region of Failed Flags*, hung above the buildings of ACC, Gwangju Biennale.

# Engagement (and impact)

A successful biennale exhibition is reflected by the curator's ability to select a group of different types of artists to examine some of the complex issues of both local and global consequences. Working with artists include studio visits, discussions throughout their creative progress, seek additional funding, and to produce an installation design that can carry the curatorial message. The aim is to communicate the significance of the artworks to the public and prompt reflections of the theme. The following are some of the different steps involved in generating meaningful engagement for artists and audience:

***Global engagement with artists:*** *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 including Francis Alÿs (based in Mexico), Tara Donovan (USA), Nara Yoshitomo (Japan), Yoan Capote (Cuba), Paolo Cirio (Italy), Simon Leung (USA/HK) and Luke Ching (HK). Koon also “returned” artists and artworks from the first Gwangju Biennale (“Beyond the Borders”) to reflect on how concepts of borders have changed since 1995, providing a historical reflection to the 2018 Biennale's theme. One such work was Cuban artist Kcho's *Para Olvidar (To Forget)*, a boat on a sea of beer bottles which won the first Grand Jury Prize. This was a difficult piece to return – from the problems of installing an older work in a more modern space to talking to an artist who was under surveillance during the time of preparation. Koon had to seek different methods of connecting with the artist and learning about the work. Her successful installation of *Para Olvidar* was rewarded by critics who named this work as a “must-see.” Kcho, now free to leave his home, is planning a retrospective show, which will include another iteration of this work.

***Engagement with artists who are self-taught (outsider) or are new to audiences in Asia:*** An important engagement was to include “outsider artists” and Koon worked with Xiyadie, a Beijing based gay artist who makes traditional woodcuts on themes related to his homosexual identity. His work has routinely been banned in China, which added to the challenge of getting his works across the borders. By including his work, the exhibition engaged audiences with some of the difficulty of border crossing that are invisible to most people. The success of the exhibition has achieved positive economic impact for Xiyadie, a factory worker in China, by introducing his work to a larger international audience.

***Engagement with audiences through public events and texts:*** As part of the public side of connecting artists, artworks with a larger audience, Koon took part in a series of public talks and contributed to its catalogue, of which 21,000 copies were printed.





Outsider artist Xiyadie's series of woodcuts of his sexual identity as gay man in China. These are works that he cannot openly exhibit in China.









Koon also selected artists who are less well known in Asia including Nina Chanel Abney, a young African-American artist whose work draws on issues related to Black Lives Matter and American military history. This history also resonates with Gwangju's own political and military past.



# Engagement (and Impacts Achieved)

## *Faultline's library "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. Post-Gwangju, the content is being hosted on the Fine Arts Department's website (<https://finearts.hku.hk/afterwords-faultlines/>) 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.
- 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. 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."



# Impacts Achieved

## *Impact on Contributing Artists*

- The Biennale was officially opened by South Korea's First Lady, Kim Jeong Sook. It received 320,000 visitors, more than 20% higher than the previous edition. 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"
- 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.



# Impacts Achieved

## *Impact on Contributing Artists (continued)*

By encouraging artists to produce works that were personally challenging and including them in the Biennale, *Faultlines* benefited the artists in multiple ways including building international reputation, opening doors to new opportunities and enhancing economic value of artists. Post-Gwangju Biennale, **Luke Ching** states that Koon's inclusion of his work, "definitely helped to raise [his] international profile." He was 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, Luke Ching was invited to join the artists residency programme at the **Helsinki International Artist Programme, Finland**. The Director of the Karin Weber Gallery in Hong Kong, which represents Luke 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. 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 transformed his work's reception and cultural value, as well as the public's perception of what qualifies as art.

[helsinki-international.artist-programme](https://helsinki-international.artist-programme)

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← PAST RESIDENTS

LUKE CHING CHIN WAI

COMMUNITY ARTS /  
PHOTOGRAPHY / VISUAL ARTS /  
WRITER  
HONG KONG



# Impacts Achieved

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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 bringing part of this project to his retrospective exhibition at LACMA scheduled to open in July 2020. This exhibition will travel to major global institutions including Yuz Museum, Shanghai. Of his collaboration with Koon for the Biennale, Nara states: “This really felt like a collaborative conversation between a curator and an artist. I was very touched and indeed inspired to create new works for the Gwangju Biennale after our conversations.” 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.”

Working with Yoshitomo Nara for Gwangju also led to Koon’s next research book project. The first-ever monograph of the artist was published in March 2020 by Phaidon. It is also being translated into in Chinese, Korean and Japanese with expected publication in 2021.



# Impacts Achieved

The success of *Faultlines* at the Gwangju Biennale has led to an invitation to curate the first major group exhibition of Hong Kong artists as a satellite event of the inaugural Helsinki Biennale (postponed to June 2021).

The exhibition will be held at the historical site of Levyhalli on the UNESCO island of Suomenlinna, Finland. The project is supported by Arts Promotion Office (LSCD, HK) and in collaboration with HIAP, a leading non-profit arts organization in Finland.