

Seoul Biennale, or Committing to Place

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Set in the center of a dynamic metropolis, how do you curate an exhibition on urbanism, a biennale on the contemporary city? For the 2017 Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, the key to this challenge lay in the idea of place as a critical constituent of the cosmopolitan, transnational gaze. In other words, the organization of the Seoul Biennale – centered on the three major curatorial sections of the Thematic, the Cities Exhibition, and Live Projects – is best explained by the way each section sets up a relation with its immediate site as well as the global network of places in which it participates.

If we assume that places are created not by buildings but by human commitment, we must then ask whether an international biennale can be a part of a place-making process. I state that commitment to a place is not confined to those who take permanent residence. As an ethical stance, commitment separates itself from both universalism and parochialism. Commitment is a sense of responsibility to others, wherever they may reside. It is a conscious understanding that each person's well-being is contingent on a wider set of human relations. Whatever success or failure may be claimed, the key ambition of the Seoul Biennale was to become part of a place making process.

In different ways, the Seoul Biennale thus entered into the fray of the political economy of a diverse array of places: a star architect's spectacle of a gallery, the live sites of urban production, and a new type of public space. Through its curatorial engagements, it demonstrates that space and place are central to workings of capitalism and governance. As a theoretical statement, it was David Harvey who most clearly articulated this dynamic between location and mobility with the notion of "the spatial fix": "capitalism has to fix space (in immoveable structures of transport and communication networks, as well as in built environments of factories, roads, houses, water supplies, and other physical infrastructures) in order to overcome space (achieve a liberty of movement through low transport and communication costs)." In as much as the

commons can be understood as a critical transformation of capitalism and the public body, the Seoul Biennale is not only an exhibition about the fixed spaces of the contemporary city but also a testing ground for the commons. It is not only about the commons as an entity but also a small but intricate part of the process of "commoning." Presented in a city undergoing major transformation, not as in previous decades one of redevelopment and physical expansion but that of its culture and social fabric, the Seoul Biennale is specific to its moment and location. In times when all over the world nationalistic impulses and identity politics are taking on fascist forms, a biennale of the city requires a commitment to the here and now; that is, to a global sense of place.