

Flash Art



*Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
with architect Frank Gehry (left) and director Thomas Krens (right)*

Interpreted by Mark Kostabi



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EVERYDAY LIFE, MEMORY AND HISTORY

CHAN-KYOUNG PARK

OF THE FIVE satellite exhibitions surrounding the main exhibition of the Kwangju Biennale, "Everyday Life, Memory and History" is the most meticulously crafted and informative. Jin-Song Kim, the exhibition's curator, chronologically catalogues popular Korean culture from the time of liberation to the present. He provided a synthetic identity to each historical period and genre of mass media. Images are categorized under specific definitions that describe each era as follows: the initial era as "Social Chaos and Fragmentation"; the 50s as "War and Poverty"; the 60s as "Development and Social Mobilization"; the 70s as "Oppression and Protest"; the 80s as "Conflict for Democratization"; and the 90s as "Ideological De-mythologization and Consumerism." Jin-Song Kim maintains the classical definitive dichotomy, or binary opposition, between "high art" and mass media. His collection of mass media is truly encyclopedic and includes hundreds of cartoons, propaganda posters, political slo-

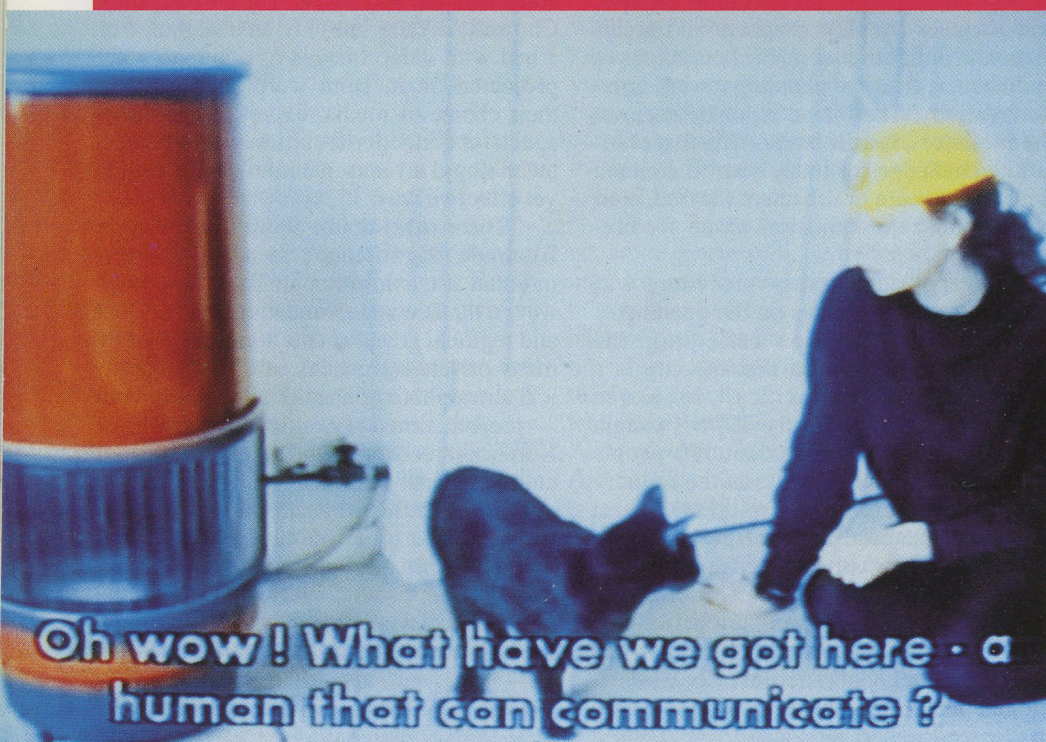
gans, advertisements, trade marks, film posters, magazines, television ads, fashion and even architecture.

At first glance, this kind of edifying narrative appears heavily indebted to antecedent left-wing strategies that sought to de-mystify art by utilizing ordinary images that put meaning within the grasp of a general audience. This sort of informative methodology was popular in Korea during the 1980s and therefore seems somewhat repetitive. Significantly, however, such a thorough and comprehensive description had not been made until this collection was assembled. So, although the curator's taxonomy is not original, its scope and commentary are. Until now, such an extensive cultural retrospective was impossible in Korea due to the very cultural phenomena that this exhibition endeavors to expose. These are modern Korean paintings and images. Frenzied speed along with grotesque, loose and inadvertent style are central thematic concerns. These images are definitive cultural moments. A chronological exhibition of these images, is therefore like a highly charged historical narrative that can also contain a particularly poignant political statement, especially within the Korean context. Moreover, when this exhibition is viewed against the backdrop of the main exhibition at the Biennale, "Unmapping the Earth" — which places importance on a "nomadic" and deconstructive postmodern view of the world — this exhibition appears all the more dramatic. "Everyday Life, Memory and History" is a stunning portrait of Korea that seeks to construct rather than

deconstruct by using Korea's most powerful modernist imagery. The depth and authenticity of this perspective lies in the discovery of how Korean art and culture has lost its nerve in the face of government interference, control and censorship and more exactly, how the division of Korea into communist North and non-communist South, has functioned as an alibi for the ascendance of the "aesthetics of government." The vital role of the proliferation of multiple pornographic images — the overt pornography of advertising as well as the truly overt — in the alteration of the Korean cultural landscape was also well documented here. This may have led to the creation of a special section for Korean kitsch paintings regarded as objects of the economy of desire. The artworks located mainly at the latter part of the exhibition, characterized by the work of Young-Tae Kim, Bul-Ddong Park, Jung-Hwa Choi and Kong-Gi Lee can be classified into a fascinating pop-art genre that could be called "Cultural-Colonialist Pop" because of its captivating depiction, of cultural colonialism through pop images. These works are both sensational and anti-state. Due to the sophistication of their commentary, these works provide an excellent conclusion to this collection. The remarkable nature of this retrospective exhibition lies in the diverse mixture of imagery that allows the audience to view the under-currents that drag it along in the same way that an x-ray makes symptoms and ailments visible to a patient. ■

(Translated from Korean by Nathan Dooley)
Chan-Kyong Park is a critic based in Seoul.

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Above: CHUNG MUONG HWA, Koreatown: Cityscape — Town of Babel, 1996. Slide projection, 15 x 10".
Left: GEORGINA STARR, video still.