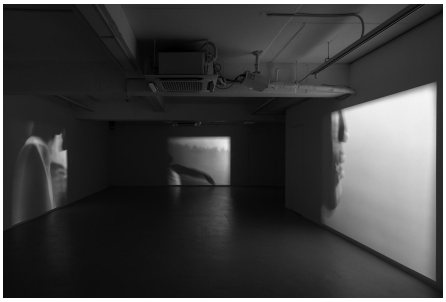
And I dance into the future with the past, as a bird

by Haruko Kumakura

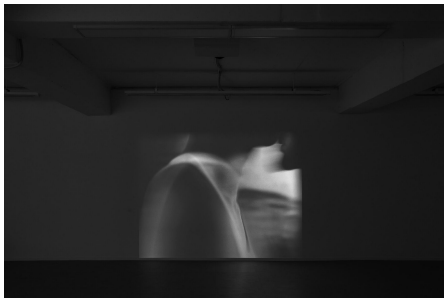
Published on 27.12.2024



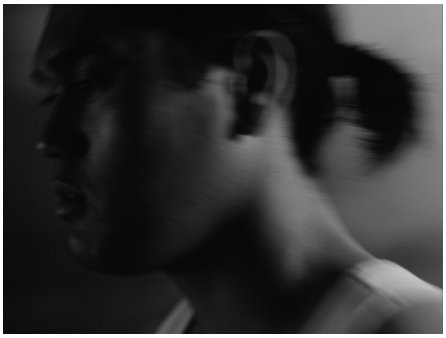
Shannon Te Ao, *Ia rā, ia rā (rere runga, rere raro) - Everyday (I fly high, I fly low)*, 2021. Three-channel video with sound. Courtesy of Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: STUDIO POSSIBLE ZONE.



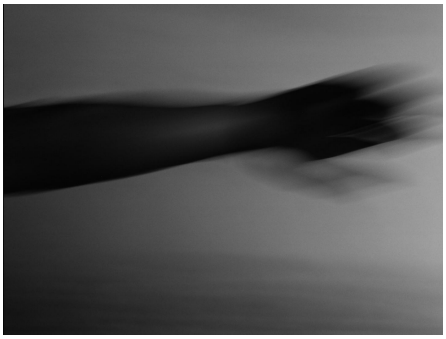
Shannon Te Ao, *Ia rā, ia rā (rere runga, rere raro) - Everyday (I fly high, I fly low)*, 2021. Three-channel video with sound. Courtesy of Office for Contemporary Art Aotearoa.



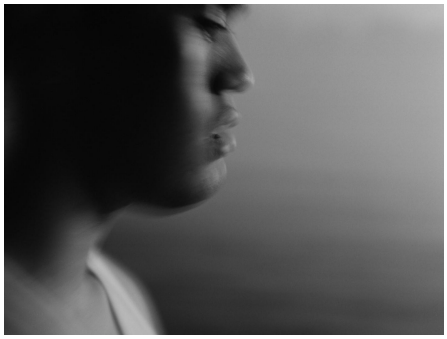
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Curator Haruko Kumakura meditates on Shannon Te Ao's Ia rā, ia rā (rere runga, rere raro) - Everyday (I fly high, I fly low) *(2021), Aotearoa New Zealand's presentation at the 15th Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. Recalling the political history of the Biennale, established to commemorate the lives lost during the pro-democracy Gwangju Uprising in 1980, and the attempts of this year's edition to propose new modes of relationality for the Anthropocene, Kumakura identifies Te Ao's work—and its rhetoric of the pīwakawaka (fantail)—as bringing into focus what the thematic exhibition of the Biennale misses: a meaningful weaving together of the voices of the past, present and future.*

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On 3 December 2024, at 22:22, two days after the closing of the Gwangju Biennale, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol described the opposition-controlled parliament as "anti-state forces" trying to "paralyse government functions,"[01] and declared martial law. A few hours later, protesting citizens and lawmakers gathered at the National Assembly, where lawmakers who had arrived inside the assembly hall unanimously passed a resolution demanding the lifting of the martial law. President Yoon did so at around 5am on December 4, and the situation de-escalated in about six hours. The last time South Korea was under martial law was in 1980. Under the military regime, all political activities, including demonstrations and assemblies, were banned nationwide (except on Jeju Island), and speech was tightly controlled. The military was deployed in Gwangju on 18 May 1980 to suppress student and citizen protests calling for democratisation, and the military crackdown on civilians escalated day by day, resulting in a massacre of many citizens. The South Korean officials announced that almost 200 people had been killed, but the actual number of victims is believed to have been in the thousands.[02]

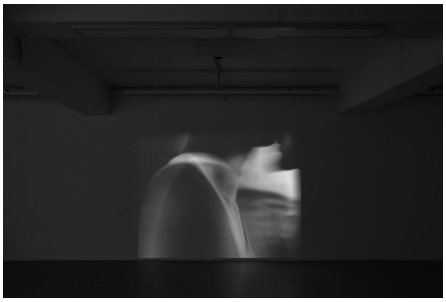
The Gwangju Biennale, first held in 1995, was established to commemorate and honour the Gwangju democratic movement. It is one of the oldest international contemporary art exhibitions in Asia. From the beginning, it aimed to become an international hub for contemporary art in Asia, and the important roles of artistic directors, curators and commissioners have been filled not only by Korea- or Asia-based curators but also by internationally renowned curators such as Harald Szeemann, Hou Hanru, Okwui Enwezor, Massimiliano Gioni and Maria Lind. The curatorial team for this year's 15th edition of the biennale is led by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, and the title is *PANSORI: A Soundscape of the 21st Century*. *Pansori*, a traditional Korean art form, involves storytelling through the performance of a solo singer and drummer, where *pan* means a public space and *sori* means sound;

literally, ‘the noise from the public place’. This exhibition aimed to rethink the “relational space”[03] in which humans, machines, animals, spirits and organic life coexist, through various works that focus not only on visual elements but also on sound as a vehicle for democratic expression. However, the main venue, the Biennale Hall, left me questioning whether the ‘soundscape’ described in the subtitle actually materialised within the exhibition space. The relationships between the works and the overall structure of the exhibition did not always seem to correspond with the theme, while each work stood separately and rarely coexisted with other works in the ‘relational space’. At least when I visited, the grandeur of Asia’s oldest biennale, which once boasted higher attendance than documenta or the Venice Biennale, [04] was nowhere to be seen.

On the other hand, a work by Aotearoa New Zealand artist Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Ngāti Te Rangiita, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui) was not part of the above-mentioned thematic exhibition. Instead, it was part of a new initiative, the Pavilion Project, launched in 2018 to expand and form networks with domestic and international art institutions. The Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion, which was curated by Karl Chitham and realised by a partnership between Te Tuhi, The Dowse Art Museum and the Office for Contemporary Art Aotearoa, was not located within the Asia Cultural Center, where many national pavilions are positioned, but was displayed at the Suha Gallery in the city. Stepping into the gallery space, one was greeted by large black-and-white images projected on three walls, accompanied by a voice singing in te reo Māori (the Māori language) without a backing track. There were no subtitles or textual information, so those without knowledge of te reo would not understand the words that were being sung. However, the exhibition space created a tranquil atmosphere where you would want to walk around and spend time; it felt like a cool breeze was blowing past your head and body, which were heated by walking through the vast Biennale venue and the city.



Shannon Te Ao, *Ia rā, ia rā (rere runga, rere raro) - Everyday (I fly high, I fly low)*, 2021. Three-channel video with sound. Courtesy of Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: STUDIO POSSIBLE ZONE.



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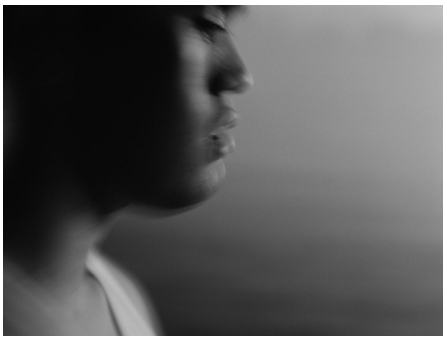
The exhibited work, *Ia rā, ia rā (rere runga, rere raro) – Everyday (I fly high, I fly low)*, from 2021, like Te Ao's other recent works, centres on an original song that works as both a script and a score, composed and sung by Kurt Komene, a frequent collaborator with the artist. Te Ao says there is no specific model or fixed process for producing work with collaborators; in this case, the song was the first piece of material and they built everything else around it. For Te Ao, Komene is a dear friend and a mentor in many respects. The lyrics were born from their long conversations, during which they often talked about birds while they delved into deeper reflections on life and what might lie beyond it—whatever that may be, as he puts it. The protagonist of the song is the pīwakawaka (fantail), a small bird native to Aotearoa, which in Māori mythology is connected to Tāne Mahuta (god of the forest) and the demi-god Māui, and is often associated with life and death. In Japanese mythology, the wagtail, which belongs to the same order as the fantail, Passeriformes, appears as a bird that suggests how the gods gave birth to the land. Perhaps the ancient peoples, observing these small, agile birds flying freely, low among the trees or in the sky, imagined not only the visible natural world before them but also the intangible worlds of life and death, the past, present and future, moving freely within their territory. Te Ao mentions that the simple lyrics of the bird can be an inventive place that contains all kinds of complexity.

The still images projected on the walls show two people moving as themselves and at the same time as if identifying with the pīwakawaka, as "vessels for other stories as well," Te Ao tells me in a Zoom conversation. "The dancers can be me and my late father,

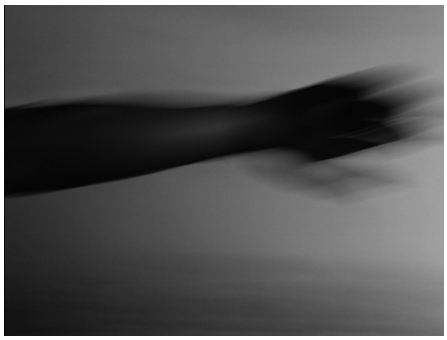
life and death, here and not here, or also two parts of one thing." He then shares that the reason for his decision not to have subtitles, or even handouts of printed lyrics for the song, is that "what was in the lyrics of the song doesn't naturally exist outside the reo world." He also mentions that all his work is a physical experience connected to time and space, and he doesn't want viewers to be distracted by reading English subtitles. The shoot took place in a studio, with an image of a hill near Taupō in the central North Island of Aotearoa—where many of his ancestors including his father are buried—projected as a backdrop for the dancers. He says that this work is in a way a response to a story of his father, who went to the hill at the time of the loss of his own father, as told to Te Ao by his grandmother.



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What does it mean to present Te Ao's work in Gwangju, a sacred site for democratisation? A Māori proverb that provides the title for Te Ao's 2020 work *Ka mua, ka muri*, and translates as "Walk backwards into the future"—meaning to move into the future with one's ancestors before one—suggests an approach to life distinguished from Western society's understanding of reality (which, through the impacts of colonialism and capitalism, has become the dominant understanding of reality worldwide). In contrast, this whakataukī (proverb) encourages ongoing dialogue with the ever-expanding past, receiving it in both hands, and only through this process can the future take shape as the past. In this sense, the Māori worldview, where the past, present and future coexist inseparably, offers us a profound lesson.

Looking at the state of biennales around the world, where the significance of national pavilions in the Venice Biennale model is diminishing and most exhibitions are now in the form of thematic programmes akin to documenta,[05] the Gwangju Biennale may seem, in a sense, to be going against the tide. Additionally, the practice of appointing 'star' curators as artistic directors feels increasingly outdated. In this Biennale, though unintended, Te Ao's work was one of the featured works that most aptly responded to the main theme, expanding its framework in meaningful ways. What does the Gwangju Biennale need today, considering the social, political and ecological narratives we are all in? It should not be discussed based on a borrowed framework that clings to an unshakable 'good old' Western-centric worldview, but rather from a multiplicity of perspectives and voices that help us reconnect with a worldview where the past, present and future, life and death, the natural world and the spiritual world exist inseparably and simultaneously. It is this kind of intelligence that I believe will guide us to a world that is both ancient and new.

Footnotes

01. Kazuki Koike, "Yun daitouryou no kaigenrei danwa," *Yomiuri Shimbun* onrain ["President Yoon's Martial Law Statement," *Yomiuri Newspaper* online], 4 December 2024, https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/20241204-OYT1T50001/.

02. “Flashback: The Kwangju Massacre,” *BBC News*, 17 May 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/752055.stm.

03. “Pansori: 24.9.7–24.12.1,” 15th Gwangju Biennale, accessed 18 December 2024, https://www.15gwangjubiennale.com/en.

04. Yongwoo Lee, “Case Studies: South Korea, Gwangju Biennale,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 12, no. 3 (2013): 88–90, https://yishu-online.com/wp-content/uploads/mm-products/uploads/2013_v12_03_lee_y_p088.pdf; “Retrospective,” documenta, accessed 18 December 2024, https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_ix; “The Biennale Arte 2022 Closes with Over 800,000 Tickets,” La Biennale di Venezia, accessed 18 December 2024, https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2022-closes-over-800000-tickets.

05. The 60th Venice Biennale in 2024 marked only the second time Aotearoa New Zealand has not had a national pavilion since it began participating in the Biennale in 2002. Also, Japan’s pavilion had a non-Japanese curator for the first time; the representing artist, Mohri Yuko, appointed the curator Sook-Kyung Lee, former Senior Curator, International Art at Tate and Commissioner and Curator for the Korea Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. It would thus be the time for us to reconsider the norms of ‘representation’ within the framework of a ‘national’ pavilion.

Biographies



Working predominantly with performance and film, the elegiac installations of Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Ngāti Te Rangiita, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui, b. 1978, Sydney) explore fraught dynamics of indigeneity, language and loss. Te Ao draws on a range of existing literary material, including Māori lyrical sources such as whakataukī and waiata, as well as poetic and lyrical texts from popular culture. Richly layered, Te Ao’s works enact a compression wherein past and present co-exist, and daily life is inextricably linked to multifarious social, cultural and philosophical histories.



Based in Tokyo, Haruko Kumakura served as a curator at the Mori Art Museum from 2011 to 2024. Currently, she works independently as a curator, writer, and part-time poet. During her tenure at the Mori Art Museum, Kumakura curated exhibitions including *MAM Project 023: Agatha Gothe-Snape* (2017), *Roppongi Crossing 2019: Connexions* (2019), *Listen to the Sound of the Earth Turning: Our Wellbeing since the Pandemic* (2022), *World Classroom: Contemporary Art through School Subjects* (2023), and *MAM Project 031: Jinushi Maiko* (2024).

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