

Mo Bahc, the global artworker and the possibility of the network

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This paper addresses how Bahc Yiso attained establishment in Korea through vocational labour and flexible authorial practice of his prior incarnation ‘Mo Bahc’ in New York. In relation to the post-1989 contemporary shift from New York to the global artworld and the notion of the networked artworker, it shows how Bahc authorially negotiated this terrain to significantly mediate in the formation of the Seoul artworld. It confirms the influence of the late-capitalist network in shaping the global contemporary artworld, but also demonstrates how the expansion of this field facilitated artworkers who desired to locate themselves beyond the Western institutional and intellectual frameworks of production. In conclusion, it asserts that to account for the progressive practice of a contemporary artworker one should critically attend to the entirety of their labour and agency in the network; beyond and including the production of art works.

Keywords: Bahc Yiso; Mo Bahc; global contemporary art; art networks; New York alternative scene; contemporary Korean art

From the 1970s, Korean artists in New York were introduced [then] exported back to Korea. But was this a superficial exchange? [T]here wasn't much discussion about how a Korean artist enters [the] global art world, through what kinds of doors and what were the outcomes. [T]his essay intends to examine [the] reality and the fantasy of this cultural exchange and explore its true meaning and potential. (Bahc 1990, 112)

Bahc Yiso [박이소],¹ known between 1984 and 1995 as Mo Bahc [박모] (b. Park Cheolho [박철호] 1957–2004), is considered within South Korea (hereafter Korea) as one of the nation's most significant artists. His canonical status was most recently underlined by a 2018 retrospective at the

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Korean National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA). Titled *Memos and Memories*, the show featured Bahc's notes, documents and archival ephemera to illustrate historically how he provided 'fresh vitality' to the national artworld during the 1990s, relative to his diverse vocational endeavours and transnational career.² Roles that were emphasized included: the creation of Minor Injury (a non-profit gallery in Brooklyn) in 1985; his co-organizing of *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art* (the first mainstream exhibition of Korean contemporary art in America) in 1993; and his teaching appointment to the Samsung Institute of Art and Design in 1995. The welcome ambition to include such source material notwithstanding, arguably this documentary element offered largely superficial decoration to enliven what was an orthodox retrospective entirely grounded in the artist's 'major works' of art.

In an attempt to expand on '*Memos and Memories*' this paper aims to historically contextualize and politically qualify the significance of the artist's wider legacy as an artworker. As such, the following account of the first half of Bahc's career (essentially his life as Mo Bahc) eschews a close examination of his 'art' to focus on his broad professional history. The contention here is that the sum of Mo Bahc's activity in New York (as an artist, an organizer, a curator, and a writer) between 1985 and 1995 holistically constituted the authorial work that informed his rise to national establishment in the Korean artworld. Relative to the notion of a contiguous (if not continuous) contemporary global art history driven by network relations, the further assertion of this article (to paraphrase Benjamin 1968) is that Bahc's authorial consequence and significance can be gauged through the positioning of his work (i.e. all his artworld labour) within the epochal relations of its production, as much as in its attitude to them.

The contemporary problem with the global

If artists' reputations are a sum of the values we assign to their works, the discrepant value assigned by the Korean and international artworlds to Bahc Yiso comes into question. While in Korea he is considered as significant as artists such as Haegue Yang, Do Ho Suh, Lee Bul and Kimsooja, it is notable that in comparison to these figures, his work is absent within major Western collections, and he has never been recognized with a marquee solo show outside Seoul. This contrast problematises the notion that the posited post-1989 global contemporary period could be considered as significantly less parochial or more simultaneous than that (of the modernist or postmodern) which preceded it (Smith 2010). In basic terms, Bahc's significance in Korea is not reflected in the wider 'global' historical framework of contemporary art history despite that he

conducted half of his career in New York. This would seem to confirm that the local histories of such, and the aesthetic and conceptual practices that shape the work of individual artists within, remain significantly different in their discrete and intersecting formation even when conducted over shared geographical terrain (Joselit 2016).

However, this essay contends that by examining Bahc's authorial activities relative to his entire professional oeuvre rather than just his 'works of art,' it is possible to uncover the global relevance of his career in comparative terms that usefully speak to 'the discrepant practices, histories, ideas, and geographies of contemporary art' (Okeke-Agulu 2009). The guiding notion here is that if ideas, movement, space and (social/labour) 'networks' drive today's global capitalist culture industry (Relyea 2013), it is through these common and ubiquitous dynamics, not the discrete products of such, that the system might best be analyzed relative to all those who work within and the discursive significance of their practice.³

To flesh out the significance of Mo Bahc's example relative to his flexible authorial/ professional practice in the networked space of the contemporary artworld, this essay demonstrates in historical detail how he constructed a position of influence through organizational and critical activities within New York, before he returned to Korea in order to mediate in the formation of Seoul as an emergent global hub. Through this comprehensive historical and structural 'demystification,' or delineation of the artist/ artworker's diverse activities and the outcomes of their cultural practice, the theoretical intention is to concretely qualify the subjectively formed catalytic political possibility (or 'human agency') of a cultural worker within the institutional and corporate space of the global contemporary artworld.⁴

Do it yourself New York

The cultural politics and market of New York ... reject 'the other' and are almost completely closed for those without connections. Despite [this] artists and students have inherited the dreams of older generations [that] they can enter the New York mainstream through studying in the [West, or] become a star in Korea [by] acquiring new perspectives ... (Bahc 1990, 112)

Graduating with a BA in painting from Hong-Ik university in Seoul, Park Cheolho arrived to undertake an MFA at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute in 1982, facilitated by the presence of fellow Hong-Ik alumnus Sung-ho Choi [최성호]. If students today attend MFA programmes in international artworld 'hubs' to make professional connections as much as to create artworks, in the 1980s a comparable possibility attracted Park. But, despite his apparent initial optimism, in 1985 the artist graduated to find himself marginalised due to his émigré background and lack of success on the course (Bahc, in Starkman and Zelevansky 2009, 78).

Anticipating a fraught professional future, Park's first creative action upon leaving the Pratt was to refigure the Korean term for anonymity *Bak Mo* [박모, Park Mo, lit. *Anonymous Park*] into his artworld nom-de-guerre 'Mo Bahc.' While his Korean peers grasped this as a pretentiously amusing postmodern wordplay that phonically maintained his surname, for anglophones its Korean meaning and fictive nature remained entirely undetectable. This ironic opening authorial pose could be considered as Bahc's foundational move to orientate himself between his present circumstances as an unknown artist in the margins of New York and his desired future notoriety in Korea.

The open-ended adaptability demanded within today's artworld was equally appropriate in 1980s New York as the pre-eminent post-Fordist service-industry-hub of the post-war period. Here the DIY paradigm was literal. Since the 1960s, many artists worked as freelance construction contractors in addition to creating their own spaces, refiguring fallow industrial buildings across Lower Manhattan into an immense network of studios and galleries. By the 1980s, artworkers were infamous as the 'stormtroopers' of gentrification,⁵ and even in the most marginal areas of Brooklyn, landlords encouraged artists to colonize empty buildings (Curran 2007). Against this context, in 1985 Bahc moved into a ramshackle studio he had constructed with Choi and the painter Il Lee in a disused factory in Greenpoint. Across the East River, the East Village offered an obvious point of reference. However, poor transport links rendered Greenpoint isolated and disconnected from Manhattan. Here, the self-appointed Mr. Nobody embarked upon his career, his location determined by a lack of options and the settlement of his compatriots.

While aspatial dynamics like social media and transnational virtual workflows frame artworld activity in the twenty-first century, in 1980s New York the malleable arena in which a marginal producer might best agitate for recognition was the physical space of the city, both in relation to public art practices and through the creation of new galleries and sites for exhibition. As Bahc's close friend Kwang Lee recalled, through a student project Bahc had become familiar with the successful artists who had founded non-profit galleries, such as Robert Longo at Hallwalls, and Tim Rollins with Group Material; due to his lack of professional connections Bahc therefore also considered opening a gallery to kickstart his career (Lee, interview with author 2012). After graduating, Bahc undertook an internship at Artists Space to gain a greater understanding of working within the non-profit artworld. Then, on August 6, 1985, he signed a lease for an empty garage at 1073 Manhattan Avenue. This he transformed into a strip-lit white-cube, spray painting the name 'Minor Injury' above the entrance (Figure 1).

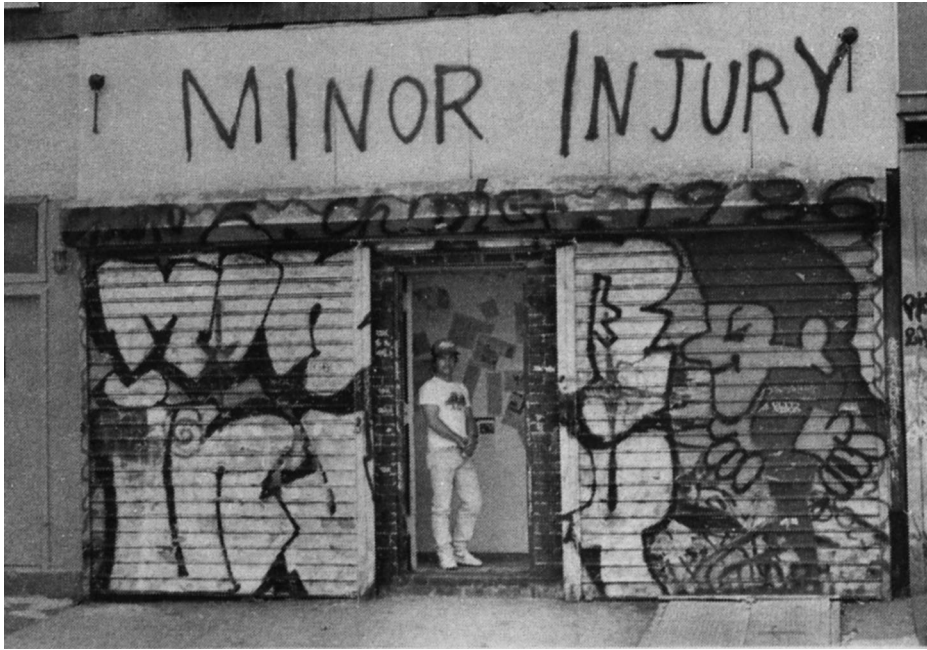


Figure 1. Photo of the front of Minor Injury. Uncredited. (Minor Injury flyer 1987. Collection of the Brooklyn Museum).

The author as director of a non-profit space

In terms of precedents, the work of the artist-run group Colab (Collaborative Projects) loomed large over the 1980s New York alternative scene. Various members of Colab had generated critical kudos through the innovatively inclusive South Bronx gallery 'FASHION 時裝 MODA МОДА' which had opened in 1979, the anarchic group exhibition the '*Times Square Show*' in 1980, and the East Village art space 'ABC no Rio' founded the same year (see Moore and Miller 1985). To Mo Bahc, the success of Fashion Moda in the Bronx particularly demonstrated that elite artworld was not completely impermeable to those normatively excluded and operating in the uncharted hinterlands of the city (Sam Binkley, interviewed by author 2013).

The idea of 'art' as a progressive social enterprise pervaded Colab's work in the 1980s and the positive critical assessments of their activities (Lippard 1984). Indebted to Frankfurt School Marxism and inspired by the civil rights movements of the 1960s, this political artworld interest emerged in reaction to increasing national conservatism and the destructive establishment of the deregulated 'neo-liberal' economy in the 1970s (Moore 2011). June 1985, the moment of Bahc's graduation from the Pratt, arguably witnessed the apex of attention for this concern, with the collective Group Material being invited to make a curatorial intervention

at the summer's Whitney Biennale through their project *Americana*. To orientate Minor Injury within this critical zeitgeist, Bahc dedicated the gallery to 'experimental' artists 'not adapted' to the 'commercial system' (Minor Injury 1985, np). While he would have to initially finance Minor Injury himself, if the space lasted a second year, Bahc understood this overtly non-profit approach could potentially enable him to obtain both national and/or local government funding for the gallery and a salary for his work. Given his liminal circumstance, Bahc considered this was his best chance for professional establishment and one which would uniquely enable him to connect with a range of government funders and artworkers as a young unknown Korean artist. He therefore applied himself to the role of directing the gallery vigorously and sincerely, declining to exhibit his own work or curate shows in the gallery.

From the minority to the third world

In addition to his professional ambition, Bahc's volunteerism demands consideration relative to his status as a Korean migrant. In short, as a non-white artworker in 1980s New York his marginalisation was an unavoidable reality that resulted from the ubiquitous social fact of racism within the U.S. (Pindell 1998). His foundational statement was to proclaim Minor Injury open to artists from any 'foreign country (except Western Europe) ... Minorities in the USA, ... women,' and any other artists 'isolated from the mainstream' (Minor Injury 1985, np). Bahc optimistically envisioned a space where non-white artists could refigure mainstream exclusion to their 'advantage' (in Wiener 1985, 23). This orientation was framed by both the topical interest in identity politics and the 'multicultural' funding encouraging artworld organisations toward inclusivity. As Bahc indicated, the moniker 'Minor Injury' reflected his awareness of the restrictive minority schema within the wider white cultural milieu, and the lack of alternatives within which to locate himself and his organization (Bahc 1985 1986, np). Yet, he also would have known that multicultural funding in Manhattan did support progressive galleries which offered a crucial challenge to the racist status-quo, such as the Alternative Museum and Kenkeleba House (Machida 2007, 25 31). Therefore, while Minor Injury's progressive 'minority' orientation was both professionally expedient and ironically framed, it nonetheless reflected Bahc's desire to challenge disenfranchisement through connectivity.

To exceed the divisive frameworks of race and multiculturalism that dominated U.S. society and culture, Bahc signaled collaborators through Minor Injury's support for 'Third World issues' (in Battenfield 1988, 3). Parallel to the post-colonial movement in academia, this 1980s use of 'Third World,' was due to the term offering a shared 'positionality' for

Non-Western intellectuals who superseded its 'historical specificity' (Kapur 2002, 20). As Yong Soon Min, Bahc's friend and peer in Brooklyn reflected, by connecting non-white artists' resistance against US racism with international opposition to Western hegemony, the banner provided a space for many marginalized American artists to build coalitions with migrant artists in New York prior to the blossoming of the more inclusive global artworld (Min, interview with author, 2012) (Figure 2).

The Greenpoint arts community

Bahc's ambition notwithstanding, the location of Greenpoint, without a direct subway line to Manhattan, restricted Minor Injury's effectiveness as a popular counter-cultural hub in the artworld. As contributor Bill Batson stated (interview, 2013), 'you couldn't get somebody to come [from Manhattan]. We were definitely on the other side of the tracks!' To counter this, Bahc emphasized Minor Injury as a space for the community, influenced by organizations like Group Material and Fashion Moda. Several local artists became volunteers, including Sam Binkley, Ethan Pettit, and Virginia Hoge. Their chief responsibility was to invigilate, and in lieu of payment they could curate and exhibit in the gallery.

The creation of a monthly newsletter with the Association of Williamsburg and Greenpoint artists, titled *Word of Mouth* (Figure 3), illustrated



Figure 2. 'Gold' group exhibition at Minor Injury. September 1988. Photo: Dave Hornor.

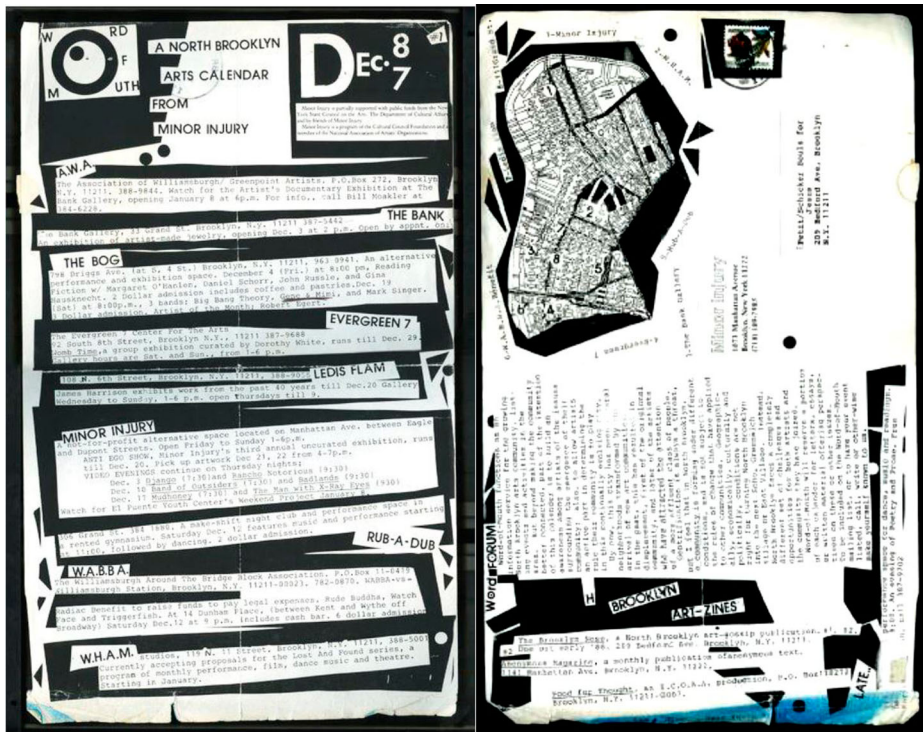


Figure 3. Word of Mouth newsletter, December 1987. Collection of Ethan Pettit.

the links and discrepancies between Minor Injury and North Brooklyn's growing artworker community. In contrast to the Third World constituency Bahe envisioned, this local audience primarily consisted of white students and recent graduates from relatively privileged backgrounds. From its contents on gallery openings and nightclubs, to its affected writing and raw facsimile aesthetic, *Word of Mouth* graphically represented the local demographic changes afoot. Each issue contained a stylized map of the constantly changing neighborhood venues to help the growing community of artworkers orientate themselves within the incipient, self-asserted 'North Brooklyn' scene. As several volunteers remembered, contributors from the local community were largely unconcerned with Third World politics and frequently came into conflict with Bahe due to their tacit racism, while equally they found themselves regularly having to confront his dismissive attitude to Feminist and LGBT+ rights,⁶ ruptures that reflected the wider identarian fissures within the New York artworld.⁷

Minor Injury's internationalist Third World orientation was also incongruous to North Brooklyn's longstanding local segregated Jewish, Polish, Puerto Rican and Dominican populations. As an attempt to counter such



Figure 4. Contact sheet of photos of the 'Racial Histories of Brooklyn' Exhibition. Minor Injury, March 1986. Photos: Bill Batson.

indifference, soon after opening, the gallery staged *The Ego Show*, a 'community' exhibition in December 1985, in which 'every work' submitted was accepted, resulting in a show that combined art by 'professional artists, kids and neighborhood people' (Binkley 1985, np). Despite the *Ego*

Show's success and that of exhibitions such as *Racial Histories of Brooklyn* in March 1986 (Figure 4), which involved local high-school students alongside artist/ activist Bill Batson, the disconnection between Minor Injury's neighborhood ambition and reality was clear to most people involved in the space. As former volunteer Ethan Pettit stated, this apathy from the longstanding local community was justified as the persistence of the gallery enabled the 'first phase' of artist settlement in the gentrification of North Brooklyn. Within this context, 'the colony settled around the fort and the fort was Minor Injury' (Pettit, interview with author 2013).

As Binkley recalled (interview, 2013), Bahc was painfully aware that this embryonic gentrification was in part facilitated by his volunteerism as the director of Minor Injury, an undertaking which also required him to arduously work part-time jobs and canvas local businesses for donations. Nonetheless, through shows like *Point Blank* (Figure 5) in October 1985 and *Personal History Public Address* in November 1985, the gallery immediately offered a useful and rare platform for local artists sympathetic to its progressive, inclusive agenda. In providing this service, Minor Injury also enabled Bahc to make productive professional connections across the city that would otherwise have been impossible for him.

The Minjung in Nokjeomdong

One of Bahc's close friends in New York was student (now art historian and critic) Jung Hunyee [정현이]. As she remembered, Bahc initially avoided specific 'Korean' shows at Minor Injury, wary of the space becoming restrictively associated with Korea (Jung, interview with author 2012). This changed when Korean Canadian Um Hyuk [엄혁] joined the gallery

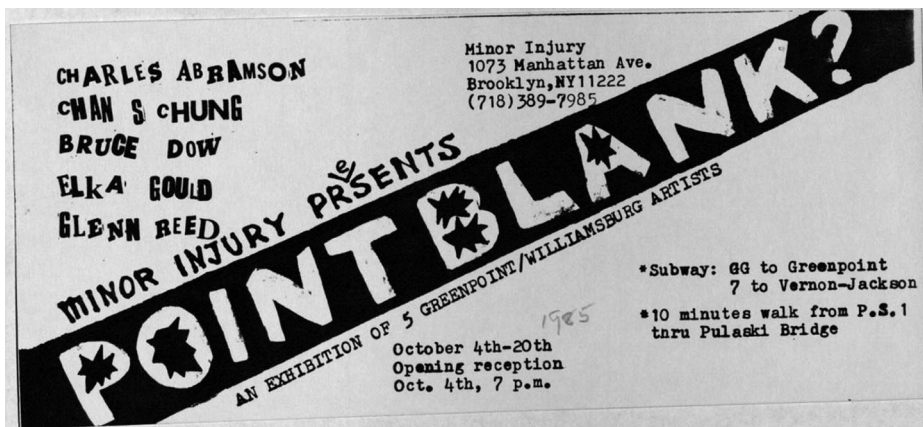


Figure 5. Point Blank Flyer, October 1985. Minor Injury (Collection of the Brooklyn Museum).

as a volunteer in 1986. Koreans in America were increasingly focused on events in Korea as social unrest in the country had steadily built up following the Gwangju Uprising in 1980 and the 1985 re-election of General Chun Doo-hwan, culminating in the 1986 June Democracy Movement. Having recently visited Seoul, Um wanted to support the burgeoning democratic movement through an exhibition of artists directly from Korea who were allied to the activist '*Min Joong*' (revised Romanization '*minjung*' [민중] 'peoples') movement.⁸ Minjung art was explicitly critical of capitalism and the military government, and consisted primarily of protest banners for demonstrations, prints for underground distribution, realist painting, and photo-collage. Created to serve a 'real' political revolution in Korea, Um felt that Minjung art 'needed' to be seen in New York given the fashion for politics and multiculturalism; in contrast, Bahc was initially skeptical of the critical relevance of Minjung art (Jung, interview 2012). However, after Um gained funding for an exhibition of works from Korea in Toronto in January 1987, Bahc consented to also stage the show at Minor Injury. The resulting exhibition (From March 14 to April 12, 1987) was titled '*Min Joong. A New Movement of Political Art From Korea*,' and was curated by Um with the remote assistance of Boksoo Jung [정복수] and Wankyung Sung [성완경] in Seoul. Mainstream attention accrued as Um had hoped, with influential critic Lucy Lippard contributing a catalogue essay for the show at Minor Injury and a positive review in *Art and Artists*.

In April 1988, a seminar in Manhattan at the Asian American Arts Center discussed the 'relationship between the Korean artist and the contemporary art world' following landmark democratic elections in December 1987 (AAAC 1988). Bahc was featured on the panel alongside Um. Conducted by émigré artists, presumably to a largely Korean audience, this event indicated the relevance of New York to the Korean artworld. Following democracy came freedom of movement for all Korean people, resulting in the student and expatriate population expanding massively in New York, alongside visitors for tourism and business. For these newcomers the significance of the artists based in Greenpoint, such as Bahc, Il Lee, and Chan S. Chung led to the area being christened *Nokjeomdong* 녹점동 ['Green Point Town']. New arrivals to the city from Korea would often visit Minor Injury as a publicly open local landmark, and, while Bahc resented the idea of the space becoming an expatriate enclave he was always keen to meet with anyone interesting from his homeland (Jung, interview with author 2012).

The 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics heralded Korea's emergence on the global stage. In recognition, Artists Space scheduled an expanded version of Minor Injury's '*Min Joong*' show for a reprise in October 1988 facilitated by Yong Soon Min, a member of the Artists Space board who first met Bahc in 1987 after he asked her to advise him at Minor Injury (Min,

interview with author 2012). A review in the Village Voice praised the reprised exhibition. Within, Um Hyuk qualified Minjung as an ethnically authentic art, stating that for Korean artists ‘blood is more important than ideology’ (Hyuk in Levin 1988, 97).

Um’s words reflected the populist idea of ‘*minjok*’ [민족], the inalienable quality of Korean ethnicity which pervaded the Minjung movement. Given the inconsequence of New York’s Korean arts community prior to this show, Bahc had been unconcerned with such ethnocentric perspectives, preferring to see Minor Injury as a means to support broader transcultural concerns relative to his position as a ‘Third World’ artist in New York. However, the *Min Joong* show had provided the gallery its only mainstream critical attention to date, both in New York and in Korea, where Bahc was even featured in a mainstream national newspaper report (Lee 1989).

Sensing the significance of this increasing connectivity between New York and Seoul, Bahc started contributing articles to Korean art journals, beginning in February 1989 with ‘Talk about the Reality of Korean Art in New York’ (Bahc 1989). In deploying his connected exteriority, Bahc’s expertise was particularly qualified in Korea due to respect for the ‘multicultural’ collaborative purview of Minor Injury that successfully extended beyond merely a Korean social and cultural framework. Through his foundational association with the gallery, he was able to easily position himself as an expert on the political and critical nuances of the U.S. artworld, assuming the role of a ‘culturepreneur’ between New York and Seoul, whose status was based on his work as ‘a mediator rather than producer’ (Davies and Ford 1998, 4).

Network capital

As Minor Injury powers into its third season [could] Mo Bahc [have] realized the importance of this prescient gesture toward his future as a modern-day Sisyphus, rolling his stone (Minor Injury) [into] history [?] (Hardy 1987, np)

Through exhibitions like *‘Homeland’ A Palestinian Quest* (in April 1989, sponsored by the Alternative Museum and curated by Yong Soon Min and Shirin Neshat) and the *Min Joong* show, by 1989 Minor Injury was a recognized (if rarely frequented) gallery in the New York alternative scene. Its government funding was increased from \$5,000 to \$10,000 (Minor Injury Budget sheet 1989, Brooklyn Museum archives). However, with just this grant to support its funding, only Bahc’s unpaid labour enabled Minor Injury to survive on an amount smaller ‘than one administrator’s salary’ at any comparable organization (Battenfield 1988, 3). In 1989 Bahc resigned as director to concentrate on his artistic career. As his close friend Betty Sue Hertz recalled (interview with author 2013), he seemed to be exhausted by the menial jobs he had to work to sustain the space.

Despite the expanding traffic between Seoul and New York, Bahc was not inclined to refigure the gallery's Third World orientation specifically toward East Asia. The rationale being that whether continuing unchanged, or refocused as an 'Asian-American,' or 'Korean' space, Minor Injury in Greenpoint would remain financially unsustainable and all-consuming, while the new programmatic focus would be even more irrelevant to the local community. This pitfall followed its peripheral location within North Brooklyn, a traditionally 'blue collar' environment that was undergoing an extensive community transformation driven by privileged young white artworkers.⁹ Binkley (who also left in 1988) offered that what primarily drove those organisationally involved at Minor Injury was 'that there would be a career ... That you would be [paid] in terms of your reputation.' For Binkley the problem was that ultimately, due to the peripheral nature of the space, 'there was nothing there to exchange for anything' (interview, 2013).

However, in contrast to Sam Binkley, Bahc had created a productive professional positioning (or network/ social capital) through Minor Injury. He was now locatable on the minority map of the national art-world, evidenced by his inclusion in the encyclopedic record of 'artists of colour,' *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America* (Lippard 1990, 34). Additionally, his directorship had positioned Bahc as a key individual mediator between Seoul and New York. As Yong Soon Min remembered, even after Minor Injury shut down, Bahc remained at 'the centre of the Korean group [of artists and critics in New York]. He had established a following in Korea that would come and visit ... He was a conduit' (interview, 2012).

In seeking position relative to the increased flow between Korea and New York, Bahc's abandoning of Minor Injury to facilitate an expanded range of opportunity was logical. Productively networked, he could now professionally afford to leave his unsustainable institutional avatar. Bahc's move was also epochally appropriate, as 1989 (the rough terminus of the Soviet Bloc) is often mooted as the inception date of the global contemporary period (Smith 2010, 378). His shift at this moment from locally, institutionally fixed producer to transnationally orientated flexible operator, would therefore seem to confirm both the global periodisation of the 'contemporary' and the network model as its appropriate analytical framework.

New York to Seoul art exchange

Everybody was aware ... that he went from running a gallery in Brooklyn to having a big piece [in] Downtown Manhattan [at Art in General in 1990]. I thought, hey dude, Hollywood is next! (Pettit, interview with author 2013)

Bahc gained opportunities to exhibit through connections he had made with curators such as Holly Block at the Bronx Museum and Betti Sue Hertz at the Bronx River Art Gallery. In 1989 he received a Foundation for the Arts grant, and in 1990 had his first solo show, *Speak American*, at the Bronx Museum. In his wider professional activity, Bahc's cultivation of a flexible authorial personality relative to the identarian and vocational demands attending global artworld expansion was represented by his continuing to write for the Korean journals *Gana Art* [가나아트] and *Wolgan Misul* [월간미술] from his insider perspective as a successful organiser and artist in New York (Figure 6).

One such prominent article published in April 1990 was titled 'Seoul to New York Art Exchange. What's the problem?' Here Bahc set out his unique perspective as a US-based artist and former 'director of an Alternative space' to qualify the possibility of non-profit galleries, exemplifying Minor Injury alongside illustrious institutions like Artists Space and White Columns. In deconstructing the romantic notion of the 'alternative' institutional pose, Bahc identified the economic rationale for non-profit funding and the role of alternative spaces as the providers of new products for mainstream consumption. He concluded that non-profit spaces can never transcend 'the reality of cultural production [in which] capital surpasses everything' (Bahc 1990, 113). In relaying this pragmatic message to



Figure 6. Mo Bahc, *Speak American*, 1990. Bronx Museum exhibition installation. Projection, monitors, magazine pages with enamel paint (Photo: Bronx Museum).

idealistic artworkers in Korea, Bahc didactically illustrated both the importance of the Manhattan alternative scene to the mainstream, and, equally, that the absence of parallel experimental non-profit institutions in Seoul fundamentally inhibited the development of contemporary Korean art.

Establishing SEORO

Bahc's conundrum was that despite the progress for non-white artists in New York, he remained fixed within the mainstream perception of multicultural or Asian art. His work was included in several such themed shows in the early 1990s, including: *Peripheral Visions* (1990); *Public Mirror* (1990); *Race and Culture* (1991); *In Plural America* (1992); *And He Was Looking for Asia* (1992).¹⁰ As he wryly commented at the time: 'I am usually invited to [these kinds of exhibitions.] And it is better to show than not to show' (Bahc in Godzilla 1993, 2). On this point, Bahc's friend and colleague, curator Jane Farver noted (interview with author, 2013): '[artists] were coming together under this rubric of being Asian. And I don't think Mo thought that was necessarily the best thing, because he [considered himself] Korean more [than] Asian.'

In his search for an artist who had circumvented the trap of multiculturalism, Bahc was drawn to David Hammons, who had achieved critical prominence in 1989 following shows at PS1 and Exit Art. In an article for *Wolgan Misul*, Bahc noted that Hammons' unprecedented 'directorial' influence as a non-white artist derived from his strategy of garnering support first within African American audiences, then the 'alternative scene,' and finally within the 'white establishment' (1991c, 146). This reverential identification of Hammons' foundational cultivation of support within his own ethnic community doubtless further inspired Bahc's efforts to increase his connection to Korea.

Still mindful of the utility of collective activity, Bahc accepted Sung Ho Choi and critic Hye Jung Park's [박혜정] invitation to establish the Korean US 'cultural network' 'SEORO' 서로 [each other] in 1990. This aimed to connect artists with community organisations, foster artworld relations between Korea and America, and support progressive work by Koreans with other 'minority groups' (SEORO 1990, np). All these ambitions hinged on Bahc's experience and connections.

Postmodernism and Korean art

In 1991 Bahc published two articles on postmodernism that would become immensely influential within Korea (1991a, 1991b). Here, his stated intention was to rectify the superficial local understanding of post-structural theory and help Koreans negotiate their positioning within a

discriminatory Western framework of art production. Bahc (1991b, 95) considered that the Korean discourse on postmodernism was vacuously favouring commercial artists such as David Salle and Julian Schnabel. In response, he detailed the conflicting conceptual basis of such 'postmodern art' with post-structuralist theory and identified the problematic use of the 'postmodern' term 'pluralism' to subsume non-Western art within a very un-post-structural grand narrative (1991b, 93–95). Bahc asserted that for Koreans, the true utility of post-structural critique is that it supports the pursuit of local intellectual independence from pejorative (Western) 'universal' standards of judgement, and that art made by Koreans in this spirit of independence, such as Minjung, was valid in its own terms (1991b, 151–152).

In operating between Korea and the U.S. to challenge the conservative cultural intelligentsia in Seoul, Bahc's activities echoed the contemporaneously formed notion of the 'critical organic catalyst' offered up by Cornel West within a New Museum publication in 1990. West sought to describe and valorize cultural workers who promote a 'new cultural politics of difference [by staying attuned to the best of the] mainstream its paradigms, viewpoints, and methods [yet maintain] a grounding in affirming and enabling subcultures of criticism' (West 1990, 33). Here, Bahc also sought to productively position himself in relation to the mainstream artworlds in Seoul and New York, and broadcast his nuanced understanding of post-structuralist theory to empower progressive practices of 'critique and resistance' (West 1990, 33) within the former. In Korea, Bahc's perspective was privileged due to his professional experience in New York and his skillful critical writing. As Hunyee Jung stated, audiences in Seoul now considered that they properly understood the discourse of postmodernism primarily 'through Bahc's writing' (interview, 2012). If the possibility of a discursively influential mode of existence is the crucial 'political' achievement of the artist or author (Foucault 1980, 159–160), Bahc's own authorial possibility was significantly enhanced by these articles. They became foundational elements within his professional oeuvre, significantly furthering his influence within Korea.

Across the Pacific

SEORO hoped to encourage a high-profile group exhibition of Korean contemporary artists in New York, and in 1992 they were commissioned by the Queens Museum to organize an exhibition of Korean and Korean American artists. This would become *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*. Here, the museum was particularly receptive as Queens was home to the largest population of Koreans in New York.

As the first group show of non-western contemporary art in a mainstream US museum, the logistics of organizing the exhibition were substantial and its trans-continental construction was unprecedented. Through Bahc, former curator at the Alternative Museum, Jane Farver, alongside Young Chul Lee in Korea, were appointed as the show's curators in New York and Seoul respectively (Farver, interview 2013). Lee organized a selection of Korean artists' work to go to New York, while in parallel, Bahc and Farver organized the US based artists and travelled to Korea in 1992. This first return since 1982 enabled him to personally connect with the artworld that he had been addressing in his writing for the last three years.

In New York, the exhibition received the desired high-profile and favourable media attention within publications such as the New York Times (Cotter 1993). It then travelled to the Kumho Museum in Seoul. This venue was pre-ordained, as the Kumho corporation was the *chaebol* (conglomerate corporate) partner of Asiana Airlines, sponsor of the show at the Queens Museum. Due to the political nature of the art and the explicit critiques of the Korean cultural establishment within the curatorial essays, it was clear to the organisers that the conservative national Museums in Korea, such as the MMCA, would be unwilling to exhibit the show (Jane Farver, interview with author 2013). In contrast, the Kumho Museum was founded in 1989 primarily to help culturally legitimate its corporate owner's profile relative their emergent interest in cultural sponsorship, and this unprecedented transcontinental show was entirely apposite to the Museum's purpose to make a name for itself at home and abroad by introducing 'the most insightful' artists of the 'younger generation of Korea's contemporary artworld' (Park in Farver 1993, i).

As he was not officially listed as a curator, the show also facilitated Bahc's first opportunity to professionally exhibit in Seoul. He chose a video installation titled *Learning American* (1993). Based on extracts from an educational English language Korean television programme for US bound migrants, this featured a singing presenter offering guidance on subjects like 'Buying a House,' 'Making Money' and 'Calling the Police' (Farver 1993, 50). By projecting excerpts of this onto motorized Korean and US flags gently waving, Bahc ironically mocked the migrant ambition for instructed enjoinment to US society and provoked Korean artworkers to also consider their aspirations for such complicitly framed success (Figure 7).

In 1990, Bahc forecast that the decade would bring opportunities for 'return exhibitions' between Seoul and New York. He argued it was impossible to prevent mainstream and commercial interests dominating this flow so it was crucial for progressive producers to 'actively participate' in these exchanges if possible (Bahc 1990, 118); a perspective tacitly

reflected by the critique of mindless enjoinder offered within *Learning American*. But beyond merely participating, Bahc's substantive engagement in *Across the Pacific* as an artist and (unofficial) curator represented his further authorial seizure of the chance to intervene in this inevitable institutional exchange at the highest level. His concern to encourage an independent Korean artworld here also usefully converged with the instrumentalist aims of the Kumho Asiana group, to increase Korea's cultural profile and their own corporate brand both nationally and internationally.

Within the contemporary network paradigm, the question of politics is largely framed as subsumable to 'market relations,' particularly in the case of vocationally 'flexible operators' like Mo Bahc (Holmes 2003, 132). Yet, answering specific questions about the relationship between political intent, personal ambition and commercial interests often demands more than a simple rendering of power and its mediation as subordinate to economics. This is not least as it is arguably necessary for politically effective transformative gestures to be both 'simultaneously progressive and co-opted' to succeed at any meaningful level within mainstream institutions (West 1990, 20). In this case, the known (if indeed self-aggrandised) consistency of Bahc's professional history in the non-profit scene helped to position him as an honest broker within the Seoul artworld.



Figure 7. Mo Bahc, *Learning American*, 1992. Video Projection, flags, electronic fans. Running time 10:35. (Photo from Lee, *Divine Comedy*, 111).

Here it is crucial to foreground that Bahc's ambition was not defined by his desire for critical success as an artist per-se, but for mediatory influence in relation to the appropriation of elite institutional platforms of exhibition in Korea and the U.S. Therefore, rather than being seduced by a corporate agenda, Bahc was able to appropriate these platforms for himself and other progressive artworkers to authorize a new mainstream critical orientation for Korean art in the 1990s.

Importantly, the curatorial orientation of *Across the Pacific* was entirely distinct from the conservative agenda that dominated the 1980s Korean artworld, which had completely rejected the critical legitimacy of political works (such as those of Minjung art) in favour of the 'silent' art of monochromatic 'dansae kwha' abstraction (Lee in Farver 1993, 10–12). The progressive perspective authorised through this landmark transnational show therefore also helped to radically reframe art production in Korea into the 1990s. It was canonically crucial in that it affirmed within Korea (ironically through the critical validation offered by the Western artworld) the value of work that was overtly disruptive of, and radically different to, the conservative, politically vacuous forms of expression championed within the elite Korean art establishment during recent history. On an abstract level, *Across the Pacific* therefore demonstrates how artworkers at the inception of the global contemporary period could catalytically operate through transnational artworld networks and elite institutions of display, to drive the establishment of new, progressive, cultural politics within mainstream national and international milieus.

Reality and independence

In 1994 Bahc was invited to the Havana Biennale. Alongside his involvement in *Across the Pacific*, his participation in one of the major international art events to emerge over the period further signaled to him the diverse reality of the new global artworld, a community heralded through shows like the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in Paris, the establishment of publications such as *Third Text* in 1987, and the inauguration of the Asia Pacific Triennial in 1993.

At this moment, Bahc was compelled to re-evaluate his professional life and the advantages of remaining in Greenpoint, as bouts of ill health were exacerbated by the poor living conditions within his dilapidated studio and by his lack of income (Young Chul Lee, interview with author 2012). As Jane Farver recalled, he searched for a teaching job in New York, but this proved impossible without a work visa, something he had failed to obtain after leaving the Pratt as a student. Although *Across the Pacific* and his writing had vastly furthered Bahc's reputation in Seoul, the localised relevance of this status could not yield any

substantive professional opportunity in America. Therefore, when he received an offer to teach at the newly founded Samsung Art and Design Institute in Seoul, he decided to return (Farver, interview 2013).

Despite the rapid expansion of the Seoul artworld, many Koreans considered his return ill-advised given the apparently burgeoning interest in multicultural art within America (Young Chul Lee, interview 2012). However, Bahc's low-income professional practice in New York was almost entirely based on organising and exhibiting within the non-profit scene, which by 1994 was in severe decline. This situation had been developing since 1991 due to local fiscal crisis in New York, but was exacerbated by government defunding in the aftermath of the 'Culture Wars' (Dubin 1992, 278–313), with non-white artists providing the focus for this purge (Wallace 1999).

By contrast, in 1995 the Korean artworld would witness the establishment of the Gwangju Biennial, the first such regular transnational event in East Asia, alongside the construction of a permanent Korean pavilion within the Venice Biennale. Given these developments, the idea that New York was still the best location for an ambitious Korean artist was now questionable. Consequently, when Bahc returned it was not simply because his professional positioning in New York was unstable, but also because the city had lost its absolute claim to relevance within the increasingly networked international artworld. At the turn of the decade Bahc had offered that work capable of baffling the 'Western logic' of control would be better staged beyond self-inscribed Western hubs such as Manhattan (Bahc 1991a, 95). It was now time to test this idea.

Don't Look Back

The relevance of Mo Bahc's authorial oeuvre to Korean audiences was made clear when in 1995 his return was anticipated by a retrospective at the Kumho Museum, titled, '*Mo Bahc* 박모.' Accompanied by a monograph in Korean and English, the exhibition was another good fit for the Museum and the artist, again enabling both to assert their transnational cultural credentials and contemporary relevance within Seoul. It was curated by Park Chan-kyong and Jung Hunyee, the latter of whom had become friends with Bahc while in New York as a student. As Park identified, Bahc's art itself was largely unknown in Seoul. Instead, his national reputation stemmed from his writing on 'Western ... post-modernism' and his experience as the director of a New York non-profit space; in this light, Park enthusiastically hailed Mo Bahc's work as that of a uniquely 'dislocated' Korean 'USA residing artist' (Park 1995, 95). Both curators trumpeted the relevance of Bahc's artistic concern with cultural dislocation as a returnee from New York, as an increasing number of Koreans had been educated in the US since the mid-1980s, and many more were highly

familiar with Western culture, relative to the acquisitive atmosphere of intellectual freedom that characterized the early democratic period. While the relevance of Bahc's critical writing and his professional history in New York facilitated his status in Korea, here his art was also usefully perceived as evocative of local concerns about the nation's global cultural identity, not least as viewers could react through their shared knowledge of Korean and US culture, a particularly educated spectatorship denied to Bahc in the U.S. The national introduction of Bahc's entire 'mid-career' oeuvre at this moment, just a few years after the introduction of democracy in Korea, therefore keyed directly into a new intellectual zeitgeist that he had helped to foment through his writing questioning the uncritical acceptance of Western models and asserting the need for intellectual reflexivity to lift the Korean artworld to global relevance.

Among several new sculptures, the exhibition featured the couplet *Don't Look Back* (1994), consisting of *Untitled*, a half-built concrete dingy, and *Honesty*, a stack of cardboard boxes on a pallet board, within which Bahc had inserted a recording of himself singing Billy Joel's *Honesty* in Korean over the original. The otherwise empty boxes and the absurd unfinished concrete boat presented an image of migration gone awry that riffed on the half-finished, under-construction aesthetic of Korean society and urban space itself at this moment of intensive national development. This self-mocking auto-biographical account of the returnee and the aspiring modern, newly democratic nation was significant, in that Korean audiences were fully aware of the extent of the artist's idealistically driven travails in the post-neo-colonial metropole of New York. Arguably, Bahc's conception of himself here as a failed transnational emissary indicated that perhaps the promised land lay elsewhere beyond the West, perhaps closer to home within the unfinished project of Korean national development (Figure 8).

After a decade of global networking, Bahc had progressed from being a peripatetic volunteer within the non-profit multicultural New York alternative scene, to celebrated artist in the chaebol funded Seoul art-world. Now an established national artist, the authorial utility and authenticity of the moniker Mo Bahc were exhausted, and he changed his title to the intentionally meaningless Bahc Yiso (Bahc in Starkman and Zelevansky 2009, 33). In the completion of his ten-year labour across the Pacific and back, Mo Bahc's lived example and diverse range of professional positionings lend useful critique to the idea of a fixed network dichotomy between globally peripatetic super-producers who possess the influence to 'legitimize' culture, versus 'lower-level' insignificant cultural workers who are compelled to 'stay-put' (Relyea 2013, 56). If the idea that the contemporary global network 'naturally' functions to disperse artworkers has encouraged the notion that all such producers lack 'autonomy' in their movements (Relyea 2013, 14), Mo Bahc's example demonstrates that political agency can also be facilitated through such



Figure 8. Mo Bahc, *Don't Look Back – Honesty*, 1994. Cardboard boxes, tape recorder, 213 × 366 × 122 cm. / *Don't Look Back – Untitled*, 1994. Concrete, iron rods. 91 × 386 × 122 cm. (Photo from Park, *Mo Bahc*, 90–91).

movements, particularly when they are consistently combined with culturally progressive and socially expansive organizational projects. From the Third World margins with *Minor Injury* in Greenpoint, through the multicultural Korean minority in the US with SEORO, to the global/national Seoul artworld with *Across the Pacific*, the autonomous logic of Bahc's route is reflected in his consistent effort from the margins to 'connect with power [within] structures capable of producing cultural meaning and an effective political voice' (Fisher 2003, 73).

Epilogue: new spaces in the Seoul artworld

Despite his new name, Bahc Yiso retained the structural concerns of Mo Bahc and he continued to encourage local powerbrokers and artists to develop the Seoul artworld. One outcome of this mediation was the private, non-commercial institution Artsonje. In New York, Bahc had befriended Sunjung Kim [김선정], the ambitious daughter of prominent arts patron Chung Hee-ja [정희자]. Soon after Bahc's return, Kim sought his input in creating a groundbreaking space for national and international art in Seoul, inspired by the large non-profits in New York, such as PS1 and the New Museum, that functioned without a permanent collection. For Kim, Bahc's advice on programming and infrastructure at this moment of establishment were invaluable in helping her to create the Artsonje Center in 1998 (Kim, interview with author 2012). This space rapidly became the nationally pre-eminent institution for national and international contemporary art, consisting of a large multi-floored gallery and numerous supportive ancillary spaces within a prominent landmark building in Samcheong-dong, a central location well-known for its galleries and arts community.

The timing of the foundation of Artsonje as an ambitious ‘private art museum’ operationally freer of the programmatic and acquisitive demands placed on the collection based large-scale corporate museums in Korea was apposite to the moment. 1997–1998 had witnessed the Korean International Monetary Fund crisis. The subsequent scaling back of chaebol cultural sponsorship resulted in Bahc losing his job at SADI. However, as a veteran of the opportunity wrought by neo-liberalism in New York, Bahc, like many artists in Korea who had been inspired by his writing and lived example, understood the crisis would engender possibilities to regenerate the empty commercial spaces of Seoul, and, in 1998–1999 numerous small non-commercial galleries rapidly emerged to critical prominence, tacitly modelled on the mid-sized New York ‘alternative spaces’ of the 1980s. These included Ssamzie Space, art space Loop, Project Space Sarubia, and Alternative Space POOL [풀], the latter of which was a ‘grassroots’ ‘artist-run space’ dedicated to experimental work in which Bahc was influential in setting up (Hunye Jung, interview 2012).

If Korean society was forcibly compelled to accept flexible labour practices in the immediate wake of the IMF crisis, the Seoul artworld of the early twenty-first century more enthusiastically embraced vocational self-exploitation (Shin 2016). Young, ambitious Korean non-profit gallerists exploited the lower overheads, the lack of commercial opportunity for artists, and increased experimental focus with the attenuation of the art market and national economy. The founders of these non-profit galleries maintained an unabashedly prosaic notion of the possibility of an alternative space, and considered their work a constructive, not oppositional, response to the inability of museums and commercial venues to accommodate new art practices (Kim 2016). This local twenty-first century understanding of alternative spaces as entirely complementary to the mainstream artworld, rather than ‘alternative’ to it, arguably stemmed from the lasting influence of Bahc’s highly critical perspective on the political possibility of the alternative scene, transmitted from New York a decade before. Today, nearly 20 years after Bahc’s passing, Artsonje and the ever-shifting galleries of the Seoul alternative space scene remain productive cornerstones of the city’s globally connected artworld: the former providing a showcase venue for renowned domestic and international artists, and the latter offering a flexible, experimental model of networked practice for ambitious young artworkers as they attempt to kickstart their careers.

Beyond the network: substantiating a global artworld

In relation to a sociological notion of ‘art work’ and a discursive conception of authorial practice the discussion offered here demonstrates

that Mo Bahe's transnationally driven, organisational and collaborative mediatory activities were crucial to his establishment as an artist in Korea and the institutional development of the Seoul artworld in the 1990s. If one ascribes to the idea that artists of the contemporary era must adaptively work across a globally networked arena toward establishment, then the example of Mo Bahe indicates the veracity of this paradigm. By combining various practices (artist, organizer, curator, writer) and transnational opportunity toward personal success and national establishment, his career affirms the notion of the combinative professional, progressive, and 'catalytic' possibility of vocational work, movement, and connectivity within the artworld. However, in seeking to transcend a politically void account of the global network, this essay also demonstrates that the transformative utility of a contemporary cultural worker's 'work' can be critically and comparatively approached by attending to the broad scope of their discursive practice. As it is this broad context of 'art work' alongside the transgressive, expansive efforts of movement, dialogue and connection that constitute the significant substance of their engagement and agency within and beyond the networked contemporary artworld.

Notes

1. This paper follows the Revised Romanisation of Hangeul but uses McCune Reischauer Romanisation (1984–2000) for the recorded titles of events during the period of its use (such as the '*Min Joong Show ...*' of 1987). In Romanising Korean names, the example set by the individual is used.
2. <<https://www.mmca.go.kr/eng/exhibitions/exhibitionsDetail.do?exhId=201807020001066>> (Accessed 22 September 2018).
3. On discursive influence as the crucial political value assignable to the authorial position, see Foucault (1980).
4. On 'agency' and the analytical need to historically demonstrate this potential through precise structural and historical 'demystification,' see West (1990).
5. On Manhattan's gentrification, see Abu Lughod (1994) and Simpson (1981).
6. A perspective shared by various former Minor Injury volunteers, including Sam Binkley (interview, 2013), Ethan Pettit (interview, 2013), Virginia Hoge (interview, 2013) and Dave Hornor (interview, 2013).
7. See, for instance, the divergent political perspectives offered in the essays within Golden, Deitcher, and Gómez-Peña (1990).
8. The term '*Minjung*' [민중] was used widely within 20th century Korea to characterize a range of grassroots, nationalist anti-authoritarian cultural-political movements (see Wells 1995).
9. Attested to by the rebirth of Minor Injury on Grand Street in Williamsburg in 1990, specifically orientated toward this audience (Pettit, interview with author 2013).
10. For a full exhibition bio, see Lee (2006, 202).

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The author is an independent art historian, currently residing in Busan, South Korea.

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