The gift of the GanaArt Collection to the Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA) in 2001 gave immediate rise to institutional discord, ‘to wrangling and infighting within the bureaucracy,’ as one journalist put it.1 For some, the realist works in the collection, many of which were created by artists associated with the 1980s Minjung democratization movement, amounted to ‘anti-government propaganda with no artistic value.’2 As such, according to this line of thinking, they deserved little more than to be stacked away in the bowels of the museum. For others, however, the collection indexed a crucial moment in the history of twentieth century Korean art, one that demanded critical probing rather than reactionary dismissal. Speaking under the guise of anonymity, one SeMA curator went as far as to declare: “without this gift, who knows what will happen to these works, and all the debates and controversies that they engender will also be swept away in the bowels of the museum. For others, with this characterization, Yoo Young-chil—the SeMA director—uttered the words ‘when they begin speaking to him.’”3

As unlikely as it might have seemed at the time, the latter perspective ultimately won out. When the exhibition opened in 1994, the museum ‘was placed in the public eye and the spotlight that it needed.’4 The occasion of the present English-language publication for SeMA’s new permanent exhibition of works from the GanaArt Collection affords an opportunity to reflect on this problem by attending to the ways in which Minjung Art has been discursively treated in exhibitions and catalogue texts marketed to audiences outside of Korea. The presumed need to provide a comprehensive contextualization of Minjung Art for viewers with little to no familiarity with Korean cultural or political history has resulted in a habitual reliance on the timeline as an interpretative lens. Weaving through exhibition texts from the late 1980s, when Minjung Art was first shown outside of Korea, to the late 2000s, in what follows I argue that Minjung Art objects hardly correspond in such regimented fashion with the alignment of historical events said to demarcate their collective lifespan. On the contrary, these works have a peculiar way of returning to us long after the moment of their creation, oftentimes igniting heated debates that underpin the most mainstream of art institutions. Tellingly, the journalist Mark Clifford described this effect in temporal terms, noting how the exhibition caused the works to appear outmoded, writing: “To outsiders, Minjung Art seems more like a quaintly anachronistic reminder of struggles past than a current threat.”5 As suggested by his attribution of this perspective to “outsiders,” however, Clifford sensed that Minjung Art might carry more political valence in contemporary South Korea than the museum’s nominal assimilation of the movement would suggest. His suspicion stemmed from the fact that procuring an interview with a representative of the museum proved to be a considerable challenge. “Museum officials refuse to confirm the existence of the show, let alone discuss Minjung Art,” he wrote, noting that even Minjung artists involved in the preparatory process would suddenly be called away by their superiors when they began speaking to him.6 In this light, the exhibition took on the air of a backroom conspiracy concerned with tempering any potentially subversive aspects of Minjung Art.

2 Ibid.
3 Quoted in ibid.
4 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
stating: “As unlively as it may sound, one of the liveliest exhibitions in Toronto right now is a display of contemporary political art from South Korea.”

A routine remark on the surface, this line proves extraordinary for the fact that it went to print a full three years before the 1980s had actually passed. Employing an emphatically retrospective tone, the essay’s introductory passage describes the Minjung movement’s immediate aims as, by and large, already accomplished. In all its peculiarity, the sentence bespeaks how, even in the thick of its unfolding, Minjung was consistently relegated to the realm of the historical. Indeed, the past tense runs throughout the essay, as readers encounter such statements as: “One significant aspect of Min Joong art was consistently relegated to the movement’s immediate aims as, by and large, already accomplished.”

A routine remark on the surface, this line proves how, even in the thick of its unfolding, Minjung might appear outdated in the eyes of international audiences.

This concern was far from unguarded. Even in his largely favorable assessment of the A Space exhibition, John Bentley Mays acknowledged how out of touch Minjung artists’ figurative realism seemed vis-à-vis the mainstream contemporary art world. Mays began his review with the exhortation: “If the very idea of trucking down to Queen and Bathurst vis-à-vis the mainstream contemporary art world. In another mode of historicization comparable to that which had structured his contribution in the form of a discursive exhibition, however, the majority of which employed a mode of historicization comparable to that which had characterized Um Hyuk’s text for the 1987 catalogue. In addition to new texts by Lippard and Um, the Artists Space catalogue contained several essays by South Korean critics, each of which provided social, political, and aesthetic background for the works in the show. In an effort to establish an overview of the Minjung art movement, the critic Sung Wan-Young structured his contribution in the form of a discursive exhibition, graphing two distinct generations of Minjung artists and the intersections of their work with landmark events from the Gwangju Uprising to the June Democracy Movement. In his discussion of the latter event, he even included a day-by-day timeline excerpted from the records of the artist Choi Byung Soo, who had produced portraits and a banner painting of the student Lee Han-yeol after he was hit and ultimately killed by a tear gas grenade canister during the rally. Kim confronts everything that the figure in his print has renounced, stacking up the dregs of consumer culture to form what reads as a phallic monument to the grotesque excesses of capitalism. As suggested by the fact that both of these works were produced in the mid-1980s, the two aesthetic idioms identified in this essay not only coexist in a neat succession, with one giving way to the other. In proceeding as if this were the case, however, Sung sought to forge a new direction for the Minjung art movement wherein artists who remained committed to either of these two aesthetics would collaborate with and/or move more dynamically between them in an attempt to overlap with the 1988 Olympics. Discussions of Minjung art’s engagement with problematic aspects of international audiences. Such was the case when the Los Angeles Times art critic Laurie Ochoa witnessed a 1988 exhibition of Minjung prints titled “Woodcuts of Liberation,” which was held at the Soho Photo Art Center gallery in Venice, California. Upon her visit, Ochoa was given a casual tour of the space by Han Kyong Kim, who was at the time chair of the Los Angeles chapter of Young Koreans United, a pro-reunification organization. As an unofficial docent, Kim led Ochoa through the gallery with specific works that, at first, corresponded with the same chronological sequence of political events highlighted in the Min Joong art catalogues. The Gwangju Uprising, as depicted in a print titled “Woodcuts of Liberation,” was again the starting point. As Kim explained: “This is the event that sparked the Minjoong movement, the event that made us know that the government couldn’t be moved.” It quickly became apparent to Ochoa, however, that many of the issues that Minjung artists confronted were far from reducible to specific events. They remained, in fact, ongoing dilemmas. This became especially clear in the case of works addressing the issue of reunification with North Korea. One of the prints in the show, for example, depicted barbed wire signifying the division of the peninsula at the 38th parallel along with azaleas planted in the foreground. Kim explained that despite seeming like an innocuous icon on the surface, the image of the azalea had taken on strong associations with North Korea and, as a result, any depiction of the flower by Minjung artists might be met with severe penalties. “Azaleas
The movement of Korea (Binghamton: State University of New York at Binghamton’s University Art Museum. Curated by Jamie Park, In Search of a National Identity: The Min Joong Art in Canada and the United States in the late 1980s, one of the most incisive critiques of the 1980s, one of the most incisive critiques of the timeline as an interpretive scheme came in the form of a catalogue for a little known exhibition titled “In Search of a National Identity: The Min Joong Art Movement of Korea,” which opened in 1991 at the State University of New York at Binghamton’s University Art Museum. Curated by Jamie Park, In Search of a National Identity: The Min Joong Art movement had entered an ‘identity crisis’ in the 1990s. After all, Kim Young-sam, a former democratic activist, had been elected president of South Korea in 1993, and on the global scale, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe significantly attenuated the political threat that figurative realism had maintained in decades past. Heartney thus aligned the two camps of Minjung artists—the ‘hard-core’ and the younger generation—with separate temporalities: “Classic examples, like Bong Joon Kim’s cartoon-style representation of a 1989 street demonstration or Min Hwa Cho’s folk-art inspired representation of popular guerillas in the 19th century, are joined by works which attempt to shift the discussion toward more contemporary issues such as Western consumerism and the oppression of women in Korean society. One also senses an effort to break away from the Socialist Realist-inspired esthetics.”

Meanwhile, the political context continued to prevail. This much is evidenced by the critical responses to “Across the Pacific: Battle of Visions,” an exhibition co-curated by Beck Lee—seek of the Arts Council of Korea (ARKO) and the Kunsthalle’s Peter Joch. This exhibition paired examples of Minjung Art from the 1980s with works by contemporary Korean artists such as the collective known as mixrice, who the curators saw as emerging artists—the “hard-core” and the younger generation—pressing contemporary concerns—virtually no overlap occurring between the two.

The exhibition retrospective examines an era of art that ran through the Min Joong Art catalogues and reviews like Heartney’s might have steamed from innocent intentions, the stakes involved in establishing temporal frameworks for art movements like Minjung came to the fore in a review of Across the Pacific: Battle of Visions, published in Holland Cotter’s New York Times. In this text, alarm bells sound from the opening lines in which Cotter quotes the title of Gauquin’s 1897 painting “Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going,” asserting that “[a] century later, they are still being asked by non-Westerners whose lives have been changed—as the Tahitians were—by Western culture.” By this logic, the incursion of Western culture into South Korea, in part through American military presence following World War II, had awakened Korean artists and prompted them to rethink assumptions about Minjung Art in fact only reinscribes a well-rehearsed endpoint.

This portion of the catalogue, however, found itself at odds with the recursive model of temporality posited by the exhibition’s curators. According to the press release, “The Battle of Visions” would mark a decisive break from the tendency to date Minjung Art as a dated phenomenon, characterizing it instead as a movement “whose tense continues to be present—progressive.” The works in the show were in turn cast as embodying “at once the conclusion and the discontinuation of [Minjung Art] from the 1980s, the conclusion and the return to the 80s.”

Beck expanded on this thesis in an essay included in the catalogue, stating “my interest starts from the sense and the hope that Minjung Art will not be relegated merely to the status of an artistic trend of a particular locality, or a cultural ideology of a definite political moment, that Minjung Art was and will continue to have significant influence on the practice of contemporary art.” Well aware of Minjung Art’s contentious relation to art institutions, Beck goes on to remind readers that much of the work that Minjung artists produced in the 1980s was ephemeral and had to be reassembled, for the exhibition existed only for the duration of a given protest while prints were oftentimes distributed among local populations rather than preserved for posterity. The surviving canvases that have come to signify the whole of Minjung Art for museum audiences should thus be read as anachronistic, each token of what was and is Minjung Art. For Beck, this perspective allows us to grasp the continuum between Minjung Art of the 1980s and contemporary art practices that share in the kind of political activism integral to Minjung Art, and a return to the 80s.

Beck’s propositions offer an opportunity to rethink assumptions about Minjung Art’s relation to the contemporary. That the GanaCollection provides an instructive set of works with which to undertake such an investigation was apparent upon the opening of the exhibition “Mapping the
The work withdrawn from the exhibition. The kind of censorship that Han Xiong had described to Laurie Ochoa during the 1988 "Woodcuts of Liberation" exhibition in California still had not subsided in contemporary South Korea.

How does all of this change the way we look at Minjung Art? One way of answering this question is to return to "Story of the Painting Scene in the 80's" and specifically the installation of the works that face a "shock to the senses," as the Minjung works on view here expressed the "anger and frustration felt by Koreans through years of dictatorial rule, and their artistic and political efforts [which] helped to bring about profound democratic change." 26

An accompanying leaflet underscored this conventional bifurcated framework for understanding Korean art of the 1970s and 80s by including a timeline that stretches across six foldout pages. 27 The portion dedicated to Minjung Art begins with the formation of groups such as Reality and Utterance in 1980 and ends even earlier than most historical accounts of the movement, with the 1988 Olympics and the Min Joong Art exhibition at Artists Space serving as concluding episodes. It is no wonder, then, that reviewers read the exhibition’s contents as belonging to and reflecting a particular historical moment, one emphatically divorced from the present. A work of art is like a mirror, in that it cannot avoid being a product of its time,” wrote Soh, who left the exhibition convinced that the works provided “a poignant reflection of the historical realities of when and where they were made.”

Despite this overarching narrative, however, the display of Minjung Art in its “Mapping the Realities” might be read against the grain, especially in light of the temporal framework put forth in “The Battle of Visions.” Curated by Woom Shim, the floor dedicated to Minjung Art was arranged not chronologically but according to five different “scenes.” Here, the English term used in the exhibition materials evokes not a fixed positioning but rather a provisional process of constructing and staging. The following themes acted as a tentative ordering structure for the exhibition’s contents: "Criticism and Art," "Consumer Society and Media;" "Capitalism and Human Alienation;" and "Traditional Values and Mass Production." Drawing largely from works in the GanaArt Collection, the exhibition’s arrangement afforded an opportunity to think about discrete works outside of a chronological framework. What became apparent as a result was the fact that these conceptual ‘scenes’ hardly remained exclusive to the context of the 1980s. As the following themes acted as a tentative ordering structure for the exhibition’s contents: “Criticism and Art,” “Consumer Society and Media;” “Capitalism and Human Alienation;” and “Traditional Values and Mass Production.” Drawing largely from works in the GanaArt Collection, the exhibition’s arrangement afforded an opportunity to think about discrete works outside of a chronological framework. What became apparent as a result was the fact that these conceptual ‘scenes’ hardly remained exclusive to the context of the 1980s. As the following themes acted as a tentative ordering structure for the exhibition’s contents: “Criticism and Art,” “Consumer Society and Media;” “Capitalism and Human Alienation;” and “Traditional Values and Mass Production.” Drawing largely from works in the GanaArt Collection, the exhibition’s arrangement afforded an opportunity to think about discrete works outside of a chronological framework. What became apparent as a result was the fact that these conceptual ‘scenes’ hardly remained exclusive to the context of the 1980s.
Reality and Utterance

was formed between the late 1970s and early 1980s, when young artists began to accept critical realism. While preparing the exhibition commemorating the 20th year of the April 19 Revolution (1960) in December 1979, four critics (Won Dong-suk, Choi Min, Sung Wan-kyung, Youn Bummo) and eight artists (Son Jang-sup, Kim Kyoungin, Joo Jae Hwan, Kim Jeong-heon, Oh Soo Hwan, Kim Jung-Soo, Kim Yongtae and Oh Yoon) gathered at a restaurant in Seoul where they resolved to launch their initiative for Reality and Utterance. This group began by fundamentally reflecting on art itself and context before forming which developed the Korean art scene at the time. The group sought to restore the function of art as a language and as a means of communication. Although the “Reality and Utterance–Inaugural Exhibition,” was to be held at Korea Arts and Culture Education Service on October 17, 1980, the exhibition was canceled due to government pressure. The exhibition resumed instead at the Dongsanbang Gallery on November 13, sharing with the group an activity founded-based exhibitions for the following years, including “City and the Sight” at Lotte Art Museum in 1981; “Image of Happiness” at Deoksu Museum in 1982; “6.25: The Korean War” at Arab Cultural Center in 1984 and “Korean Peninsula Watches America” at Geurimmadang Min in 1988.

Painting
1989 Mixed media on cotton fabric 1434 x 1434 cm

“Story of the Painting Scene in the 80s” (1989) is a large-scale hanging picture produced for an exhibition to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the founding of the art group Reality and Utterance. As many as 20 artists who had been members of Reality and Utterance, as well as several who had been at the forefront of Minjung Art, participated in this project. On one 14-meter sheet of cotton cloth, the lines from one of the traditional Korean outdoor performances satirizing the era are written in an exhilarating tone, and the masterpieces that represent Minjung Art of the 1980s are featured together all over the cloth to create a magnificent image, including “Detecting Veins” by Kang Yo-bae; “Creating an Affluent Life-Lucky Monoryum” by Kim Jeong-heon; “Barley Field” by Lim Ok-sang; “Great Desires for the Unification” by Oh Yoon; “DMZ Dongducheon Photo Salon” by Kim Yongtae; “All Things under Heaven Go Up-Side-Down” by Kim Bong-jun; “Mondrian Hotel” by Joo Myung Duck; “Save Han Yeol!” by Choi Byung Soo; “I am e(m)barrassed)vious of our President” by Park Bul-dong; “Contemporary Korean History: Rice Planting” by Shin Hak-chul; “Window of History” by Son Jang-sup; and “Labor” by the Minjung Art group Ganeunpae.