

Record of the International Symposium for the 20th Anniversary of the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum:  
Why Are Photography Museums Necessary?

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Photography shows its presence as an important medium in contemporary art exhibitions as well as photography art museums these days. I, as a curator, like photographic works and invite photographers to my exhibitions. Although I must say that even I find myself considering paintings, installations, and media arts before photography, though this tendency also varies depending on the theme of the exhibition.

In addition to that, I, like many other curators of art museums, have less expertise in photography than curators in photography art museums. I think this is because we are afforded fewer resources and opportunities for research and less access to photographic artworks. Accordingly, photography exhibitions by art museums are somewhat different from exhibitions by photography art museums in terms of view and context. One of the most important reasons that photography museums are so needed is that without them, photography artists can be seriously neglected. I would like to further explain this issue by showcasing the current status of South Korean photography.

According to 2015 statistics from the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, there are 982 registered museums in the country: 780 archaeological museums and 202 art museums. Among them are three photography art museums: the Museum of Photography, Seoul, GoEun Museum of Photography in Busan, and Donggang Museum of Photography in Yeongwol, Gangwon Province. The Museum of Photography, Seoul and GoEun Museum of Photography are private museums. Donggang Museum of Photography is the only public photography museum. However, it is located in the countryside, about three hours' travel from Seoul. Due to this, the museum is not so popular with visitors.

So the Museum of Photography, Seoul and GoEun Museum of Photography are the most active and important photography art museums in South Korea. The Ilwoo Space in Seoul (run by the Ilwoo Foundation, which is affiliated with the Hanjin Group) also focuses on photography, although it is not a registered museum. Even though around a dozen new museums opened in



2016, none of them focus on photography. On a positive note, the Seoul Museum of Art is preparing to open a Museum of Photography in five years.

The three photography museums mentioned above and Ilwoo Space have regular photography exhibitions, are actively collecting, and host awards for talented photographers. They have played a very important role in the discovery and support of young talented photographers. In addition to that, they have been active in popularizing publications, education, and academic seminars relating to photography. However, it is rare for a major Korean museum to hold a photography exhibition. Even though photography is far more popular than it used to be, the majority of exhibitions are confined to veteran artists' donated works and annual group exhibitions.

Along with the aforementioned spaces, there's also the Daegu Photo Biennale, which aims to showcase more experimental and genre-defying works. Their portfolio-reviewing program Encounter selects and exhibits qualifying new photographers.

Additionally, photography doesn't have the strongest presence in the Korean art market. Only a few galleries focus exclusively on photography: Trunk Gallery, Gallery Lux, Xii Gallery, Gallery Lumiere, and Kim Young Seob Photo Gallery. Their complaints point to the difficulties in financially operating museums. Due to the economic downturn, the number of private buyers has vastly shrunk, and artists' incomes mostly derive from the small number of purchases made by museums.

Overall, programs that focus solely on the medium of photography are rare. Despite the fact that photographic artists are increasing in number, the chances to exhibit their work grow slimmer. Because of the difficulty of making sales, many talented young photo artists resort to commercial photography as a part- or full-time job. In short, in order to support photography artists and the understanding and appreciation of photography as a medium, photography museums are essential.

For the remainder, I'd like to present some photos and related materials from the major museums mentioned above, as I believe that these may help provide context and understanding for the current state of photography in Korea.

#### **Photography collections and exhibitions in the last two years in major museums:**

- **National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art** ([www.mmca.go.kr](http://www.mmca.go.kr))  
Total collection: 7,981 works (3,683 donated) / 905 photographic (304 donated)  
Exhibitions: about 40 annual exhibitions; three of the 80 exhibitions in the last two years were photography exhibitions
- 1. *City We Have Known* — *Photographs by Kang Hong Goo and Area Park*,

2015

2. *Yook Myong-Shim Retrospective*, 2015-2016

3. *Public to Private: Photography in Korean Art since 1989*, 2016

- **Seoul Museum of Art** (<http://sema.seoul.go.kr>)

Total collection: 4,348 works / 600 photographs (about 250 donated)

Exhibitions: 40 annual exhibitions at five locations

1. Seoul Photo Festival, 2016

2. *Photographs by Kang Bong-kyu: Human Theater*, 2016

— exhibition of donated artworks

3. *Lee Juyong Photographic Studio*, 2016

4. *The Family of the Invisibles*, 2016

— held in commemoration of 130 years of Korean-French diplomatic ties

5. Seoul Photo Festival, 2015

6. *Faces*, Joo Myung Duck, 2015

- **Busan Museum of Art** ([art.busan.go.kr](http://art.busan.go.kr))

Total collection: 2,407 works / 121 photographic (65 donated)

1. *Unacquainted Familiarity: The Residue of Memory*, 2016

exhibition of donated artworks by Kim Bok Man

2. *The Moment! The memory of a moment*, 2015

— exhibition of donated artworks by Choi Min Shik

- **Daegu Art Museum** ([www.daeguartmuseum.org](http://www.daeguartmuseum.org))

Total collection: 1,007 works / 42 photographic (five donated)

1. *Asian Contemporary Photography: WANG Qingsong, JUNG Yeondoo*, 2014

2. Yang Fudong, *The Light That I Feel*, 2016

- **The Museum of Photography, Seoul** ([www.photomuseum.or.kr](http://www.photomuseum.or.kr))

The Museum of Photography, Seoul, commonly known as the Hanmi Photography Art Museum in Korea, was founded by the Gahyeon Foundation of Culture. (The foundation is run by Hanmi Pharmaceutical, which is one of the leading companies in the pharmaceutical industry.) The museum opened in 2003, becoming the country's first museum dedicated to photographic art. It hosted three photography awards in its first three years. It has a collection of about 10,000 works, which is of crucial value to researchers of the history of international and Korean photography. The museum has also developed various education and publication programs.

- **GoEun Museum of Photography** ([www.goeunmuseum.org](http://www.goeunmuseum.org))

The GoEun Museum of Photography opened in 2007 in Busan; it was established by the GoEun Foundation. The museum is focused on building a photography archive, planning high-quality exhibitions, and discovering and supporting young talented photography artists. It is also

active in publication and education, and organizes academic seminars.

- **Donggang Museum of Photography** ([www.dgphotomuseum.com](http://www.dgphotomuseum.com))

The museum opened in 2005, becoming the country's first public photo museum. It holds the Donggang International Photo Festival every summer, as well as regular awards ceremonies.

- **Ilwoo Space** ([www.ilwoo.org](http://www.ilwoo.org))

The space opened in 2010 and hosts the Ilwoo Photography Awards.

- **Daegu Photo Biennale** ([www.daeguphoto.com](http://www.daeguphoto.com))

The biennale started in 2006. The 6th edition was held in 2016; Japanese art director Naoya Yoshikawa directed the main exhibition, *Asian Express*, around the theme, "We come from somewhere, but where are we going?" This exhibition aimed to showcase various experimental interpretations of the changing landscape and environment of Asia in the late-twentieth century.

(English Editing: Alex Dudok de Wit [Art Translators Collective])