

April 12 2026

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## THE PRECARIOUS MYTH OF THE BIENNIAL ARTIST

By Ho Tzu Nyen



Ho Tzu Nyen, *Utama—Every Name in History Is I*, 2003, digital video, color, sound, 23 minutes.

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**WHEN MY PROJECT** *Utama—Every Name in History Is I*, 2003, was selected for the Singapore pavilion at the [Twenty-Sixth São Paulo Bienal](#) in 2004, I did not really know what a national pavilion meant, or even what a biennial was. I had not gone to art school and so I had no context for understanding these things. In Singapore in the early 2000s there were no galleries showing video art and very few people interested in the kind of work I was making; at that moment, I was not only finding my way as an artist, but also discovering where I might be able to present the kind of work that I do.

What I remember now is not the exhibition itself, but the small constellation of people who believed in the work. Those relationships continued for years. Around the same time, I was also showing the video component of *Utama* at film festivals like Oberhausen, and presenting lecture versions of it at performing arts festivals such as Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels. In Oberhausen, seeing the strange films made by artists from all parts of the world made me feel much less alone; in Brussels, I saw performances and met people who would change the course of my life. The biennial was part of that trajectory of discovering, but it was only one thread in a larger field of cultural, artistic, and social encounters through which friendships, collaborations, projects, and livelihoods were woven together.

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the biennial it deserves.**

It is important to say, though, that one can't make a living from participating in biennials. As the current artistic director of the Gwangju Biennale, I was struck by how artist fees today remain just as inconsequential as they were more than a decade ago, when I was a participating artist. The costs of living increase in all parts of the world, but the fees one receives remain negligible. Everyone knows there is something wrong with this, yet very little seems to change. While people speak about the rise of the “biennial artist,” this is not a category that corresponds to any stable economic reality. It is simply a condition of circulation.

For me, the biennial is not a career path but a temporary concentration of forces. It is a moment when works, ideas, and people from different places are brought into proximity, when capacities meet and sometimes amplify one another. At rare times this produces genuine encounters; most of the time it leads to repetition and exhaustion. The advantages and disadvantages are often the same: the scale, the speed, the pressure to be visible, to translate oneself quickly across contexts.

I do not think of the biennial as a fixed model. Every place, at every moment in time, produces the biennial it deserves. Rather than asking what a biennial is, I am more interested in what it can be: a provisional structure to be grasped as capacity—a space where new relations, conversations, and forms of practice might briefly intersect and intensify, before dispersing again, realigning onto other trajectories.

*Ho Tzu Nyen is the artistic director of the Gwangju Biennale, which opens in September this year.*

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