

Portrait of **HO TZU NYEN**.
Photo by Lee Il Chun.
Courtesy the Gwangju Biennale.

A portrait of artist Ho Tzu Nyen. He is standing in front of a light-colored, textured wall. Five circular mirrors are mounted on the wall, arranged in a cross pattern around him. The mirrors reflect various outdoor scenes, including trees, a building, and a paved area. Ho Tzu Nyen is wearing a dark, long-sleeved jacket and glasses. He has his arms crossed and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

HO TZU NYEN

After Commemoration

BY LOUIS LU



Installation view of **HO TZU NYEN's** *Hotel Aporia*, 2019, six-channel video projection, 24 channel sound, automated fans, lights, transducers, and show control system, at "Taming Y/Our Passion," Aichi Triennale 2019. Photo by Takeshi Hirabayashi. Courtesy the artist.

History rarely unfolds as a clean sequence of events. It loops, stalls, folds one moment into the next, and reappears under different names. It is assembled after the fact, from documents, images, and songs—spirals of myths and archival residues. What we call the past is often a composite: facts braided with ideology, memory shaped by the needs of the present. For the better part of two decades, Ho Tzu Nyen has been preoccupied with time, history, and the archive, mining period cinema, colonial lithographs, wartime philosophy, and folkloric demons to expose how a region, a trauma, or a life gets narrated, and how easily that narration unravels.

In May 1980, citizens of Gwangju rose up against Chun Doo-hwan's military regime; the army responded with paratroopers and live fire, killing hundreds over 10 days. The brutal suppression and the long aftermath of mourning and reckoning eventually turned the massacre into a founding

narrative of South Korean democracy. Established in 1995, the Gwangju Biennale took up that legacy directly, conceived in part to honor the city's uprising and carry its democratic spirit forward. When Ho was named artistic director of this year's edition—the first artist, rather than professional curator, to take up the role—the appointment raised a question: how might an artistic sensibility attuned to duration, recurrence, and dissolution engage with a biennale so tightly bound to a single unresolved moment?

We spoke by video just before the opening of the Venice Biennale, which Ho had opted to miss this time around. It could be a case of biennale fatigue, the exhaustion produced by a calendar in which a major international exhibition seems to launch somewhere every few weeks. Yet Gwangju, with its dispersed venues and standing as one of Asia's oldest biennales, has long held a

particular pull for him. To take on this biennale is to inherit the weight of May 1980, and to decide what an exhibition can responsibly do with it.

Ho doesn't seem bothered by the perceived gulf between making art and organizing exhibitions. The scope of responsibility and the volume of communication are, he concedes, undeniably different, but he insists on treating the two roles as though they were one. "Fundamentally there's only one way I am able to function," he told me, adding that he is not even certain if this mode is specific to being an artist—it is simply the only one available to him. "If they chose an artist, then they should get an artist, I suppose." The remark does not feel like a boast; it registers as a description of method. His practice has always been grounded in the assemblage of existing materials, from regional folkloric motifs such as Malayan weretigers and the biography of a Southeast Asian spy to an archive of Hong Kong film clips. For Ho, to work



View of protesters gathered in Geumnam-ro, Gwangju, on May 21, 1980. Photo by Na Kyung-taek, former photojournalist for Jeonnam Daily Newspaper.

is to bring things, people, and histories into relation.

In 2018, for the 12th Gwangju Biennale, Ho collaborated on a performance with curator David Teh, improvised music group FEN, whose name references the Far East Network of American military radio, and Korean vocalist Park Minhee. Trained in the court-music tradition of *gugak*, Park sang texts Ho had chosen about the wartime philosophers of the Kyoto School. It was his first sustained engagement with the entangled histories of Japanese imperialism, and it seeded what became his so-called Japanese trilogy. The performance rehearsed, in miniature, the relational logic that runs through his career as both artist and curator: a congregation of practitioners, texts, and histories brought into charged alignment.

The *49th Hexagram* (2020), Ho's contribution to that year's exhibition, was his first direct meditation on the city's democratic past. The work turns on a buried etymology of revolution as molting, the violent shedding of one skin for another. 革命 (*gémìng*), the Chinese word for "revolution," pairs 命 (*mìng*), which signals life, destiny,

or mandate, with 革 (*gé*), a character for change whose oracle-bone form depicts a flayed animal skin, its head, limbs, and horns still attached. The character makes its earliest appearance in the 49th hexagram of the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes. Commissioned for the 40th anniversary of May 1980 and created during the pandemic, the piece began with stills culled from various South Korean films that dramatize the country's recurring uprisings, which Ho assembled into storyboards for an animation. He then outsourced the animation to a studio in North Korea, which, for political reasons, could not depict Korean history directly and substituted generic forms for what it could not show, stripping the film of national symbol and historical specificity. The result literalizes the etymology: figures revolt while masked, wrapped in other skins, their identities peeled away. Even the names of the studio and its country were effaced in the exhibition text, credited only as an animation company in "The Nation of Morning Calm." "That project was critical in forming my relationship

to Gwangju," Ho said. "It's really not possible to think about Gwangju without thinking about the uprising; they're so deeply intertwined." The history, he added, "drives each edition of the biennale in a different way, whether directly or indirectly."

This year's edition takes its title from the closing line of Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* (1908), "You Must Change Your Life." Ho is drawn to the phrase for its internal incongruity. "It's an imperative and it's open at the same time," he said. "There's almost a contradiction there, a paradoxical force." This paradox is less a theme than an organizing principle, an intentional refusal of the usual anchors. Biennales tend to cohere around a region, a thesis, a concept, or a narrative, but Ho set out to reject all of these. He wanted no fixed geography, no single subject, no argument under which artworks would be marshaled. "Rilke's paradoxical line was the closest I could get," he explained—a proposition intense enough to hold the exhibition together, yet indeterminate enough to point nowhere in particular. From it he derives two terms, "change" and "practice," and the relay between them: at times practice channels change,

while at others, it resists change imposed from the outside, becoming “a retreat from a certain kind of enforced social pressure.” Artists, he observed, often develop a practice—a routine for living and working, and for enduring economic and political prejudice—before making art. This is why the biennale will show multiple contributions by each artist, rendering visible “a shape in time,” the slow accumulation through which a practice reveals itself.

During curatorial research, Ho encountered the May Mothers’ House, an association of women who lost family members in the events of May 18 or witnessed loved ones permanently altered by them. He was struck by the women, who now commune for therapy and, in the process, have begun to paint. Ho has included their canvases in this year’s biennale. Rather than depicting the violence, these small and intimate paintings—each just 30 centimeters square—turn toward memory and repair: a plate of *Chuseok* rice cakes on a field of blue in Jang Myung-hee’s *Chuseok Songpyeon* (*In Solidarity*) (2023); a pair of eyes

surfacing from a ground of gold in Kang Hae-jung’s *My Eyes (Remembering)* (2022); and a night garden in full bloom, with a self-portrait nestled among the blossoms, in Park Soon-geum’s *Planting Flowers (Finding Myself)* (2022). Ho turns to Freud to describe trauma: an event that happens once but lodges permanently in the unconscious, halting time and compelling the mind to repeat it. To return endlessly to May 1980 risks reopening the wound. The mothers suggest another path, not repetition of the injury but repetition redirected toward the generative—the weekly labor of gathering, therapy, and painting. “Life goes on, and they transform themselves,” Ho reflected. Here the biennale’s imperative acquires a human face: change becomes the daily toil of surviving one’s own history.

How does one commemorate a singular rift in time while insisting that each moment carries equal weight? Ho rejects the opposition between dramatic event and everyday continuity, between disruption and flow, treating the distinction as a matter of vantage: “A rupture looks sudden only because of the scale at which we perceive it.”

His approach to Gwangju’s history as mythology draws on the same instinct that animates *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2012–): the conviction that all mythologies are composites of fact, ideology, and belief, and that none should be mistaken for the sole truth. But his questioning is not combative, and with Gwangju, he proceeds “respectfully and lovingly,” interrogating not the event itself or its intensity, but the constructions that have accrued around it. The aim is not to flatten the uprising by pressing it down, but to “raise everything upward,” linking the courage of its participants to the wider textures of life. Asked what history might do beyond paying tribute to the past, he offers no definitive answer, only a proposition: “Commemoration is like the body,” he said. “These events are embodied in us.” If the past already lives within us, then to change one’s life is not to sever ourselves from it, but to let it flow onward in other forms. “You Must Change Your Life” was never an order to escape the past. It was an invitation to continue.

HO TZU NYEN, *The 49th Hexagram*, 2020, video still of synchronized two-channel HD projections, 16:9 format, color, and six-channel sound: 30 min 30 sec. Music by Ryu Hankil, Park Minhee, and Bek Hyunjin. Courtesy the artist; Kiang Malingue, Hong Kong/New York; and neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

