

'2022 Title Match: IM Heung-soon vs Omer Fast "Cut!"' at SeMA in Seoul

Paul O'Kane

'2022 Title Match: IM Heung-soon vs Omer Fast "Cut!"', 17 November 2022 – 2 April 2023,
SeMA, Buk-Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea

As I have recently published a book about history in contemporary art I might like to regard myself as some kind of expert regarding the relationship between contemporary art and history... however, as Omer Fast makes clear in a video interview that introduced this show, history and contemporary art, once brought together, produce nothing but further questions, although, thankfully, also endless possibilities. Those questions, of course, include questions of what and how contemporary art can contribute to a history that seems today to be in a kind of perpetual crisis – trying to understand what it is, has been or might be, considering a concurrent radical critique of knowledge, fact and truth and a corresponding embrace of various stories, fictions and fakes. Nevertheless, the big answer to such big questions is not 'if' or whether contemporary and artists can and do use history, but how and how well they do so.



SeMA, Buk-Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea, photo by the author, 2023

This show's full title was 'CUT! – Title Match' augmented by the year and the artists' names. It was the eighth in an annual SeMA (Seoul Museum of Art) series wherein two artists are brought together in an unusually sporty sense of 'competition', although this is a word that Fast distances himself from in his interview. We are not used to artists explicitly and honestly 'competing', even if and even though we are probably aware of the many ways in which artists really *do* compete, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing, sometimes bringing out the best in us artistically, even while exposing a seamier side to identities that we like to think of as relatively virtuous and clean.



IM Heung-soon, *Basement My Love*, 2000, single channel 6mm video, colour, sound, 20 min 9 sec, supported by Art Space Pool, courtesy of the artist, photo courtesy of the Seoul Museum of Art

This was a large show, held in this beautifully designed museum, with a publicly funded feel to both the buildings and the programme. The artists' videos were meticulously and sometimes quite inventively installed across a variety of generous spaces on two floors. By the time I had seen all (it took me two visits), along with the videos' contents, I had also experienced just about every variation on the many known (and some less familiar) ways, by and with which to accommodate an audience to view artists' video. At one point, watching a video by IM Heung-Soon (about basement life), I looked at a low-definition image on an old cube monitor in a tiny space, perched on small stools and beneath some stairs. Elsewhere I used headphones, then listened to sounds bleeding in from one video installation into another. Sometimes I leaned on pillows and at one point laid back on a rattan lounger, while at other times I just sat or stood on a carpeted floor. Sometimes I had to travel to the other side of a screen to see the whole of a two- or four-channel video, and once I found myself sitting, as though at a tennis match, on one of two horizontal plinths laid down like benches, watching a video whose narrative passes from the screen on the left over to another on the right. Furthermore, on several occasions,

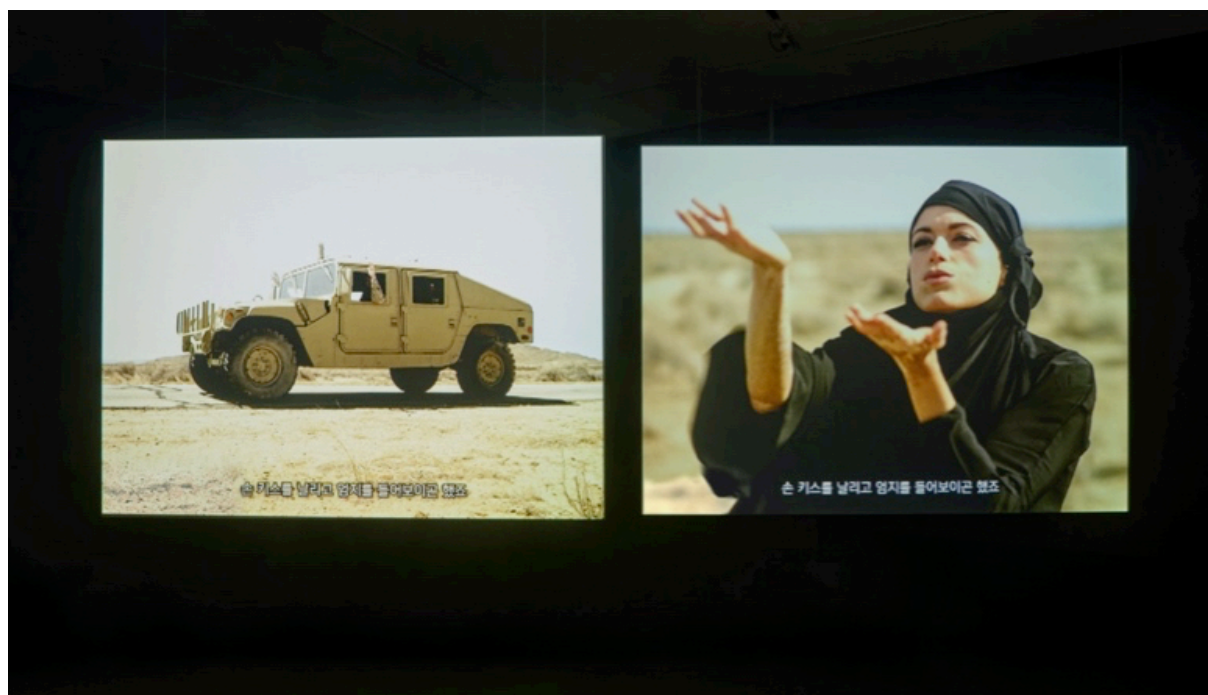
the installed video, screen and sound (for both artists) were accompanied by carefully chosen and specifically placed household objects – a rug, sideboard, houseplant or vase, and in one case a whole roomful of paraphernalia – as if to domesticate the installations and extend the on-screen narratives into our real, present life, space and time. This might sound unlikely, but it was quite successful, and even felt welcome in an age wherein our experience is so dominated by the virtual image and the inhuman and undimensional digital screen.



IM Heung-soon, *Good Light, Good Air*, 2018, 2-channel FHD video, colour, 4-channel sound, 42 min, commissioned by Carnegie Museum of Art for the exhibition 'Carnegie International, 57th Edition' with the support of samuso and the Page Gallery, courtesy of the artist, photo courtesy of the Seoul Museum of Art

If this really is a 'title match', we might add up the points at the end of our visit and decide that Omer Fast is the clear winner, given the intense sophistication and high production values of his works, which truly open up a troublesome can of global and contemporary questions currently informing artist's video, as well as history, memory, narrative, fiction and story. But this would be crude, and also rude to the show's Korean hosts, who have, after all, put their own man up to fight the local corner as representative of one of the world's most avariciously 'developing' and now surely 'leading' nations (NB returning to the UK after a trip to Korea invariably feels like stepping back into an earlier century of redundant technology, wrung-out consumerism, disempowered politics, poor infrastructure, *et al*).

To nominate Fast as 'the winner' would also, and obviously, be wrong, simply because art does not tally up judgmental points in any simplistically quantitative way. Omer Fast and IM Heung-Soon both represent (although this idea might be worth unpicking in more detail) their own lives, practices, cultures, nations, etc. While Fast's work may have that 'biennale quality', ie seeming and assuming to speak for a whole world (or 'the art world' at least), IM Heung-Soon's video art could still 'win' hands-down here, according to the criteria of making a certain locally emotive political contribution that requires less grandiose retheorisations of time, narrative, history, etc, but provides more specialised knowledge of the Korean context.



Omer Fast, *The Casting*, 2007, 4-channel video installation, colour, sound, 14 min 10 sec, commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, courtesy of the artist, photo courtesy of the Seoul Museum of Art

Despite Korea's stunning hyper-modernisation and hyper-capitalist hyper-consumerism (in painfully polar opposition and contrast to the hyper-communism of its estranged northern sister state), its society will impress any visitor to Seoul, with its adherence and loyalty to its own history. This can be found in tourist-friendly displays of traditional costume, food, rituals and architecture at the national museum, or re-enacted in the grounds of various ancient palaces, etc. But history is also revealed in various forms of honorifics and etiquette that pervade even the dynamic youth culture here, so that Korean teenagers, coolly attuned to fashions and styles that now shape Western tastes, are simultaneously knowledgeable and respectful of the correct and polite way to refer to each member of their family's hierarchy, as well as to social and professional relations. And then there is the kind of history that taps into Korea's grim post-World War Two procession of wars, coups, revolutions, presidential impeachment, assassination and suicides, as well as some short-lived, more progressive political settlements. This history is ever present, live, and seething away in public debates fed nightly by KBS TV news full of corruptions and scandals.

On a visit some years ago to Seoul's slightly clumsily titled 'Museum of Contemporary History', I found myself working my way up and along a timeline that repeatedly moved me to tears with its representations of the post-World War Two Korean generations' passionate insistence on improving, creating, instating and defending modern progressive rights against the irrepressibly resurgent odds of competing right-wing dictatorships and a corrupt nexus of right-wing governments with leaders of big business. Hence, in IM Heung-Soon's videos we find sometimes explicit, sometimes inferred reference to the 1980 Gwangju uprising and subsequent massacre of protesting students – but also to the 1948–1949 Jeju uprising and massacre; then to the more recent *Sewol* ferry disaster in 2014, in which over three hundred people, almost all of them schoolchildren, lost their lives. These events are further haunted by the 1994 Seongsu

bridge rush-hour collapse which claimed 32 lives; the 1995 Sampoong department store collapse due to a structural failure that killed 502 people; and most recently the 2022 crowd crush in the Itaewon neighbourhood of Seoul that killed over 150 people, most of them born in the 1990s, as they tried to get through a 45-metre-long alleyway to celebrate Halloween.

In the Korean left's perennial and unquenchable enthusiasm for a 'cleaner' political and economic system, stripped of what they see as Korea's unspeakable endemic corruption, these disasters can all find their way to being – in one sense or another – representative of a lack of care on behalf of the rich and powerful, who are accused of (and often exposed) as feathering their own nests instead of behaving more responsibly to build a sustainable, fair and ethical society and using Korea's demonstrable energies and talents to not only create dizzying growth and mega-wealth but to also help and protect the less successful and more vulnerable – who must always be an accountable aspect of the capitalist deal.

And so, while IM Heung-Soon's works might come across as relatively modest when compared to Fast's, they serve a specific purpose for and to a specific culture, which then becomes a model for other cultures that, like Korea, may not have been the first to sit at the dining table of the modern but who as later-comers arrive at their own pace and, with the benefit of a certain historical hindsight, interpret both the modern and capitalism in their own way (this is one interpretation of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Altermodern* theory).



Omer Fast, *Garage Sale*, 2022, 3-channel video installation, colour, sound, 29 min 30 sec, commissioned by ajh.pm and Seoul Museum of Art with the support of Outset Contemporary Art Fund, courtesy of the artist, photo courtesy of the Seoul Museum of Art

As for Fast, in his work we see repeated reference to global levels of other forms of corruption – for example, those that produced and perpetuate the legacy of hegemonic post-9/11 wars in which Euro-American and NATO forces fight, or fought, a so-called 'war on terror' – an unprecedented and in some ways unrecognisable war, a war on a concept, which, in various

ways, brought war *per se*, and history too, *home* to the so-called ‘rich West’ and its comfortable and complacent position as presumed (and hence rather delusional) kings of the world.

However, in Fast’s work, as well as making repeated reference to Afghanistan, demobbed NATO forces, and homecoming American or German sons suffering PTSD while trying to rebuild their own realities through forms of storytelling, we also encounter older, more traditional forms of story – for example, ancient Jewish myths, and references to art history in the guise of Erwin Panofsky, Jan Van Eyck and August Sander. Nevertheless, much of this subtly winds its way, in one way or another, to implicating the arch-modern historical matter of the holocaust, and repeated references to what, along with slavery, is perhaps the most lethal modern historical narrative of all: Nazism.

But as we have seen, Omer Fast’s mixed Israeli/US/German cultural identity cannot be said to be the only internationally historical voice in this supposed ‘bout’. For IM Heung-Soon, the stakes are also and always historically high, concerning questions of what art, and video-art in particular (along with its considered installation), can do for or say about society, politics, community, corruption, and ultimately about the hope that we all need in order to sustain an effective and constructive critique of our appalling modern failings.

Fast’s work may reveal that history, for the so-called ‘rich West’ is today a Pandora’s Box (a reference made in one of Fast’s videos), a labyrinth of disruptive repressions, lost directions and debilitating uncertainties, but this does not disallow supposedly ‘emerging’ nations, with their own art and artists, and with their own often more ancient histories, forms and traditions, from cultivating and maintaining their own vision of a future, a viable or justifiable modernity, a sense of hope and optimism and a promise of happiness.

As winter turned to Spring in Seoul there was plenty of visible optimism around. On Yeouido island, for example, by the un-embanked edges of the wide Han river, crowds of stylish teenagers come to picnic and date on sunny Sunday afternoons (think of a twenty-first century update on Seurat’s *Grande Jatte*). Some hire cycles or tandems to trundle, smiling, along recently built cycle superhighways. There is optimism in the vast fantasy consumer world of Yeouido’s towering Hyundai shopping palace, in all the confident smiles and smart fashions of all those going about their daily business aided by all the super-efficient infrastructure that serves this city (commuters don’t need to be warned to ‘mind the gap’ as there is no gap – Korean engineers have resolved the modern issue of making trains fit platforms). Much of Korea’s hope and optimism is to be found in its especially dedicated and kind approach to social service, that seems to persist despite all the corruption. And so you can also find hope if, climbing to the top of one of Seoul’s many urban mountains, you find scores of fit-looking retirees there, working out on government-supplied gym equipment, but also when, on descending the same mountain, you find a beautifully made children’s centre, generously constructed purely for the purpose of instructing children in the art of negotiating their traffic-filled city. It has mini zebra crossings, mini traffic lights, mini bridges, walkways and roundabouts. Meanwhile, thousands of protestors gather every Saturday afternoon, filled with yet another kind of hope, as they march, sing, dance and together call for the overthrow of the recently, narrowly elected right-wing president and government that they view as wholly un- or mis-representative of the (as they

see it) much-wronged, oft-oppressed, but ultimately true, clean, pure and kind political and social heart of the Korean people.

SeMA's sporty, competitive-sounding 'Title Match' series might sound and seem slightly incongruous, and yet it here produced a valuable outcome in the unusual overlapping and hybridisation of two very different and usually quite distant video artists. Omer Fast and IM Heung-Soon each draw from very different cultural and artistic *oeuvres* and traditions, but always in order to propose – while self-consciously interacting with – a rich sequence of cultural and historical works that, taken together, add-up to a 'win-win' for every visitor, and a score-draw for these would-be 'competitors'.

Paul O'Kane is an artist, writer and senior lecturer at Central Saint Martins (CSM), University of the Arts London (UAL). He also teaches at SOAS, University of London. His book, *History in Contemporary Art and Culture*, was published by Routledge in 2023. He has also published about three hundred professional pieces, including articles, essays, reviews, and a group of artists' self-published books. His writings have appeared in *Third Text's* refereed journal, as well as *Third Text* Online and numerous other platforms, including *Art Monthly*. His long-running seminars 'Technologies of Romance' and 'A Thing of the Past?' (on history in contemporary art) contextualise the impact of today's 'new' technologies on art, life and culture, while attempting to use history to see, interpret and theorise our times.