

FACT on tour: Jikji International Festival

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FACT on tour: Director Prof. Mike Stubbs on his trip to JIKJI International Festival Exhibition in South Korea

“Jikji” was the world’s first form of movable metal typeface - effectively the technology that democratised the written word through mass production, interestingly some seventy years previous to the Gutenberg Press. Earlier this year, I was invited to JIKJI International Festival Exhibition in Cheongju, South Korea, where the technology originated, to collaborate and advise on a major exhibition. The show was part of a ‘boosted’ festival, aiming to make more of the invention for the place-making and brand of Cheongju City, which is located two hours south of Seoul and has a population of 850,000 people.

As much as I like longer planning periods, I also adore short timescales and the challenge to improvise, associate and make things happen quickly. Collaboration being key in this, and, as with a similar event two years back, Crystalize, I worked closely with Stephanie Seungmin, Chief Curator for JIKJI Korea International Festival, on a three-day event at Old Billingsgate, which marked a 150 trade agreement between UKTI and KOTRA.

Apart from being a curatorial sounding board for JIKJI Korea International Festival, I made direct input into the ‘future’ section of the festival and related to the idea of Jikji as a form of information storage, by including works by artists such as Ryoichi Kurokawa, Gina Czarnecki, Semiconductor and Marshmallow Laser Feast. The idea was that transcoding information between mediums and spaces as interpreted by artists, suggests that storage, whether biological (DNA) or metadata sets accumulated through atomic research for astronomical purposes, will be the languages of the future. Much of this work is relevant to FACT’s focus this year on Art and Science and our new partnership with CERN.

Collaborating with the excellent exhibition designer Abe Rogers, and working alongside Ron Arad who was commissioned to build a new pavilion (also in a ridiculously short time frame), we managed to pull off something quite spectacular and popular (more than 120,000 visitors in a week). Apart from FACT and the artists getting the chance of exposure for new work, we could also develop new relationships and strengthened existing collaborations, with major organisations such as SEMA, Artsonje Centre and the British Council, which is great for FACT’s international agenda.

Working in Asia is interesting in so many ways and we at FACT can both learn and inform so much. For example, a maker fair in the square outside the festival included a ‘lab for boys’; when I couldn’t find similar activity for girls I raised the question during the symposium, and was told that this was to encourage boys to participate as mainly girls got involved in making, challenging my assumptions around gender politics, which can be very different in South Korea.

So if it’s about intercultural exchange, let’s think more broadly. Barbecues, (beer), pervasive pop idol culture, shamanism, custom mini-bikes, fashion and martial arts are some of the idiosyncrasies I have sampled. For instance, I was kindly invited as a special guest to an international Judo contest where I met the previous prime minister and witnessed the most balletic martial arts in the form of a dual grading, and met the 2012 gold medal winner!

South Korea also hosts many biennales: Busan, Gwangju and Mediacity Seoul Biennial, which I got to attend the preview of. Showcasing great work, superbly curated with serious subjects at its heart, let’s not forget South Korea’s location, recent (young) history and precarious relationship with North Korea. I am writing this, having just observed this morning’s news headlining; Kim Jon-un’s latest underground nuclear test which at first was considered a 5.5 scale earthquake. This follows continued provocation and bilateral misunderstanding.

The DMZ (Demilitarised Zone) between North and South Korea is shrinking, complex politics are dangerously played out, and border walls are getting taller, in what once was a single state (think cold war Germany, Berlin wall). Despite this, the people I have had the privilege to meet and work with are buoyant, hopeful and humorous - useful lessons for those of us worrying about Brexit.