


# KIMSOOJA

TO BREATHE: BOTTARI



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### *Being as Building, the Korean papillione*

Michel Mossessian

There is an unbearable lightness of building type when it comes to pavilions at art exhibitions. They are exactly what you don't expect architecture to be about: they are temporary, ephemeral, coming to life for a one-off event, just like the butterfly, the 'papillione' from which the word pavilion derives.

This particular butterfly, a pavilion in the Venetian Giardini, does come back to life on a regular schedule, however, re-awakening annually to host art and architecture installations, a permanent presence, since 1995, in the constellation of world nations. Here it does so much more than simply house exhibitions: the Giardini pavilions carry huge responsibilities. They are the signifiers of nationhood, jostling for the best site amongst their global neighbours.

Korea is tucked behind the main avenue, a sideshow to the triumvirate of France, England and Germany that dominates one end of the main avenue, at the other end of which sits the megalopolis of Italy. In fact, you might miss Korea altogether and its architects decided to create the most temporary-feeling space possible.

This pavilion is a negotiated, found space, a modestly understated neighbour to the pompous neoclassical battleships either side, a kit of parts—glass, air and light—but it too carries a weighty message. The COREA inscribed over the entrance is very specifically a place for a unified representation of the country. It isn't ignoring the geopolitical divide, but its very existence questions whether people can share blood ties without sharing cultural values.

As I write, there is news of tension over the Korean divide. The South Korean President, Park Geun-hye, announced that she is setting out policies "designed to establish peace and a foundation for reunification [with North Korea] by building and restoring trust". To this architecturally phrased pronouncement, North Korea responds with a threat of war. Cultural identity encompasses notions of resemblance, difference and adherence. The



Korean pavilion is a superb illustration of an idea finding a home under no flag. It is a piece of architecture in as much as it provides a place to celebrate, a space to reflect values, manifestos, a state of mind. These same words might be used to describe a place of worship: although cathedrals are hefty affairs, they carry a similar ambiguity of being static and mobile. They come to life periodically for rituals and then go back into hibernation. They even look like ships, the altar in the prow, the spire a mast.

Pavilions are also vessels of a sort, carrying cultural values to a destination. Of the two main architectural archetypes—the cave for sedentary communities, the tent for the nomadic ones—the pavilion is closer to a tent. It has that dimension rarely associated with buildings: time. It only functions sporadically. But when it is inhabited, it becomes laden with meaning and, since the meaning changes each time, the building has to be suitable for any content, in any format. It is this need for flexibility that sets the pavilion free from classical architecture's notion of form following function.

In fact, the Korean Pavilion's physical presence and permanence are its message. Initiated by artist Nam June Paik, this space goes beyond borders and divisions by acting as a vessel, instead of a flagship. It becomes the ultimate ground for interrogating art—where values and concepts can be questioned with lightness and delight, where compelling ideas come to life with all the scintillating colour of the flutter of a butterfly's wings.

02/04/2013 08:42

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