

About the cancellation of the exhibition “After ‘Freedom of Expression?’”



Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung, Statue of a Girl of Peace (2011). Courtesy of the artists.

What happened

The Aichi Triennial, named after the Japanese Aichi prefecture and located in its capital Nagoya, was founded in 2010. Its stated objectives are to demonstrate trends in cutting edge contemporary art centered around visual art with an international perspective, to incorporate performing arts and to enhance the attractiveness of the city and the region through cultural activities.

- [Biennial Foundation: About](#)
- [Aichi Triennale: Outline](#)

The 4th edition of the Aichi Triennale saw the inclusion of an exhibition titled *After 'Freedom of Expression?'*, which was part of the contemporary art showcase. The exhibition was an expansion of the original exhibition *Freedom of Expression?* held in Tokyo in 2015.

The Triennial announced it would be showing works that for the most part '*for one reason or another, due to censorship or self-censorship, [...] were not exhibited in the past in Japan.*' The exhibition displayed works that had been rejected or removed from public institutions in Japan because of systematic censorship or fear of controversy due to their depiction of delicate subjects such as the emperor or the Japanese army. Information concerning the circumstances of their removal was displayed alongside the works.

- [Aichi Triennale: About *After "Freedom of Expression?"*](#)

While the first edition in Tokyo did not attract a public outcry, partly because it was only shown in a small private gallery for a short time, the situation at the Triennale was very different. The focus was on a sculpture titled *Statue of Peace*, depicting a so-called 'comfort woman'. The 'comfort women', Korean women forced by the Japanese occupiers to serve as prostitutes for the Japanese soldiers, have been a highly sensitive issue in the relations between Korea and Japan since the second world war, and remain so

especially after current prime minister Shinzo Abe had the courage to address the issue in 2015.

- [Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, 2015](#)
- [The 'Final and Irreversible' 2015 Japan-South Korea Comfort Women Deal Unravels](#)

The Triennale opened to the public on August 1st. The exhibition *After 'Freedom of Expression?'* was on display in the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art Gallery, the main venue of the Aichi Triennale, but was closed on August 3rd following many aggressive phone calls, one anonymous handwritten fax threatening arson and a call by the Nagoya mayor Takashi Kawamura 'to remove the *Statue of Peace* and cancel "*After 'Freedom of Expression?'*"

- [Statement by Artistic Director Daisuke Tsuda, 2 August 2019](#)

The fax was deemed relevant after last month's arson attack on an animation studio in Kyoto that killed 35 people. A suspect has since been arrested.

- [Kyoto Animation arson attack](#)

The Triennale claimed that the decision of its Organizing Committee to close the exhibition was a measure to ensure a safe and secure setting for visitors and was not an act of censorship.

On August 3rd, two Korean artists participating in the Triennale asked for their works to be withdrawn.

- [Concerning the withdrawal of artworks by Park Chan-kyong and Lim Minouk \(Announced on Aug 16\)](#)

On August 6th, 72 of the 90 artists participating in the Triennale published a statement about the case. That statement has now been signed by 87 of the 90 participating artists. It provides a balanced view of the situation, makes a case for the importance of art and seeks *'a discussion that is open to all*

people and respects individual opinions and viewpoints and a Triennale that is capable of realizing such a discussion’.

The artists requested three things: the immediate restoration of the Aichi Triennale 2019’s autonomy from political pressure and intimidation; the continuation of the exhibition under the assurance of safety for all its staff and visitors; and the establishment of a platform for free and vigorous discussion that is open to all, including the participating artists.

→ Statement by the artists of Aichi Triennale 2019 on the closure of *After ‘Freedom of Expression?’*”

On August 13th, a dozen artists demanded that their work be removed if these conditions are not met. Following discussions between the Aichi Triennale Organizing Committee and individual artists who requested for their works to be withdrawn, the Triennale implemented these requests and certain exhibits were removed as of August 20th.

→ Artists Demand Removal of Work from Aichi Triennale Following Censorship Controversy

→ On artworks to be withdrawn or changed as of August 20th (Announced on Aug 17)

Statement

CIMAM is greatly concerned about the 2019 Aichi Triennale’s decision to cancel the exhibition *After ‘Freedom of Expression?’*. The cancellation is an infringement of the artists’ freedom of expression, at the behest of politicians and the Mayor of Nagoya City, Takashi Kawamura, who made a direct request for the exhibition to be closed. On display in the exhibition was a collection of artworks that were excluded from museums in Japan or

were included in exhibitions that were closed due to censorship or self-censorship. The closing of the exhibition itself is a serious violation of freedom of expression.

CIMAM requests that the demands of the great majority of artists participating in the triennial, as expressed in their statement on August 6th, are met. The artists requested three things: the immediate restoration of the Aichi Triennale 2019's autonomy from political pressure and intimidation; the continuation of the exhibition under the assurance of safety for all its staff and visitors; and the establishment of a platform for free and vigorous discussion open to all, including the participating artists.

CIMAM strongly denounces that an exhibition has been closed as a result of political threats and intimidation. The issue is, however, wider than this and requires a meaningful reflection upon the curatorial premise behind the exhibition and clear recognition that the freedom of expression it sought to engender is now completely undermined.

CIMAM calls on the Aichi Triennial to honour the commitments it has made – namely to put in place the appropriate security arrangements for the exhibition to reopen, and to lead in facilitating the open platform for reflection and free and vigorous discussion that the artists have called for.

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The Museum Watch Committee of the CIMAM Board 2017–2019: Bart De Baere, Calin Dan, Corinne Diserens, Sarah Glennie, Sunjung Kim, Jaroslaw Suchan and Eugene Tan.

CIMAM – International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art – is an Affiliated Organization of ICOM.