

Nikon, Neo-Nationalists and a Censored Comfort Women Photo Exhibition

ニコン、ネオ・国粹主義者達、従軍慰安婦写真展 検閲

Makiko Segawa

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Nikon is the one of the world’s most renowned and trusted camera makers, especially among professional photographers and journalists. So, its recent decision to pull the plug on an exhibition by Ahn Sehong, a 41-year-old Nagoya-based Korean photo-documentary artist, surprised many who might have expected the company to defend the integrity of artistic expression. Forced to reverse that decision by the Tokyo District Court, which ordered it to hold the exhibit, the company banned Ahn from giving interviews to the media at the gallery - in effect censoring him from discussing his own work - and prevents foreign press from entering the venue.

Korean Comfort Women Left Behind in China <[here](#)> was scheduled to run from June 26th to July 9th at the Shinjuku Nikon Salon in Tokyo. About a month before it was due to open, Nikon told Ahn that the exhibition was cancelled. All indications are that the company bent to pressure from Japanese neonationalist zealots.

To cap the incident, a great deal of Ahn’s personal and contact information has been leaked online, possibly exposing him to danger from those zealots. “It suggests that in the future we photographers will have to think hard in advance about what we exhibit for Nikon.”

Ahn has been working for over a decade on the issue of the forgotten Korean comfort women left in China after the war. So strongly does he feel that he says he has used about four million yen (US\$50,000) of his own money on the project. His motivation, he says, is not political but what he calls “pure humanitarian sympathy” for the women. “Most have died and the survivors live alone in poor conditions.”

In an interview with this writer on May 30th in Shinjuku, Ahn was angry and defiant. “I will not surrender to Nikon’s request -- I am still preparing my exhibition for its June showing.” When we first spoke, he was preparing a legal challenge to the Nikon decision.

Ahn says a Nikon official called him on May 22th to tell him of the cancellation and offer to come personally and apologize. The official, who repeatedly swatted away Ahn’s demands for an explanation, later sent him an official



The exhibition, Layer by Layer: Surviving

apology letter dated May 24th. The letter added insult to injury by informing him that a second photo exhibition, scheduled for September 13th to 19th at the Osaka Nikon Salon had also been cancelled.

A panel of five experts had cleared the exhibition along with Nikon, so what can have gone wrong? Ahn speculates that only right-wing pressure can explain the cancellation. "I want to solve this problem by discussing it with Nikon, but they do not have either the will or the honesty to talk to me." He sent a letter to Nikon on May 23rd with a list of questions, asking for an explanation. Here is the less-than-illuminating reply he received two days later:

Ahn: What made you decide to cancel the photo exhibition?

Nikon: We decided to do so after considering various situations in general.

Ahn: What is the purpose of Nikon Salon? For whom does this exhibition space exist?

Nikon: The purpose is to spread and improve the culture of photography. Our salon provides a space for photographers and lovers of photographs.

Ahn: Prior to the decision to cancel, didn't you have any will to fight for the exhibition?

Answer: Our company decided to stop the exhibition after we considered various situations in general.

This writer got the very same response when I called the public relations office of Nikon on May 30th. An official said he was "not allowed" to make any other comments. But when pressed he admitted the following: "It is a fact that we have received quite a lot of emails and phone calls protesting against the photo exhibition." In fact, the company's decision to host the exhibition was denounced on Internet bulletin boards, with some people calling for a

boycott of Nikon. Even after the cancellation announcement, some bloggers continued to vent their anger: "They are just prostitutes!," said one, referring to the standard nationalist whitewash of the sex slaves issue.

On May 25th, neo-nationalists gathered outside Nikon's main office in Tokyo to "congratulate" the company for cancelling the exhibition. A reporter for ultra-right webcaster Channel Sakura spoke to me. "The photo exhibition deserved to be halted because people should not show things that are not based on facts," he said.

"It is a part of the state strategy of South Korea to request further apologies from Japan and to procure money by condemning our past."

The reporter offered his own analysis of why Nikon cancelled the exhibition: "They stopped it because they were afraid that a boycott would mobilize effectively."

Ahn soon learned that his safety may have been compromised. On May 26th after the Japanese media aired the Nikon story, his home address in Nagoya and the personal information of colleagues involved in the project were leaked on a right-wing website. Since then, he has received frequent threatening calls. When his wife reported this situation to the police in Nagoya, they said, "We have already been informed about it."

Ahn expresses concern about the safety of his family. He also noted that shortly before Nikon's decision, a scheduled lecture in Nagoya was abruptly cancelled. "It is photographers and fans of photography who have defended our gallery. It is shameful that Nikon betrays photography and art because of this political pressure," Ahn says.

Benjamin Ismail, Asia head of the media watchdog Reporters Without Borders, condemned what he called the "censorship" of

Ahn Sehong's exhibition. "Nationalist lobbying to prevent such work from being shown is a direct violation of freedom of information. It is unfortunate when a private company such as Nikon passively complies with such censorship."

The Japanese courts agreed. On June 22nd, Ahn won the legal right to stage his exhibition after the Tokyo District Court issued a directive to Nikon to permit it to go ahead as planned. Nikon conceded defeat but Nikon lawyers instructed Ahn that he could not talk to the media during the opening on June 26th. "I had to go at the first floor, then walk to the closest park outdoors in order to speak to reporters who came to visit my exhibition. In such situation, I feel that my freedom of expression are denied," he said. He was not allowed to sell his photos and banned from posting fliers or advertisements of any kind outside the gallery. Nikon not only did not announce the exhibition on its website, but it forced all visitors to go through rigid security checks. Neo-nationalists surrounded the Shinjuku Nikon Salon, yelling racist abuse and demanding that Ahn 'go home' to Korea.

Ahn says Nikon staff even followed him outside the building to check who he was talking to. "Three lawyers from Nikon are following to eavesdrop and record my every move," he explained. He was left with the clear impression that the camera-maker was trying to smother the exhibition it had sponsored. "I fear that Nikon is desperately looking for any excuse to overturn the (court) order in the hope of canceling my exhibition," he said. "I have been censored."

"I am enduring this for the sake of visitors, but this is like the period of Japan's occupation of Korea." Ahn's protest against Nikon's censorship and harassment, and a petition seeking support is at his website called "I AM

CENSORED" <[here](#)>

The incident comes at a time when the wartime comfort women issue has surfaced repeatedly in South Korea, in the United States and in Okinawa. Japanese lawmakers and activists, for example, have secured 25,000 signatures for a petition on the White House website calling on the Obama administration to compel New Jersey to close a small Palisades Park monument dedicated to the memory of the comfort women on the grounds that "False accusations regarding the South Korean comfort women issue have disgraced the people of Japan for decades."

On related subjects:

Jake Adelstein, "[Comfort Women" Show Makes Nikon Uncomfortable But Not Tokyo Courts.](#)"

<[Comfort Women Memorial](#)> On June 25 The Women's Active Museum on War and Peace opened an exhibit a Tokyo exhibit on Okinawan comfort women including testimonies by 300 comfort women, including Okinawan and Korean women <[JapanTimes: Okinawa Exhibition](#)>. The exhibition will move to Okinawa in July.

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Makiko SEGAWA is a freelance journalist based in Japan, as well as a translator and guide to overseas media. She is the Japan correspondent of [Reporters Without Borders](#). She can be contacted at makikosegawa@gmail.com