

Who am We? Do-Ho Suh's Transformative Architecture

Do-Ho Suh, Serpentine Gallery, London, April 2002.

Today I am going to place Do-Ho Suh's work in a number of contexts - art criticism, architecture, cultural theory, Korean culture, personal travelogues. I have just come back from a trip to Korea where I encountered an amazing generosity of time and dialogue from all the artists and architects I met. Much of what I am going to say is in response to that journey.

My writing is concerned with architectural qualities, with spaces, with solids, with edges, with views, with permeability, with detail, with the ways in which we construct relationships with others and the places we make through what we say. There are some very close correspondences between a number of texts I have already written on travel, home and identity, one originally for David Blamey for his beautiful book *Here, There, Elsewhere: Dialogues on Location and Mobility*.

who am we

I'd like you to first to experiment with the wall piece 'Who am We?' and establish if there is a viewing distance that you favour. How does the work position you? From far away we see a washed out colour, a little closer and it appears to be an even but dappled pattern, then closer in again we see many faces, but they all look very similar. And then as we draw back it seems impossible that we were ever able to not see faces all over the wall.

Do-Ho Suh was born and educated in Korea and then the US. When I visited Korea recently, one aspect of life there, most noticeable to me in being so different to what I am used to is Confucianism. I think it would be fair to say that Korean culture is dominated by Confucianism – a system of ethics that originates in China. Perhaps it is best be described as a set of rules governing the relationship between people: father and son, husband and wife, friends, based on age, gender and so on. These relationships involve respect, and dictate that there be no acrimony between people outwardly and no loss of face. It is not that everyone becomes the same, but rather that each person's identity is determined by his/her relationship to another. I was told that were no personal pronouns in the Korean language. For example, a man would not say 'my' wife but rather 'our' wife. The emphasis is on the collective rather than the individual. But this emphasis on the collective could be a liberating condition or a stifling one. It all depends on what you are used to and where you are, and where you have been. Is global capitalism's myth of the freedom of the individual as oppressive than the more collective ethos of Korean confusianism?

'Who am We?' (2000) needs to be read in relation to 'Doormat Welcome: Amber' (2000), 'Some/One' (2001) and 'Floor' (1997-2000). I'd like you now to remove your shoes and leave

them around the edge of 'Floor' in order to walk up onto it. 'Floor' is also interesting in how it positions the viewer – but in this piece there is more at stake than the ambiguities offered by visual distance. By standing on the work, you do more than simply 'see' the tiny hands holding you up from below. You become someone who is standing on others, but at the same time it is possible to identify with the figures supporting you trapped beneath glass.

Much of the critical conversation about Do-Ho Suh's work has focused on the relationship the work has to minimalism and conceptualism. An aspect of minimalism most famously theorised through Robert Morris' writings is the emphasis placed on the perception of the work as a public experience rather than an intimate private one. Rosalind Krauss in her seminal essay, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', discusses the effects produced by viewing of art outside the gallery, off the pedestal, within in a larger field of vision.

The art critic Sung Wan Kyung has argued that as conceptual art travelled from the west to Korea through Japan, it lost its political component, particularly its active critique of art institutions and the gallery system, and became known as 'The Duchamp effect'. In Seoul there are twenty or more universities. Education is of the utmost importance to Koreans. Students are under great pressure and suicide is a problem. While I was there I visited a number Seoul National University, where Do-Ho Soh studied. A beautiful campus to the north of the city, it is an art school big on traditional painting and on sculpture, with students working outdoors in a stone carving yard and placing their works throughout the grounds.

The Professor of Sculpture – Insu Choi – attended a lecture of mine on site-specific art and critical practice. Afterwards we talked about his own work. He places a strong emphasis on taoist tradition and on meditation. Insu Choi draws lines on paper at a certain distance from his body in response to the length of his breath during the winter, and in the summer he rolls clay. He spoke of *techne*, of seeing the hand as tool that shapes matter while integrating the spirit from above. He was keen to tell me, laughing, how many times he had rejected offers of solo shows in London. But his position was not simply one that refused aspects of western influence. Informed by a reading of post-colonial theory, the distinction he made was around the question of choice. What choice do developing countries or countries who have been colonised have about the direction of their own progress? He understood the birth of modernism or death of representative painting and figurative sculpture as a western construct and one that should only be adopted through choice.

Korea is a country that has been invaded constantly in its history: by China, later by Japan in the early 20th Century. It was then divided between the USSR and USA after the Second World War. This condition of constant invasion has wiped out much early culture – Buddhist culture in particular. Most Koreans are understandably protective about what is left of their culture.

Another artist I met, this time through workshops I was involved in, was Soon Young Seok. Although he is now a professor at Kyungwon University, he was one of Suh's teachers. Soon occupies a very different position from Choi. He is a conceptual artist who trained in Stuttgart, and is engaged with the making of what he calls conceptual objects. His most recent work done at a residency in PS1 in New York is called 'Piggy Plantation' and deals with artificial reproduction. A huge number of Korean artists and architects study in the US and Germany. Many never return. For those that do return, big questions arise concerning freedom and individuality.

some to one

In 'Some/One' (2001) we first see one, then we see many, what appears to be one dress is on closer inspection constructed of thousands of dog tags. I'd like you to move next door now over 'Some/One' to look at the image 'High School Uni-face' (1997) and the sculptural piece 'High School Uniform' (1996). I particularly like this position here where I can get a view of both the image – 'High School Uni-face' (1997), where what appears to be one is actually many, and 'High School Uniform' (1996) where many are seen as one.

When viewed from a distance, the surface of Suh's work appears uniform, and the objects operate as identifiable sculptural forms. But up-close the surface breaks up to reveal more detail. The details does not re-inscribe the meaning that operates at a larger scale but upsets the first reading of the work, bringing the viewer into contact with multiple, different but nameless, individuals.

It is worth noting that Do-Ho Suh's mother is active in retaining aspects of Korean culture and his father is a well-known artist working in the traditional manner. Is the keeping of tradition backward looking or forward looking? Koreans, in Korea and the US, are making decisions about the direction their work takes rather than conforming to particular notions of 'korean-ness' determined by outside. They challenge the division of inside and outside through lived experience.

I want now to think about the work in a different way – through the use of materials and processes. I learnt about 'the discipline' of textile art at Winchester School of Art when I spent some years involved in teaching students in the BA (Hons) in textile art. I was fascinated by the undefineable nature of this course, not quite fitting into any set category. A colleague once defined it for me: textile art can either involve a textile-based process such as weaving, but any material, or it must involve a textile as the material but not necessarily a textile-based process. 'Could a house with a carpet count?' I asked, 'or a brick wall inlaid with one fine golden thread?'

Even so it was possible to make errors in mistaken identity. On one occasion I congratulated a textile artist on the meticulous craft of her work. There was a horrible silence. I had unknowingly made a gaff. Craft to her meant making and this implied that the work was not thoughtful, not conceptual, concern with ideas rather than simply materials was an important aim for younger generation artists working in textiles.

A number of textile artists have made empty dresses. Caroline Broadhead's transparent dresses. 'Steppenwolf' (1997) and 'Shadow Dress' (1998), are hung away from the wall and cast animate shadows more solid than the fine material they are constructed from. The fragile shadows of the seams have more substance than the body which has mysteriously disappeared. And there is Jane Baker's beautiful brittle 'Glass Dress' (2000) that would tear your flesh if you slipped inside it. Or Marina Abramovic's stone shoes, whose cool and silky interiors, tempt your toes inside, only to realise these shoes would break your ankle if you tried to lift your foot.

Many of these works come out of a long tradition of radical feminist artists in the U.S. in the 1970's exploring female sexuality and desire through an interest in techniques, materials and processes traditionally connected with women's work such as sewing and interaction: but also importantly story-telling. The pieces of work that we will go on now to look at are made of silk/nylon and meticulously sewn by Do-Ho Suh and Korean women skilled in sewing.

I wonder about the relationship between the artist and those who physically make the work. It brings to mind the famous piece of Boetti - a map of the world made in the colours of flags sewn by women in Afghanistan. How important are the conversations that happen while sewing? Is it here power relationships between western concepts and eastern labour are renegotiated. 'Hemmed In' by Nicola Morris was a project that consisted of tiny houses in bright coloured silks sewn by Hindustani and Bangladeshi women. These women came from closed societies and the project was aimed at raising housing issues as part of a regeneration programme in Birmingham. Then there is Yinka Shonibare's 'Victorian Parlour' where he replaced all the fabric coverings of the furnishings of an English Colonial Interior with brightly pattern fabric from Africa. And of course Tracey Emin's famous tent, 'Everyone I have ever slept with 1963-95', (1995). A textile architecture - a nomadic structure - that tells a personal story but in different mode.

travelling the distance

I'd like you now to take a walk along the images on the wall . . .

'My Country' 1999

'Haunting House' 1999

'Seoul House/LA Home' 1999

'My House' 1999

. . .and then to come into the centre of the room and look up into the interior of 'Seoul Home/LA Home/new York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home' (1999).

From photographers such as Rut Brees Luxembourg and Bridget Smith, to video artists such as Victor Burgin, Jane and Louis Wilson and Stan Douglas, there are many, many artists at present interested in architecture. There are artists who make replicas of space and place them in galleries, like Mike Nelson. Or artists, like Gary Perkins and Nathan Coley, who work with architectural models to make comments on social space and power.

But in dealing with physical and experiential qualities of place Do-Ho Suh's work is perhaps most similar to Rachel Whiteread. From 'House', her concrete cast of the interior of a Victorian house in London's East End, to her transparent resin cast of a water tower on the sky-line of New York, she is famous for making absence present – for taking what is inside outside. Suh's work is similar in that it makes a trace of an interior architecture at a scale of one to one. But unlike Whiteread's work, it is light and travels well.

There are also a number of artists making portable architectures, such as Andrea Zittel and Lucy Orta. Atelier van Liesholt convert vehicles into communal spaces, while Nils Norman's 'Geocruiser' in Peckham Square was an open access mobile library and education centre housed in a converted coach.

But Do-Ho's 'Seoul Home/LA Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home' (1999) is a portable architecture that speaks of home. The work makes reference to somewhere else, in physical form to his childhood home in Seoul. It is important to note that Do-Ho Suh's childhood home was composed of timber taken from a palace site, from buildings, modelled on everyday dwellings, that were located in a secret garden in one of the Royal Palaces. (So that the King could play at being an ordinary citizen by experiencing first hand through replicas the spaces such folk lived in). When some of these buildings were demolished to make way for new roads, Suh's father salvaged timbers and reconstructed the house for his family. I visited the secret garden when I was in Korea and was mesmerised by the qualities of this architecture.

There is a sense in which the experiential aspect of the work privileges this one home above any other. The expanding title references the travelling aspect of the work and indicates the changing places this home has occupied.

What about the drawings?

'My Country' 1999

'Haunting House' 1999

'Seoul House'

'LA Home' 1999

'My House' 1999

Is the house haunted?

By a ghost?

Are ghosts are trapped elements of the past, buried aspects of ourselves. Or is it our nostalgia that traps us in the past? Does home anchor us backwards or can we take our homes with us? Is our past an agent of our liberation or a trap?

In my view the ways in which the work addresses such questions very much depends how it is installed in the gallery. Here the piece floats above us – inaccessible like a hot air balloon or an open parachute but offering movement. But when installed in Los Angeles it was placed on top of a central staircase so every one had to go through it and it became a place of passage.

Many of the conversations about this work have referred to nomadism and to site specificity – can a work be both site specific and move? 'Site' has been used to refer to the place that the work is a trace of – think of Smithson's notion of site as outside the gallery and the gallery or the place where the work is documented as non-site. The situation here is somewhat different though. Do-Ho Suh's work is made for the gallery. The site of the gallery must therefore be considered as much a site as the architecture the work is a tracing of.

I'd like you now to walk through and explore the final two pieces '348 West 22nd Street, Apt. A, New York, NY 10011 at Rodin Gallery, Seoul/Toyko Opera City Art Gallery/Serpentine Gallery' (2000) – the grey piece – and '348 West 22nd Street, Apt. A, New York, NY 10011 at Rodin Gallery, Seoul/Toyko Opera City Art gallery/Serpentine Gallery Corridor', (2001) – the pink piece. Then pause on the other side of the work, in the space between the gallery wall and the work itself.

transformative architecture

Traditional Korean architecture does not use glass, but paper that is then waxed to keep out the rain. The use of paper reduces the emphasis on vision that comes with the use of glass. The buildings have a certain porosity to the environment. They are not sealed boxes with

certain 'u' values. From inside you can hear and smell what is outside. The relation between inside and outside is spatially layered with many rooms between inside and outside

An action rather than one singular physical entity or wall, marks the transition between inside and outside. It is important to take your shoes off at the threshold. Traditionally the floors of houses were timber covered in paper and lacquered and heat came through from pipes running under the floor

A colleague of mine noticed that many of the men's shoes in Korea have both side-zips and laces, a student laughed when he pointed this out and explained, the zips are for convenience, the laces for appearance.

But situation in Korea regarding architecture is not so simple as Do-Ho Suh's home might have us believe. The capital city of South Korea, Seoul, has a huge percentage of Korea's population. It has expanded massively in the last years to become the sixth biggest city in the world and the third densest. Since the the 1970's the new buildings are all tower blocks – for housing, for offices, for shopping , for entertainment. 24 hour, 12 storey markets, with multi-storey underground car parks. The city is cut through with huge highways. There are rapidly expanding satellite towns. The traffic is solid day and night. Commuting times make London look fast moving.

The urban development is backed by five main family run corporations who operate business in Seoul. We went to visit a brand new scheme currently under construction by one of these, Samsung, The 100 storey apartment blocks comprising 'Tower Palace' felt like new apartments in Docklands, international style architecture, sealed in by glass windows, fitted out with fabrics from Italy. We were informed that the contractor was embarrassed by how out of date the furnishings in the show flats were - matter of months old. Taste is important to Koreans. These apartments are desired, they are seen to be 'convenient'.

We could have been anywhere in the world. Except that the views offered showed the rapidly changing city of Seoul. A few shanty towns were just visible on the outskirts of the city and the last district of old housing soon to be demolished. It is too simple to think of US architecture and Korean architecture as poles apart. Korea embraces and resists aspects of US life.

I'm interested in how 'Seoul Home' floats from the ceiling and '348 West 22nd St.' is constructed from the ground on a frame like a tent. With each new installation 'Seoul Home' retains the word home, so that each new location becomes a home defined in terms of Seoul. But with '348 West 22nd St.', the address remains the same and is located each time 'at' a

gallery. The 'at' in the title suggests that the relationship between the address and the gallery has more distance, is more formal, there is no merging between the place the work is a trace of and the new location the trace finds itself in.

Do-Ho Suh has said he is interested in 'making clothing' for buildings. For the original homes themselves, these clothes are linings to be worn on the inside. For the inhabitants of the work, these structures clothe us in absent architecture. For the new sites or galleries these clothes are not covers or linings but ephemeral objects.

For me the most interesting place to be is between the inside of the outside wall of the gallery and the outside of a trace of the inside of an absent space. This is a displaced position, for if we try to imagine the architecture that this is a trace of, we find we cannot, for we could never occupy and view such a place in this way. As such this work is transformative architecture.

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