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Q & A

DO-HO SUH

The Poetics of Space

By Jayoon Choi



After winning critical acclaim more than 12 years ago following his first solo show in New York, which featured *Floor* (1997–2000) at Lehmann Maupin gallery, Korean-born Do-Ho Suh has continued exploring the notion of space. Although motivated by his personal experience of cultural displacement, as well as the broader philosophical and quotidian displacements that prevail in the 21st century, Suh has established himself as an artist whose practice extends far beyond his cultural identity.

In March, Suh spoke with *ArtAsiaPacific* in Seoul, before the opening of his solo exhibition “Home Within Home” at the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in late March, about the evolution of his practice and his upcoming projects in Korea.

Displacement has been a recurring theme in your work. Do you still feel as though you are displaced?

Constantly. I felt displaced even as an adolescent growing up in Korea. My upbringing was very unique. In the 1960s and '70s when the norm was to tear down traditional Korean buildings to make way for modernization, my father went backward, preserving the Korean *hanok* [the traditional Korean house]. Living in a *hanok* was like living in a time capsule; each time I left home, I entered an entirely different world. The experience was dramatic not only because of the contrasting architectural styles, but also because of the political and economic climate at that time. Everyone experiences displacement in a way. Getting up, entering the shower, leaving your room and then your home—these are micro-displacements within the everyday. Leaving Korea for the US was my most significant experience of displacement, but I realize it happens to us constantly.

Is there any place where you don't feel that way?

I feel displaced even in the house that I grew up in. Though I can come back anytime, I don't live there anymore. In a way, being displaced allows for critical distance and perspective. These days, especially with globalization being so ubiquitous, we can survive no matter where we go. McDonald's, for example, is everywhere. You can get your fix if you need it. And as humans we have a commonality. There is a sense of comfort and yet awkwardness all at the same time, so displacement is hard to measure.

“Home Within Home” at Leeum is the first time five fabric pieces of your homes will be presented in one space. They are shown in the Rem Koolhaas-designed Samsung Child Education and Culture Center, which can be a difficult space to install site-specific works such as yours.

I like the challenge of difficult spaces. Leeum was generous to let me work closely with the space. The works were installed to intentionally interact with the building. Last night we finished installing four of the fabric pieces. It was a very interesting experience. I had never intended to show the works together, but together they became an ensemble where time and space collapsed. It was quite emotional, actually. I could look back at my history since leaving Seoul, all the spaces that I had lived in. This will be one of the most interesting aspects of this show. The works were made to be site-specific and some are older pieces that have been shown in other spaces. Leaving their original sites to come to Leeum, they lost some meaning but also gained something else.

Significantly, this is the museum's first solo exhibition for a living Korean artist; and your last solo show in Korea was at the Artsonje Center in 2003. What is next for you in the country?

I am currently working on two projects in Korea that I am very excited about. The first is with curator Sunjung Kim for the Gwangju Biennale. Even though the Biennale attracts so many people from outside the city, few visitors experience Gwangju outside of the Biennale or the few historical locations memorializing the Gwangju Massacre. I have been interested in the in-between spaces; *Bridging Home* (2010) is a good example. For me, the idea of home is infinitely repeatable and transportable. I want to apply this idea to highlight nonspaces so that the audience can discover Gwangju as a city, to reactivate its neighborhoods in a different way.

Are you working on any other projects locally at the moment?

The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, has invited artists to create site-specific works in and around the Deoksu Palace, where the museum has an annex. The Palace authorities have generously allowed me access to Hamnyeongjeon, the sleeping chamber of Emperor Gojong [king of the last Joseon dynasty and first emperor of the Korean Empire, who ruled (1863–1907)

during Korea's modernization and its annexation by Japan in 1910]. For this work, I am developing my first performative project based on the concept of the private space of a public figure. As a public figure Emperor Gojong may not have been able to express his personal thoughts. I am working on a fictional script of the emperor's thoughts based on historical research. I find myself engaged with narrative more and more, and it's interesting to see myself moving in that direction. It will also be interesting to deal with historical material because until now I have dealt with my personal history.

It will be quite something to see your work, especially a performative piece, in the context of Seoul's Deoksu Palace.

The Deoksu Palace is a relic, in a way. No one lives there anymore; there is no human warmth. Sheer human presence significantly affects space. When a home is deserted, it becomes a different space and actually decays faster. There is a Korean expression, “To blow a breath of warm air.” Before I begin the performances, the first thing I want to do is pay my respects to the space by working with the Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation to clean Hamnyeongjeon and restore parts of its interior. I am also planning to re-create the Emperor Gojong's bed based on historical research. My projects until now have dealt with my own personal spaces; though it is a different approach, I find the bed and bedroom one of the most private spaces for any individual, so it is a continuation of my exploration of personal space.

Despite your early success, the new projects you mention seem to depart even further from readily commercial practice.

Through my works, I try to deal with the issue of the immobility and locality of space because I believe personal space—and for that matter, all space—is transportable and translatable. Because this manifests in my works, my pieces have always been problematic and very difficult to collect. It just does not fit common museum practice or private collecting. It's a pain, but I like it; it challenges the status quo. I think that's what the role of art is, to challenge and become a catalyst for change. Hopefully I can continue to do that. I was planning to be an architect, but I am glad I didn't do that. The creativity and freedom I am allowed is the beauty of being an artist.