

COMMENTARY ABOUT HA CHA YOUN'S WORK

Ji Yoon Yang

LOCALISATION

In 1983, Ha Cha Youn embarked on her academic journey in France, commencing her studies at the esteemed institutions of Nîmes and Poitiers, subsequently furthering her education at the Braunschweig University of Art in Germany. During her time in Nîmes, the academic milieu was profoundly influenced by the artistic collective known as "Support/Surface." Formed in the 1970s, the name Support/Surface refers to "support" to hold the painting and "surface" for the canvas. This artists' group ventured to castigate the entrenched Parisian art establishment, fervently contending that the art of painting had succumbed to the commodification pressures imposed by the relentless sway of capitalism over the market. They sought to purify the very essence of painting by excising what they deemed "impure" elements that encumbered its essence. Their ambitious quest led them to dismantle the conventional wooden framing of the canvas, a deliberate act aimed at reaffirming the intrinsic nature of painting as a fabric, a singular "surface." Rooted in the ethos of anti-capitalism and anti-modernism, which had gained momentum in the aftermath of the May 1968 movement in Paris, Support/Surface posed questions concerning the societal role of abstract painting within postwar France. Meanwhile, the oeuvre produced by the collective is frequently subjected to criticism for its perceived apolitical stance, apparent simplicity, and distinctive characteristic of decorative abstraction.

Ha's journey has been deeply impacted by seismic shifts in the political economies of Korean and Western European societies, catalyzed by pivotal historical events such as the Seoul 1988 Olympic Games and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In her work, Ha skillfully raises profound inquiries into the socioeconomic fabric of neoliberal globalization - a paradigm that has, since the 1980s, engendered mass production, unrestrained consumption, and an avalanche of waste, alongside the pervasive influence of corporate marketing and advertising. Residing at the confluence of diverse cultural milieus, spanning southern Korea, southern France, and northern Germany, Ha ardently reflects upon her identity as an artist. She contemplates her unique positioning within this multifaceted terrain, probing the contours of sustainability. The concept of "localisation," elegantly rendered as "settling down" in Ha's lexicon, remains unaltered across the linguistic spectrum of English, German, and French.

Je me brûle (I Burn Me), Installation - Performance, 1987

In the landscape of 1980s France, Ha bore witness to a burgeoning "Nimby" (Not in My Backyard) movement, one that fervently opposed the widespread distribution of plastic water bottles and the ensuing disposal of plastic waste, triggered by a surge in bottled water consumption. Despite early awareness of the environmental repercussions associated with the production of plastics, corporations embarked on a reckless distribution spree, heedless of any remedial measures. Rather than regarding this phenomenon in simplistic terms, the artist

started on a profound inquiry into the overarching structure of Western European capitalism that underpinned it. Subsequent to her experiences during the 1988 Olympics, Ha encountered a parallel situation emerging in South Korea, an expansion of her critical examination of the tenets of neoliberal globalization. The artist's work titled "*Je me brûle (I Burn Me)*," represents her initial endeavor to unearth an artistic purpose for discarded consumer artifacts from the 1980s.

In her work, "*Je me brûle (I Burn Me)*," Ha embarked on a nightly ritual during her time as a student at the University of Nîmes, France, in 1987. She frequented the city center each evening with a substantial plastic bag in tow, retrieving discarded plastic bottles from the refuse bins. The subsequent day, in her studio, she repeated the process of peeling away the labels from each bottle, burning them, and pouring water into them. During these performative acts, the artist was wearing a distinctive work uniform emblazoned with the words "Ha Cha Youn, Made in Korea" on her chest, which was a bold choice to accentuate the ethnic differences between herself and the Western European audience. This artistic endeavor continued for nearly a year, posing a health risk caused by perilous fumes generated during the combustion. Indeed, the intensity of both the fumes and the searing heat would compel the audience to depart from the performance space. The artwork featured a lone tree connected by branches made of burnt plastic bottle objects, cement, and steel structures.

***Reis pflanzen (Planting Rice)*, Performance, 1987-1988**

This performance work was created in 1988 when Ha was an exchange student at the Braunschweig University of Art in Germany. By the time she left Germany, she was performing this work titled "*Reis pflanzen (Planting Rice)*", within her studio. Germany's stringent environmental policies mandated the return of plastic bottles to their place of origin after use, making discarded bottles scarce. As a creative response, the artist turned to discarded newspapers, a common sight in Germany's multilingual environment, with many schools distributing free newspapers.

Ha tore newspapers, embedding coins within them, and meticulously twisted them into textured sculptures, which she dubbed "rice." These unique creations found their place amid the co-working space, where the cement floors and walls were filled with an array of drawings and various objects. The cut wooden beams took on new forms over time. The artist meticulously dismantled sizable billboards, stacking their remnants on the floor to craft intricate tree nests. The artist, whose culinary foundation rested upon rice as a staple, undertook the transplantation of rice that was not cultivated in Germany. The performance concluded with a powerful gesture, as the artist removed her long-standing attire bearing the inscription "Ha Cha Youn, Made in Korea," worn since her time in France.

***AUSZUG*, 1993-1995**

From 1993 to 1995, Ha hosted three solo exhibitions titled *Traveling*, "*AUSZUG*". These exhibitions spanned two years. Following her studies in Braunschweig, Germany, Ha relocated to Hanover and began traversing Europe in 1983. The term "*AUSZUG*" translates as "traveling" or "excerpt." As the name suggests, the artist chose unconventional exhibition spaces, including her and others' studios, rather than traditional galleries. These exhibitions serve as autobiographical reflections, offering insights into her European travels since 1983 and her move to Hanover in 1994.

AUSZUG, traveling 1, Braunschweig, 1993
Solo, la fin de série (Solo, the end of the series)

This artwork is an installation comprising residential-themed objects situated within a sculptor's studio at the Braunschweig University of Art in Germany. Ha ingeniously repurposed the retired professor's studio into the semblance of a living space. Within this transformation, elements like a low-lying bunk bed with a leaning staircase, a sliding door in lieu of a swinging one, plywood mimicking a staircase alongside a steel one, Polaroid snapshots capturing the artist's travels across Germany and France, trimmed leaves of a potted plant atop the structure, two long erasers, and thin boards wrapped with pieces of sandpaper, which were named as a water bed, all contribute to the intimate and sedentary living environment within the expanse of the studio's lofty ceiling. The installation borrows the size and character of the space where Ha first lived from 1987 to 1988.

AUSZUG, traveling 2, Hanover, 1994
Les mots & Die Wörter (Words)

The bilingual title of the exhibition alludes to the artist's experiences living in both France and Germany. Within the exhibition space, the various installations are attempts to navigate between France and Germany or to meld the two together. Walls and floors are overwhelmed with an array of elements, including train tracks, which have been elevated to the fourth-floor studio, plastic bags, and railroad tracks and steel sculptures bearing French and German addresses. Walls and building floors are seemingly too much to bear all these artworks. The artist's personal encounters of transitioning between Germany and France are also evident, with items like a transparent vinyl book and a dictionary in use since the 1980s on display. In essence, Ha has transformed the studio into a space that fosters dialogue alongside artistic creation.

AUSZUG, traveling 3, Hannover, 1995
Die Zeittramperin (The Time-hitchhiker)

Installed in indoor and outdoor spaces, Ha brings the street environment from outside into the exhibition. The studio's floor is paved with asphalt, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of a road. Instead of being confined to one space, the artist introduces her own concept by herself. Instead of "Tramperin, the hitchhiker," who travels from place to place, the artist came up with her own term, "Die Zeittramperin, the time-hitchhiker," who travels through time. In the converted workshop, which was converted from an abandoned factory, asphalt was laid, large advertising panels were installed, and large advertising panels were installed outside.

SWEET HOME

Sweet Home, Hanover, 1999

In the mid-1990s, Ha Cha Youn received several artist grants in Germany after financial assistance from her family in Korea ended abruptly. Struggling to make a living, she became interested in the lives of socially disadvantaged people in Western Europe. Hanover, where she lived during that time, was getting ready for the Hanover Expo 2000, a major event. Ha noticed

people begging in the streets and the German police trying to push them away, something she hadn't seen before.

Hanover's cityscape was dominated by gray concrete, with the only vibrant colors coming from large billboards. In a 1999 group exhibition, Ha placed a mat in front of one of these billboards and added a plastic bowl with a container bearing the words "Ich bin Künstlerin," meaning "I am a (female) artist."

In 2001, Ha relocated to Paris to take part in the Cité Internationale des arts residency program. Then, she worked on the *Sweet Home* series, which extended from Paris during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency and continued until 2009. Nicolas Sarkozy, who had held roles as Interior and Finance Minister under Jacques Chirac since 2002, advocated robust law enforcement and market-oriented economic reforms. In 2003, he passed a law targeting the eradication of illegal immigration, and in 2006, he adopted an even more stringent approach, advocating for a shift toward a "selective immigration" policy. This involved granting French residence permits exclusively to individuals from countries classified as "priority solidarity zones."

In 2005, a tragic incident occurred when two Muslim teenage boys were electrocuted in an electricity substation while trying to evade police pursuit in Clichy-sous-Bois, a Parisian suburb in France. This event sparked protests organized by African immigrants, including Muslims, residing in the suburban slums. During this time, with Sarkozy's tough remarks regarding "human garbage," "thugs," and "having to be wiped out," the protests spread to the center of Paris. Despite the widespread protests, Sarkozy found considerable support from conservative voters who embraced his "work more, earn more" presidential campaign and anti-immigration policies. As a result, he was elected as the President of France in 2007.

Sarkozy's strong anti-immigrant policies and his rise to the presidency were unexpected for Ha, who saw herself as an outsider in Western European society. While there had been public sympathy for illegal immigrants during the implementation of the Pasqua immigration laws in 1986 and 1993, by the time Sarkozy was elected, French society had shifted toward a more right-wing stance, evident in his popularity. Following Sarkozy's election, the French government even banned homeless tents under the pretext of urban policing.

Through her performative art practice, the artist confronts the stark reality she encountered in Paris, which represents the fantasy of a romantic city. In her series *Sweet Home*, she captures the exotic aspects of Paris, shedding light on the uncomfortable truths within Western European welfare society and French culture. Unlike an objective observer or anthropologist, the artist doesn't merely objectify or document these exotic landscapes. Instead, she engages in a process of observation and interpretation. Her work delves into how the French government and media address homelessness, the journey of homeless activist groups gaining political influence, and the fate of homeless individuals who eventually disperse from Paris.

***Sweet Home*, Paris, 2004**

The benches within a Paris Metro station had low armrests on each seat, posing discomfort for homeless individuals lying down and sleeping on them. Ha ingeniously demonstrates a remedy by showcasing the installation of a

Styrofoam piece on these benches, effectively elevating the seat height to align with the armrests. This artistic creation provides a practical solution, as the Styrofoam pieces, usually laid under the benches, can be put onto the bench's top when a homeless person requires a more comfortable sleeping surface. It demonstrates how art can be used as a solution to help homeless people create and have what they need for essential human activities, including sleeping.

Balade dans Paris (Walks in Paris), Performance, Photos, Video (4 min 48 s), 2006

This work comprises a video and photographic record of a performance featuring her walking around Paris with a spacious supermarket cart full of colorful plastic bags.

Balade de Carola (Carola' Journey), Video (9 min 37 s), 2008

A rosy-pink-colored plastic bag is captured as it flies in the wind through the streets of Paris. It moves around as if infused with life.

Sweet Home 2, Video Photography, Single-Channel Video with 432 Photos (silent, 29 min 10 s), 2005-2006

Consigne (Store / order), Photograph, 2005

This artwork was born from the scenes Ha observed during her routine strolls around St. Martin's Canal. In response to French government regulations that forbid homeless individuals from erecting tents after losing their housing, the photograph captures the vivid plastic bags adorning the Seine-side trees. The homeless populace, deprived of tents, utilizes these bags as temporary repositories, stashing their belongings during the day and suspending them from branches. At nightfall, they retrieve their bags and unpack them to eat and sleep.

The artist maintains a deliberate distance from her subjects while capturing their struggles through photography. In her own words, when working on the "*Sweet Home*" series, she consciously shed an artist's identity. Rather than adopting the role of an artist, proclaiming, "I will create and exhibit the reality of homelessness in Paris as my art," she opts for social engagement by documenting the situation and sharing her insights with those who may not have witnessed it. For Ha, this period in Paris coincided with her exploration of homelessness, strangers, illegal immigration, and state policies. Despite the presence of commendable welfare initiatives such as health insurance, the humanitarian challenge of accommodating refugees loomed as a significant societal concern. Ha's aim was to capture the unfamiliar yet genuine facets of Parisian life and infuse them with a poetic essence.

Journal d'un campement (a Camp Journal), *Records of the Campsite*, Documentary Film (47 min 41 s), 2008

In the documentation titled "*Journal d'un campement (A Camp Journal)*," spanning five winter months from 2006 to 2007, the charitable organization known as "Les Enfants de Don Quichotte" or "The Children of Don Quixote" gathered homeless individuals to stage a tent protest against the housing policies of the French government. Some members of the public joined in solidarity with this demonstration, and notable figures also lent their support through endorsements, further electrifying the scene. Ultimately, this movement coalesced into a tent camp involving approximately 200 participants.

Many of the protesters were undocumented immigrants who had to work for one-third of the minimum wage because they didn't have legal papers. They were asking for the same basic rights as poor people in France, such as housing, health care, and retirement support. The French government said they would provide housing if the protesters went through a complicated paperwork process, delaying things. Some of the protesters went on hunger strikes, but the group leading the protests, "Les Enfants de Don Quichotte," did not support this extreme tactic. Eventually, many homeless protesters went back to their own neighborhoods, and the number of tents at the protest sites got smaller. Instead of reporting on what was happening, the French media portrayed the homeless people as being thankful to "Les Enfants de Don Quichotte." Some of the leaders from that group even got elected to parliament, but it is unclear where the homeless people ended up.

The overarching theme in Ha's work revolves around the concept of "settling down where you are." To establish a settled and self-sufficient life in a new environment, the artist consistently had to actively engage with society's activities. While Ha's upbringing in Masan set her perspective apart from that of Western Europeans, she perpetually pondered the universal minimal space required for human existence and how to represent it through her art. She characterizes this as a process of her becoming an ideologized person from a naïve one. Living within a liberal democracy, where citizen participation is crucial, as opposed to a monarchy or military regime, Ha underscores the importance of people being attentive to the political dynamics of their community. She encourages us to reconsider our social responsibility toward our fellow inhabitants.

Sweet Home 4, Video, 7min 59sec, 2009

In a desolate, dust-covered clearing beside a highway, aged travel suitcases are scattered about. An excavator approaches them, lifts them, and drops them onto the earth, repeating this sequence. This performance serves as a metaphor for the lives of migrants who are marginalized and forcibly excluded from the capitalist state system, akin to suitcases weathered by the relentless excavator. The setting is early morning on the outskirts of an unspecified highway. Bags, mattresses, and other essential packages are gathered in one location, while cranes, shovels, and other heavy machinery rush toward them with a deafening roar, quickly reducing these belongings to ruins. This poignant imagery invokes the contemplation of homelessness, illegal immigration, and the challenges faced by those compelled into forced migration.

Jjockbang Project, Seoul, 2013

The housing type of "Jjockbang (tiny living spaces)" in South Korea emerged after the country's liberation and has persisted as a long-standing form of illegal or expedient housing. This housing arrangement involves paying a daily rent of approximately KRW 7,000 and provides a means for the impoverished to secure an indoor living space, albeit one that is characterized by instability and temporariness. In these tiny rooms, ranging from 2 m² to 6 m², single individuals live alone. Addressing the issue of illegal and substandard housing presents numerous practical challenges for the government. Identifying and detecting illegal modifications within buildings is a complex task, and stringent crackdowns on this cheapest form of housing in urban areas may inadvertently exacerbate homelessness. Consequently, a paradoxical and dual-sided government stance

exists, where regulations are in place on paper while a more lenient approach is taken in practice toward squatting.

Having left for France in 1983 and returning to South Korea 30 years later, the artist now perceives herself as an outsider. She firmly believes that indifference toward “Jjockbang” is the gravest attitude, and this belief drives her “*Jjockbang Project*”. As a natural extension of her “*Sweet Home*” series, her concern for the homeless and migrants persists, exemplified by the 2013 performance video documentation titled “*Yeongdeungp*”o, which delves into the issue of non-residence. Through her work, the artist shines a spotlight on various forms of forced migration, personal isolation, and the hidden facets of a welfare society. Simultaneously, she directs her attention toward outsiders who reside on the boundaries of political and social perspectives. The artist establishes connections between the housing conditions in Seoul and housing issues prevalent in Western European cities, notably in France.

Translated by Lexcode