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Do-Ho Suh: Space is a Metaphor for History
Interview with Priya Malhotra

Priya Malhotra: *Your work directly explores the relationship between the individual and space—understood both as an intimate, personal environment and as an arena for social relationships. You use different dimensions of space to examine the interaction between the individual and the collective, creating tension-filled works born out of this mutual interdependence. Where does your great interest in physical space come from?*

Do-Ho Suh: My artistic inquiry doesn't only concern physical space, but metaphorical space too, which includes the history, culture, and memories we all carry with us. I came to the United States in my late twenties; it was my first major separation from my family and my country, Korea. My coming to America was both symbolic and dramatic. As a student, I moved every year to find a cheaper place **to** live. The moving experience was really disorienting and that's when I started thinking about space in a more general sense. In America, the dimensions of personal space are very different from those in Korea. I grew up in a traditional Korean house where the walls were thin pieces of paper; neither transparent nor opaque, you could make out the shadows of those who lived there. There was no sense of privacy or personal space. But this was something I only came to realize after living away and gaining a more acute sense of distance.

Priya Malhotra: *In 1997 you showed* High School Uni-Form *in Japan, an installation of around three hundred school uniforms sewn together, shoulder to shoulder: headless, legless bodies held erect on a steel frame. Images of mass destruction spring readily to mind, and the piece seems to suggest the negation of a person's selfhood by oppressive powers. In what way does the oppression and annihilation represented by the uniforms form part of your discourse on the definition of space?*

Do-Ho Suh: Clothing is the smallest most intimate thing we can inhabit, and subsequently the most intimate definition of our personal space. Of all forms of clothing, the uniform is certainly the most oppressive; its function is to control students, to stamp out all their differences. I wore uniforms right from kindergarten to the time I was in the military. The uniforms do have a double-edged function, though, which is almost protective if you don't want to stand out, if you want to blend into the bigger picture.

Priya Malhotra: *The walls surrounding* High School Uni-Form *were covered with thirty-seven thousand tiny photographs of Korean teenagers from your high school yearbooks. Even from a distance of just a few feet, you couldn't make out the faces in the miniscule photographs; they just seemed to be a huge mass of indistinguishable dots. Your interest in the relationship between individual and collective obviously took on a new perspective: the anonymity that can be achieved through collective sameness, the possibility of just fading into a background. The title of the piece,* Who Am We? *is interesting because the grammatical disjunction between the first-person verb "am" and the plural pronoun we" underlines your discourse on the ambiguous relationship between crowd and individual.*

Do-Ho Suh: I reduced the scale of the portraits as far as I could because I wanted to *find* out the exact point at which both the human eye and technology could identify individual traits. In the title I wanted to underline the distinction between singular and plural. In the Korean language, there is no such distinction.

Priya Malhotra: *For your recent New York show, you constructed a glass floor, under which were packed around 180,000 tiny plastic figures of different sexes and races—each one five centimeters high. Their hands were turned upward, pressing against the glass; their faces contorted as though suffering from claustrophobia. Seen from a distance, the figures blended into one anonymous entity.*

Do-Ho Suh: A tiny plastic figure is very fragile, but a huge number together have a significant weight. It's collective power. In my work I explore precisely that ambiguity of the "herd": the sense of protection and strength on the one hand, the loss of individuality on the other.

Priya Malhotra: *In the Western world, mankind has been of primary importance since the Renaissance. Michelangelo depicted the glories of the human form, exulting in the splendor of skin, muscle, and sinew. In total contrast to this Renaissance glorification of the human form, your tiny plastic figures come across as self-effacing, half-drowning in the vast space of the gallery.*

Do-Ho Suh: I wanted to create a contrast between spectator and figures, and make the work blend into the existing architecture. In Korea we refer to men as grains of sand, which is a far cry from humanistic philosophical vision.

Priya Malhotra: Seoul Home/LA. Home/New York Home *is a silk house that hangs down from the ceiling. In it, space takes on quite different characteristics from your*

previous work. It has a fluid, free flowing quality to it, as if it might fly away at any minute. The house is ordinarily considered the ultimate form of protective, intimate space, but you show it to be something transitory and without roots.

Do-Ho Suh: It evolved from my desire to take the space where I grew up in Korea with me wherever I went. I measured the little house where I was born, and where my parents still live, in Korea and made a silk one to those exact same measurements. The project was carried out for an exhibit at the Korean Cultural Center in Los Angeles. On a wall in a room on the first floor of the center, I found a photograph of a civilian-style house built for the king of Korea during the eighteenth century. He had commanded it to be built in order to experience how ordinary people lived. About 150 years later, my father used wood he had recovered from the dismantling of the royal house to build his own house, as an exact replica. I thought it was very interesting that there was a direct physical relationship between the king's house and my father's house. Finding the photograph was a total coincidence, but it made the place a very interesting site for my project.

Priya Malhotra: *Where does the title of the piece,* Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home*, come from?*

Do-Ho Suh: I made the house in my home in Seoul, then moved it to Los Angeles, so the *Seoul Home* became *Seoul Home/L.A. Home.* It was later taken to New York and became *Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home.* Making this piece was an active gesture to overcome a sense of longing, separation, and nostalgia. Every time I show it somewhere new, its title will get longer. It's like a suitcase—you keep adding something to it every time you travel.

Do-Ho Suh was born in 1962 in Seoul, Korea. He lives and works in New York.