The Nomad’s Baggage: Imagining the Nation in a Global World

Ahyoung Yoo

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The Nomad’s Baggage of History in Navigating the Empire

An architectural fabric sculpture, made of silk, hangs from the ceiling (fig. 1). It looks like a bottomless tent at first sight. Despite the blowy material it is made of, the sculpture is eerily serene as it hangs still. Upon closer inspection, the fabric sculpture reveals meticulous attention to details and patterns one could find in traditional Asian temples. The fabric is called *eunchosa* in Korean. This type of thin silk is from China, mostly used in making airy and lightweight summer clothes. The tactile quality of thin silk may be least associated with the building materials of architecture, to say the least. The way *Home* hangs aloof adds to the regal, majestic, and even ghostly calmness the work exudes. A material once so prized, associated with the highly covetable noble life style, the fabric evokes to the first historical trade route connecting the East and West: the Silk Road. What was once the material that symbolized the trade routes connecting continents of Europe and Asia, now stands as a phantom-like uninhabitable house that speaks to the artist’s and many contemporary travelers’ yearning to build a home wherever they go. After all, it is a structure that one cannot enter, with no inside, hanging like a spectacle, enticing the viewer to look at. Artist Do Ho Suh has been known for his fabric installations of architectural construction: a stairway, his New York City apartment, and his childhood house in South Korea, to name a few. Suh titles this work to record his itinerant journey: *Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home...* (1999). Wherever it is exhibited at, the name of the city is added to the ever-lengthening title of the work. Suh once stated that it was easy for him to literally pack the house, fold it and put them in the suitcase to travel as it is made of fabric. Suh’s works have gained international fame, which demands the artist to be in constant travel, who already splits his time between New York City and Seoul. As silk once symbolized treasures from Asia to European merchants, it seems fitting this type of fabric is used again for works that traverse borders today. On a practical level, the lightweight material befits the artist’s globetrotting life style.
Suh’s works is often aided in the sewing process by elderly Korean women. This is a small detail that often goes unnoticed in the discussion of Suh’s works. The production process is not at the center of the attention. In the end, it is the circulation of the work that celebrates globalism, not its origin or production. While it is important for the artist that these seamstresses still use the traditional sewing method, the whole practice, unavoidably reminds the viewer of how a product manufactured in cheap labor country nowadays travels to markets of Europe and America. The domestic labor is turned into a nomadic product, ready for the international market. The law of commerce in neoliberal market worldwide dictates the logic of travel, flow, and nomadism at a deeper level. Artists are laborers, demanded to travel to wherever the market calls. The effects of the new global order on the laborers’ bodies are subtler than that imposed on the colonized by the colonizer, yet they are still pervasive and inescapable. The outreach and grasp of global capitalism, defined as “Empire” by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is strong as ever.

Although Empire may have played a role in putting an end to colonialism and imperialism, it nonetheless constructs its own relationships of power based on
exploitation that are in many respects more brutal than those it destroyed. The end of the dialectic of modernity has not resulted in the end of the dialectic of exploitation.4

As Hardt and Negri assert, the new Empire has departed from historical European and even contemporary American imperialism. The imperial force, for South Korea, has now changed its face: from the First World nations of the Cold War to another Empire—globalization as the expanding forces of capitalism.

The Sovereignty of the nation-state was the cornerstone of the imperialisms that European powers constructed throughout the modern era. By “Empire,” however, we understand something altogether different from “imperialism.” ...In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command.5

In delineating the emergence of Empire, Hardt and Negri clearly state how Empire differs from previous European colonial powers. Certainly South Korea is no longer a colony in the way past Spanish and Portuguese colonial countries were. Furthermore, the two authors stress that the “United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project,” for “[i]mpirialism is over.”6 Negri and Hardt argue that it is “[t]rough circulation the multitude reappropriates space and constitutes itself as an active subject.”7 There lingers a desire to empower the multitude in this observation as we face the ever-growing Empire.

Yet, it is crucial to remember, still, how empires were historically associated with monarchical powers. The term “empire,” despite its newly endowed meaning by the two scholars, continues to carry its historical associations with, for example, Roman, Han, and Mongolian empires. The sovereignty of these empires was never merely territorial. Han scholars, for instance, promoted “Han imperial cosmopolitanism” as the Chinese empire encompassed Northeast and Central Asia in the last two centuries BCE.8 The scholars advise that the ruler unify the empire not only by military means but also by economic strategies. Without a unified financial unit, “economies will not connect, those distant from each other will have nothing to use for their common interest.”9 This argument surrounding the regulation of currency value shows how capitalistic means was readily a part of imperial rule even before contemporary globalization, and asserts the need for us to rethink it in the genealogy of historical
colonialism as well as imperialism. What is missing in Negri’s and Hardt’s account is also the tangible power a nation can still hold over other countries. In recent times in particular, refugee issues have brought to the foreground how flexible citizenship may just be an empty promise for those who are not allowed to cross borders. As such, globalization in contemporary art is a tricky realm where demand and supply meet in the name of cultural exchange, or better yet, transnational movement. Here, I am not trying to deny the increased visibility of artists from traditionally marginalized places on the global stage. I am calling for a carefully look at what is at stake in this expanded field we call “global contemporary art.” In fact, cosmopolitanism, a prevalent practice in today’s art world, has never been a politically neutral or subversive philosophy in its origin. For instance, Tamara T. Chin investigates the conceptual history of cosmopolitanism and its two strands: Stoic cosmopolitanism and Diogenes’ and Philo’s respective kosmopolitēs. Contemporary cosmopolitanism is often understood as exclusive of national barriers, which aligns with Diogenes’ and Philo’s philosophy. However, their cosmopolitanism is a specific and regional response to each social regime the philosophers belonged to. Chin further examines how, in fact, Stoic cosmopolitanism is an “imperial cosmopolitanism” that was not in conflict with the empire. Rather, it sees the world as a universal community to which disparate subjects belonged together. Chin’s historical and conceptual illumination of cosmopolitanism is crucial in questioning the possibly complicit relationship cosmopolitanism, nomadism and empire might share. Here, I contextualize Suh’s work in contemporary nomadism in the art world and argue that the common reading of Suh’s nomadism as a universal expression of cosmopolitanism risks the danger of participating in the logic of Empire. I observe that in order to avoid consumption of Suh’s works as spectacles, one must understand how they act upon history and nation even though it is their global flair that attracts the audience and critics first and foremost.

The nomadic symbolism of Suh’s work converges well with the so-called global turn in contemporary art. The figure of the successful artist in the contemporary art world is a cosmopolitan. Artists are constantly crossing borders to create and show art, smoothly sailing between cultures and languages. With the emerging multiple centers in the art world through regional biennales and art markets, artists are in fact required more than ever to travel and participate at multiple locations to exhibit. In recent years, Suh’s Home series became the material manifestation of this type of contemporary nomadism and worldwide trajectory that it follows. Along with this trend, many Korean-born artists have travelled, lived, and showed works outside of Korea. There have been many, like Suh, who first made their names beyond South Korea, particularly in Europe.
and North America. Another Korean artist, Haegue Yang, active in Berlin, once capitalized on the constant international journey she was taking. Yang decided to display the boxes that store her works and materials in the gallery since there was lack of storage space for her works and art supplies. Turning things around this way, the gallery became both the in-between passage space and destination for the work, *Storage Piece* (2004). Similarly, Suh’s work marks each location as a destination and a passing place all at once. The work not only symbolically invites the viewer to ponder upon the meaning of home, but also understands how objects circulate and mark each location within multiple histories and borders. Particularly for those who sustain a migrant life style, by force or need, Suh’s *Seoul Home/L.A. Home* becomes a haunting visual statement.

In recent years, many art historians have noted tropes of nomadism and mobility in contemporary art. James Meyer identifies two strands of nomadism.

I will argue that essentially two nomadisms have emerged, almost as if in contiguity. The first nomadism is lyrical—a mobility thematised as a random and poetic interaction with the objects and spaces of everyday life. Reconciling the Dada/Surrealist strategy of an arbitrary encounter with the real with a contemporary ‘Slacker’ feeling of aimlessness, this nomadism transfigures the most ephemeral and incidental contacts for aesthetic contemplation. The second nomadism is critical: it does not enact or record an action or movement for the spectator’s delectation, so much as locate travel itself within historical and institutional frameworks. While the one nomadism is personalized, presenting the body’s circulations as a series of phenomenological encounters occurring in real time, and tends to veil the material conditions in which this mobility occurs, the other nomadism locates the mobile self within a periodised, discursive schema.

Meyer points out acutely that one should be aware of two types of nomadism and distinguish between one that exploits the sentimentalism of travel and one that exposes the very material and historical context that allows for and fuels such travels. In her examination of site specificity, Miwon Kwon has suggested that now there may be an “unkown logic of belonging, ... [a] sense of belonging ... not bound to any specific location but to a ‘system of movement.’” In her discussion of Suh’s works, Joan Kee observes the practice of “oscillation” and calls for a “more flexible means of critical interpretation” in order to bring back useful meaning to discussions of global and local in contemporary Korean art. Both Kwon and Kee identify continuous mobility as the ethos of today’s art. However, contemporary artistic nomadism, what
was once a practice of resistance, is becoming more and more institutionalized according to Chin-Tao Wu. Wu problematizes the so much celebrated flow and fluidity of the contemporary art world and questioned the “direction” of that flow. Wu discovers how artists from Asia, South America, and Africa have moved to Europe and North America over the past four decades, particularly tracking the artists who showed works at Documenta. Unlike the façade of decentralization and deterritorialization of the global circuit, artists still moved to so-called centers of the art world to further their career and gain visibility. If we take Wu’s claim seriously, globalization is yet another logic that mandates Western consumption of Asian products by way of nomadism. The neoliberal market has expanded its circuits to include far-flung places in them in the name of globalization. The buzzword globalization has replaced the 90s multiculturalism. And it came with an ambivalent meaning. While the rubric of globalization has allowed artists from previously marginalized places to emerge, regardless the origin of nation, race, and gender, it also re-inscribes the imperial order among nations by capitalizing on this new type of nomadism. Pamela Lee writes, the works of art are indeed both objects and agents of globalization in contemporary art all at once. According to her, the works, particularly those like Suh’s are both symptoms and, more importantly, agents of globalization. Rather than understanding the art world as a readily global phenomenon, Lee suggests we “forget” the art world and see how art enables globalization. Following Lee’s words, I understand Suh’s works contain the potential to resist or re-inscribe the capitalist demands of art market. For artists, nomadism is a way of survival and strategy to increase their global visibility, yet a trope to capitalize on, as is the case with Suh’s traveling homes. Suh’s homes become a haunting sight (site) and spectacle all at once for it can mean various things. If so, how to understand works that are simultaneously global and local seems to be at stake at the present moment. Chinese art historian Wu Hung cautions against what he terms “flattening” of contemporary Chinese art in this sense. What happens when a particular contemporary Chinese, or Asian, work of art is presented to a larger American and European audience right next to a work from other European, South American, and American works? The “universal” appeals may remain, but what is lost in the process of reception and celebration of such an appeal is the thickness of the local history and culture that was once condensed in the work, now “flattened,” and obscured. To be sure, the national framework is not always the most productive reading of any given work of art, but nor should it be lost in nuanced readings of such a work to understand its agency and place in the world. If so, borrowing Wu’s term,
how to “de-flatten” a work of art? That is, how can we resist subsuming non-Western art under global contemporary art? The critic calls for “two different ways to contextualize:” first being “temporal and diachronic, the other spatial and synchronic.” As such, it is crucial to note how contemporary Asian art, now rapidly being introduced to Europe and North America, must be contextualized at the intersection of contemporary art and national history of art in both temporal and spatial terms. Wu’s insight can be expanded in order to understand the spectacularized art scene as it goes back to the question of how the spectacle of contemporary art can be positioned within and against the historical and geopolitical contexts. For Jonathan Crary, it is the “counter-memory” that provides the potential for resistance against spectacle. One of the core features of the spectacle for Guy Debord, Crary writes, was “the annihilation of historical knowledge - in particular the destruction of the recent past. In its place there is the reign of a perpetual present.” The “allure of the spectacle” perpetuates through its “annihilation of the past and fetishization of the new.” Thus, Crary argues for the importance of the strategy of what he calls “counter-memory” to rebuke the ever imposing nowness of the spectacle that erases its history. Taking seriously Crary’s and Wu’s claim, this paper seeks to examine Suh’s overall oeuvre to tease out the Korean historical contexts to counterbalance the global consumption of Suh’s work as a spectacle.

**Imagining the Nation**

*Home* series is a contemporary symbol of transient dwelling condition, but is there anything “Korean” about it? A question as such may seem no longer necessary, or even regressive. Nonetheless, it is important to consider not just circulation, but reception of a work vis-à-vis transnational audience, both Korean and non-Korean, to examine how the idea of nation reinvents itself. The *Seoul Home/L.A. Home* is a replica of Suh’s childhood house, which still stands to this day in Seoul, South Korea. This is a traditional Korean house called *hanok*. The actual house is also a copy of the historic *Yeongyeongdang* construction in the garden of *Changdeok* palace (Changdeokgung) built by King Soonjo of the *Joseon* dynasty in 1828. The light greenish color of the work evokes another highly prized luxury material during the dynasty: jade. However, even for an audience familiar with such materials and the architectural language of the traditional Korean house, *hanok*, it is rare for one to have an experience of having lived in, let alone, own one. Thus, Suh admits the unique sensibility that was brought to him in his upbringing through the tension between the traditional domestic space he grew familiar with and the modern cityscape of Seoul filled with tall concrete buildings. I stress this to point out that even for a South Korean person, seeing a *hanok* was an
experience closer to witnessing a preserved ancient treasure rather than it being part of everyday life. The responses of the audience when Suh first showed his Home series at Los Angeles Korean Cultural Center affirm this.

Los Angeles is where the largest overseas Korean community has been formed, and it may be safely assumed that many of the visitors to whom nostalgia was part of their daily emotions saw the return from the present to the past and from a foreign land to home, as they stroll up from the ground to the 2nd floor towards the tile-roofed hanok floating in the air. Although most of them had never lived in such hanok, not even for one day, to them Suh’s Seoul Home symbolized “home” that they had left in the past.21

Suh eloquently describes growing up in the 70s in Seoul and the expansion of construction projects, particularly that of high-rise apartments.22 This boom in housing construction was to deal with urbanization of Seoul, propelled with the spread of capitalism, and entry of mass population from the countryside in search of jobs and opportunities. Suh’s childhood house, planned by his father, thus stood for a symbol of already lost tradition and past of the country, in stark contrast to changing economic and labor system of South Korea. Now, the laborers had to leave the village and find job opportunities in big cities. Mobility was to become everyday flight for urban and village workers alike.

What’s missing is the idea of authentic home as Suh’s other architectural works continue to explore domestic space, particularly one that he has actually lived, including the artist’s NYC apartment. What is yearned for is not the idea of authenticity, complete reconstruction of what was, but rather the fragility of such an idea. On the one hand, these “shells,” mimic the physical place and invoke memories of them. They may well be universal representations of displacement, loss of home, and feelings of being “out of place.”

On the other hand, Suh’s traditional Korean house stands out with further national and historic meanings for the country. As the long lost tradition of hanok signals nostalgia for homeland in Korean diasporic community of Los Angeles, the house likewise invokes the nation’s tumultuous contemporary history by invoking what is in fact no longer extant: the Korea that was whole. The Home series thus invokes the impossibility of reaching that whole nation by referring to the past, using the traditional hanok as a sign, as a hovering space of return. It gestures towards Korea before the division into two, or even before Japanese colonization.23 The traditional house, hanok, then acts as what Crary defined as “counter-memory” for it stands for history even in its spectacular appearance. The house floats hauntingly with an empty
core. It’s just another sign of potential authenticity for Koreanness for those who recognize it, and creates a sense of the nation that is still at loss. Or, the Home series could offer a sign that may remain indecipherable to transnational audience, and thus productive in unexpected ways. As a symbol of deterritorialized nomadic circuit, it could stand as a metaphor for those whose experience of home has become increasingly transient by demand or will. This universal appeal of nostalgia for home in experiences of displacement certainly neutralizes the undertone of national Korean history in Suh’s work. The universal language ironically leads to de-historicization of Korea’s recent past, risking the erasure of particular history in the process of becoming global.

The Uniforms

Take a closer look at Suh’s works that seem to evolve more around domestic and national issues. While Suh’s Home series is what made the artist most famous, he has also created works that speak directly to the modern history Korea. One such work is the artist’s sculpture of uniforms. Suh’s High School Uni-Form (1997) includes three hundred uniforms in total that stand in rows, neatly aligned to form a square together (fig. 2). These uniforms are erected like mannequins that occupy storefronts, except there is no body that inhabits them. These are ghostly shells that stand like collective army. The collective mantra masks the individuality. The black and white, china-collared uniform was a well-known mandatory high school uniform for boys in South Korea. It comes with a corresponding black cap, which is missing in this case. As Miwon Kwon points out, the Japanese forced uniform during the colonization (1910-1945) was based on German tradition and endured in South Korea even after the end of world war two.24 Nowadays, this particular type of uniform is no longer in use, having lasted well into 1970s: decades since de-colonization. Historian Namhee Lee points out acutely how a renown novelist, Pok Koil, “decried the fact that Koreans failed to decolonize, to free themselves from the colonial master (Japan) and a neocolonial superpower (the United States)” in the eighties.25 Thus, the artist’s biographic memory of wearing the uniform records the nation’s post-colonial memories. Suh once stated, “architecture is “clothing” to a specific space.”26 This particular work features clothing that is hollowed out, providing empty space once occupied by the body. This space is simultaneously personal and historical: based on memories of adolescence, hinting at post-colonial remnants of South Korea.
In another work, Suh displays various uniforms he had to wear through childhood and adolescence, growing up in South Korea. This work, *High School Uni-form*, is a representation of the artist’s self-portrait, showing uniforms he wore through life from kindergarten to adulthood. Uniform is nothing unique to Suh or any men for that matter. However, the particular uniforms Suh chose to display, whether they were the actual uniforms Suh wore or not, attest closely to history of modern South Korea. The above-mentioned high school uniform is there. Then the two military camouflage garments are there. The first one is a *gyoryunbok*, a literal translation being an outfit for military training for those not yet in the army. *Gyoryun*, the military training course, was a mandatory class for high school students in particular. The emergence of this particular uniform and abolishment of it (the official abolishment takes place in 2012) signal a way of regulating male bodies. It speaks to how Korean men are instilled with the knowledge that military is always going to be a part of their life as even those who are discharged from the mandatory two year military service continue to attend civil defense training till they turn certain age. Suh once spoke about his experience:

![Figure 2. Do Ho Suh, *High School Uni-Form*, 1997. Courtesy of the artist.](image-url)
Yes, every male has to go. It’s mandatory. I was in the army for almost two years. It’s probably a different experience than here [the U.S.], because from the moment that you’re born, you know that you’re going to be in the military. Everybody has to go. And so, that’s a great deal of the Korean man’s identity. And usually everyone goes to the military right after they graduate from high school. It’s a good initiation to the real world because the whole Korean society, the whole system, is actually based on this militaristic, very hierarchical structure. So, you learn a lot of things from the military before you have a real job.27

The uniforms signify the precarious nature of South Korean everyday life, having North Korea as the neighbor and technically being under truce with each other. The Cold War has never ended on this peninsula, only perpetually delayed. Historian Bruce Cumings offers a view into the post-colonial cold war moment of South Korea. He writes:

[Here Korea] was a concentrated intersection of modernity and empire: Korean desires for autonomy and self-strengthening that took the form of a proto-nationalist rebellion, and imperial interests (Japanese, American, Russian, British) competing with one another in the world economy and determined to take advantage of Korean wealth (and weakness).28

Cumings observes how multiple imperial interests, both sovereign and capitalist ones, loomed over Korea. With the U.S. army base still stationed in South Korea, the overall security of East Asia depends on the border between South and North Korea. This deep rooted Korean history shows how from early on Korean national history has readily been an international one, situated at the intersection of transpacific power struggle. The teenage male body is thus regulated through the government so as to promote nationalistic patriotism and anticommunist propaganda vis-à-vis North Korea.

Naturally, a number of Suh’s installations and sculptures are based on his army experiences. One such example is the work Some/One (fig. 3). This sculpture at first glance looks like a life-size armor. It stands still like a grand memorial statue. It shines and reflects light because of the metal material used in construction. The irony of Suh’s work is that he uses materials that do not correspond to what it describes, for instance, using fabric for describing architecture and metal dog tags for clothing. Some/One could also be seen as something similar to a traditional Asian robe of some sort. It’s difficult to pin down what it is. It is even harder to decide which specific nation this type of garment may originate from. In resemblance to Korean traditional robe (hanbok) or Japanese one (yukata), Some/One vaguely signals Asianness. The
robe is certainly not something that hangs on the wall like the ones we encounter in museums that give us a glimpse into past life styles. Most importantly, just like the *Uniform* and *Home* series, the armor stands by itself as a shell. Upon closer look, it is revealed that the armor is made with numerous fake dog tags. These pseudo dog tags are overlapped and glued on top of each other like a “fish scale” as the artist calls it.\(^{29}\) The length of the hem is exaggerated to the point that it sweeps the ground. The look is spectacular, luminous and grand. *Some/One* features a hollow space inside. By creating this space within, where the body is supposed to fit, the work offers an opportunity for viewers to walk up to it and look inside. The inside is a shiny mirror that reflects back whoever looks in.
If the clothes signal the smallest place we occupy, this armor can signify many things. The armor may well belong to an emperor. There is certainly a regal quality to the

Figure 3. Do Ho Such, *Some/One*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.
armor as it spreads both arms out like those of crucified Christ, and the long robe grazes the floor of the gallery. It may stand as a universal imagery for international and domestic wars. The dog tags, the only sign of individuality for post-mortem identification, stack upon one another to create a wave of shiny reflection. Together, the dog tags create a splendor that is quite the opposite of their brutal underpinnings, and yet provide with a solemn spectacle. These particular dog tags are not necessarily individualized as the artist basically typed nonsensical words on each of them. But for the Korean audience, imagery as such undoubtedly conjures up particular historical turmoil the nation had to go through as well as ongoing tension on the Korean peninsula under truce because of the vigilant-looking armor that is readily associated with Korean historical figures, particularly famous national heroes. For instance, Suh observes how the Korean audience is instantly thinking of the statue of General Lee at the center of the city of Seoul when confronted with this work.30 The story of the General Lee dates back to the 16th century. Lee is famous for his invention of turtle ship for warfare against Japan. With these ships, the General won against the Japanese in what was presumably a dire and adverse situation. The contemporary statue that memorializes Lee is thus a symbol of securing the nation from foreign attacks. What Lee fought to keep in one piece, the nation, however, is still in the state of division into two.

Beyond this national context, Some/One captures what is at stake in exhibiting an Asian artist’s work in the U.S. as a “global” work. The ambiguous Asianness of this work, combined with the defiant nature of the armor, may read as asserting the rich cultural heritage of the continent. But this ambiguity speaks to the increasing difficulty of grasping intercultural contexts of any given work in today’s art world. An artwork’s increased global visibility paradoxically undermines the depth of its meaning. Upon closer look, the celebrated globalism belies remnants of the forgotten war much like the way anonymous dog tags lie quietly beneath the shiny surface of the armor. The symbol of anonymous dog tags could be interpreted as those who have lost lives during the Cold War if we decide to see Some/One as an armor. They could also stand for factory workers of Asia, if we decide to see the work as a garment. Perhaps the uncomfortable question Suh’s Some/One engages with is this; how contemporary Empire works its illusive yet penetrative power as a world system, and how institutionalized nomadism signals yet another imported good rather than expanded field of opportunity for South Korean artists to truly engage with the world.

Minjung and the Multitude
Another universal rhetoric that lies in Suh’s works is based on his use of multiple figures. Many of Suh’s works utilize, for instance, PVC figures to convey the idea of collectivity as seen in his work, *Floor* (1997-2000) (fig. 4). Multiple figures are standing, holding a glass above collectively. The collective faces become one strong anonymous hold for the glass. The assembled endurance strongly suggests how community is built and sustained. As Benedict Anderson argues, the nation is an “imagined community,” built on the belief that there are numerous others belonging to the same moment of history and region, consisting of that community. In this sense, these multiple figurines speak to the imagination of the nation as much as Suh’s bodiless sculptures and undwellable homes do. Suh’s PVC figures here are decidedly anonymous, showing no ties to specific individual, culture, or race. However, the sheer number of them as well as the idea of solidarity easily evoke the importance of *minjung* in Korean art history. *Minjung*, although difficult to translate, refers to the public or borrowing historian Namhee Lee’s term, “common people.” 31 *Minjung* movement was a sociopolitical, cultural, and artistic movement that contributed largely to democratization of South Korea in the 1980s. It is then surprising to learn that this observation is usually never made regarding Suh’s works. This is in part because Suh’s work is usually discussed in the context of global discourses, understood as a “universal” expression of collective identity. Could we, then, reinvent the meaning of *minjung* as what Negri and Hardt term the multitude in the era of empire? How could we locate this new resistance force across borders and find connections? *Minjung* movement after all was multifaceted. It promoted democracy and resisted rapid capitalization as well as Americanization of South Korean society. *Minjung* could become a meaningful part of constructing the genealogy of the multitude only when we can consider Suh’s works in both South Korean and global art histories.
For his *Net-Work* (2010), Suh used multiple figurines to construct a larger net, installed at the beach of Japan, which he later re-installed in Perth, Australia (figs. 5-6). This time, the figurines are not holding a single object together. Rather, the figurines hold each other hand-in-hand to create a giant mesh, indeed something that becomes a net that glistens under the Sun and blows with the wind. This installation can be first understood by simply what its title implies: network. After all, we are living in what Manuel Castells predicted as the network society. The figurines are creating a larger system of the net, each being an equal participant as the figurines are all identical. Could this be the new face of the multitude? A network of people who join each other to resist the spreading power of Empire from within. This would be a more positive reading of the work, which aligns with the often celebratory tone of Suh’s nomadism. The same figurines could also signal another aspect of globalization: mass migration. Installed on the shores of Japan and Australia, labor migration is what supports the production and distribution of goods. This type of mass migration is an inherent part of
Empire. Could contemporary artistic nomadism create nodes for the multitude, rooted in local historic resistant forces such as *minjung*? The liberating force of groundless nomadism should be balanced with understanding that a work is always contingent upon material contexts of historical trauma and geopolitical realities. Contemporary, “of the moment,” celebration of nomadism has certainly opened up a new space for Korean artists including Suh. The global turn in the art world will be meaningless without facing how past post-colonial and cold war dynamics haunts us in the contemporary moment of empire. The new nomads may pack light, but their belongings are still heavy.

Figure 5. Do Ho Suh, *Net-Work*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.
Ahyoung Yoo is a Ph.D. candidate in art history at Ohio State University. Her research focuses on the intersection of new media art, technology and globalization. She is also interested in posthuman bodies of cyborgs and robots. Her works have been published in Media-N and Asia Art Archive: Field Notes. Currently, she is writing her dissertation on the politics of race and nation in contemporary Korean new media art. Her project has been supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Social Science Research Council.

Footnotes

3. Think of the physical regulations imposed on Korean subjects by the Japanese, such as cutting topknot, during the process of colonization. ↩


23. For instance, in discussion of Suh’s works, Jung-Ah Woo points out how the idea of nation, even if as an “imagined community,” revives itself vis-à-vis current movements of multiculturalism and post-nationalism. Woo, *Do Ho Suh: Home Within Home*, 142-159.


29. Suh, “Some One.”

30. Suh, “Some One.”