

**Room in the Age of Airbnb, or,
How to Survive like a Fish Out of the Water:
On Ye-Eun Min's Artworks**

“Furniture is...like sculpture
which is always added to the human figure.”

– Robert Venturi

“Nearly every epoch would appear, by virtue of its inner disposition,
to be chiefly engaged in unfolding a specific architectural problem:

for the Gothic age, this is the cathedrals;

for the Baroque, the palace:

and for the early nineteenth century,

with its regressive tendency to allow itself

to be saturated with the past:

the museum.”

- Sigfried Giedion

“Belong Anywhere.”

- Airbnb

In 1939, Walter Benjamin wrote an essay, entitled, ‘Paris- the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.’ As is well-known, it was an exposé, or a summary of his incomplete magnum opus, *Das Passagen-Werk* or the Arcades Project. Despite some significant differences between this later version in French and the original draft of 1935 written in German, both are guided by a central insight- a global as well as historico-philosophical idea that the series of cataclysmic vicissitudes befell Paris (ranging from the reign of Louis Philippe to the Paris Commune in 1871) were not so much exclusive to France as what fundamentally traversed the 19th century Europe in its entirety, as a prism if you will.

At one point in the essay, Benjamin notes that, with the advent of “the individual (le particulier),” an opposition between places for dwelling (“les locaux d’habitation”) and those for work (“les locaux de travail”) occurred for the first time. Situating this tension in the time of Louis Philippe’s reign, along with the period of the French Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, Benjamin argues that “the interior,” as the equivalent of the already waning individuality and interiority, began to be constructed as a fantasy or what he calls “the phantasmagoria of the interior” (“les fantasmagories de l’intérieur”).¹

Is Benjamin’s discussion still viable? What is “the interior” or ‘a home’ in the age of telecommuting or ‘work at home,’ when distinctions between places to live and those to work have become virtually pointless with the help of unprecedented telecommunication technologies? What is a ‘house’ in the age of globalization, or rather, anti-globalization (e.g. “Go Back to Your Home!”) in which travel and migration intermingle, and as such, have become an object of rigorous interrogation? How do we tell a house from a room, or the inside from the outside? Does a house remain a house when, as the Airbnb commercial famously asserts, we can “Belong Anywhere”?

Straddling both Korea and France, Ye-eun Min is an artist whose artistic oeuvre continue to re(de)fine these questions aesthetically, that is, by weaving materials of bodily perception. *Unpredictable Invisibility*, Min’s recent solo exhibition at the Alternative Space Loop (Seoul), constituted a significant occasion where one could genuinely appreciate the intriguing trajectory of artworks she has produced with a host of variations over the past ten years in more detail.

In the following, I will explore Min’s works more methodically, taking <*Unpredictable Invisibility*> as a prism. Sidestepping conventional metaphors of ‘hybridity’ or ‘mixed-blood,’ we will critically investigate her oeuvre as to the questions of the interior and the exterior, the wall and the border, and, last but not least, habits and habitats. In doing so, we will mull over some fascinating implications Min’s idiosyncratic career provides for the 21st century Korea and abroad.

What Is a Room When the Inside Is the Outside?

Arguably the central work of the exhibition, *라비하마하마hyun 추추happyj33 아토마우스에뽀쑤기제트블랙병똥경* (hereafter abbreviated as *RABIHAMAHA*) (2019) is literally a house torn in pieces. In each of these scattered corners, all of which

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, band 5. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982, pp. 67. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Einland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 19.

lack doors, ceilings, and floors, there are a series of clocks, lights, and furniture, either dangling or hung upside down. Its preposterously long title is in fact a slapdash list of online ids and the people from whom the artist bought the abovementioned items.

To be more specific, RABIHAMAHA is a refined version of a series of works Min made in the past, ranging from *Nosiam* (2012) to *Room* (2013). In these works, the conventional relationship between the inside and the outside, or up and down is overturned, albeit abstractly. The idea of room or a chamber of which they partake was of a kind in which cultures of parents and kids, male and female, and society and home would intersect, with gender and age distinctions in flux. These unclear borders of space persisted four years later in *House(s)* (2017), where two distinct spaces were divided by walls without doors. Taken together, all of these works belong to the genealogy born of *Furniture House* (2013-).

This last work in particular deserves our scrutiny not only regarding *<Unpredictable Invisibility>* but also as it is arguably representative of Min's entire oeuvre at its most suggestive. As the deceptively blunt title amply suggests, furniture in this work is not so much installed in the house, thus reinforcing privacy of home as usual as exhibited toward the outside, constituting walls or rather, the house itself. As a result, the boundary between the inside and the outside is rendered as ambiguous as, say, a Möbius strip. One can recall M. C. Escher but that is a rather lazy reference. The real, genuine references from the contemporary, which allows *Furniture House* to operate as an artwork lies elsewhere

. One of them is Goshiwon or jjokbangchon, literally dubbed as "cubicle villages." Arguably the most budget conservative living spaces in contemporary Korea in the age of the so-called "I Live Alone", their interiors are mostly stuffed with IKEA furniture and Daiso products, well-known for being always available and easy to put together (or disassemble).² One can readily summon, for example, Do Ho Suh's fabric home installations, or hark further back to Claes Oldenburg's 'soft sculpture' in the 1960s. And yet again, they do not forge Min's proper references. (We will meet another Oldenburg shortly to be sure) The genealogy in question, i.e., the one from *Furniture House* to *RABIHAMAHA*, is rather strictly coextensive with the historical circumstances in the age of Airbnb wherein "the interior" has transformed into something no longer interior, or rather "imploded" from within, along with the hundreds of thousands of "interiors" already exhibited online search boxes at will.

As to the Korean situation, however, we should be more specific. For one should not only mention a variety of real estate apps like DABANG, JIKBANG, and HANBANG (along the lines of

² "I Live Alone" is one of the most popular entertainment reality TV programs from MBC- one of the three major broadcasting companies in Korea-, showing popular celebrities' daily lives of "living alone." It began airing every week since 2013, the same year *Furniture House* was made.

Zillow, Realtor.com, and Trulia) but also a series of lodging apps such as ‘YOGIYO [Right Here]’ OR ‘YOGIEOTAE [How about Here?]- some of which, as it turned out, were part and parcel of the extensive online cartel of the so-called ‘Molka’ or secret cameras in which thousands of people engaged in sex were recorded inside the putatively private rooms, only to be distributed for online viewing.³ Besides, the fact that most people appearing in these obscene videos are not professional actors or actresses but ordinary citizens, and further, that they are (perhaps still) not aware of their presence in them, is crucial. For, on the one hand, their ‘private’ behaviors circulated online via vast networks of web-hard are hardly ‘public’ in traditional sense. On the other hand, the allegedly ‘interior’ space in which they made love can no longer guarantee ‘private intimacy.’

It is perhaps far from a coincidence that Yang Jin-ho, one of the men who became a billionaire in this peculiar process and later got convicted for domestic violence against his wife as well as his employees, was the CEO of a company called ‘Korea Future Technology’, making robots.⁴ Still, a blind emphasis on this temporal aspect could result in a no less myopic negligence of works in the past resonating with Min’s work in question. In 1964, for instance, Claes Oldenburg showed *Bedroom Ensemble* at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, capturing the irony implicit in the interior as an object of exhibition. While often lumped together with the works of Marcel Broodthaers and Michael Asher under the rubric of the ‘Institutional Critique,’ a critical enterprise devoted to gallery or museums as material institutions, this work must be distinguished from them as it renders gallery exhibition spaces indiscernible not only from adjacent offices but also interior spaces like bedrooms. On the other hand, one must mention works like *Journal Piece* (1976), John Knight’s art project of mailing unsolicited popular magazines to a group of people’s houses. Infiltrating into their living room, coffee tables, bath room and garage, Knight’s work served to affect and transform the interior or private spaces.⁵

Min’s works continue this lineage while transmogrifying it. The updates she performs, however, are far from a simple reflection of increasing universalization of international travel or acceleration of visits diverse ethnic groups get to pay to each other’s houses. Most importantly, they do not merely show the inside of a house we are scheduled to drop by in advance; rather, they show the inside as that which makes visits and trips possible in the first place, i.e., its visualization kickstarts the journey itself. Is this inside the same inside as we know of? This is the core question Min’s oeuvre

³ “Accommodation app CEO under probe for porn distribution.” *Korea Times* 2019. 11.29
http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/11/251_259544.html

⁴ “IT entrepreneur under probe for attempted contract killing.” *Korea Herald* 2019.2.7
<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20190207000539>

⁵ Dan Graham, “Art as Design/Design as Art.” In *Rock My Religion: Writings and Projects 1965-1990*. ed. Brian Wallis. MIT Press, 1993. p. 220.

raises. The interior of the space we get to stay via Airbnb is enclosed by walls and as such remains strictly invisible. At the same time, however, this inside is supposed to be visible, rendered transparent to global customers' penetrating gazes from without as clearly as possible. As the virtual icing on the cake, the so-called 'Molka' or secret cameras now potentially embedded in any rooms on the planet, makes walls practically nonexistent if not translucent.⁶

Impressive in this regard is *Nosiam* (2012). The title of this work comes from 'maison,' French word that signifies a house. The artist changes the order in reverse, however, and replaces the last syllable 'am' with a homonym in Chinese character (庵) which means a hut. Nonetheless, this house lacks a ceiling while the outside space is covered with wallpapers and floor commonly used for the inside. That is, the work itself is in reverse, not unlike the title- or, rubber gloves turned inside out. Are the latter, which get wet after doing dishes, still rubber gloves though? That this work in which the act of inversion operative in the title in terms of language is here applied to the plastic dimension was made around the time when Airbnb drew global attention, and, more symptomatically, a kind of a 'model home' or a 'show house' ('model house' in Korean expression) made up of balsa trees and hardboard papers, is far from coincidental.

Room in the Age of Airbnb, or, Between House and Shell

This model home or show house constructed by Min is, I argue, literally the model or matrix of home of our time. And the question this work embodies is simply this: 'Is a house still a house?' Or rather, 'what is home now?' Put differently, what if the triumphant motto of Airbnb, that now we can live any place in the world, is none other than the idea that no home is the same home we knew?

Interestingly enough, Walter Benjamin wrote that "[t]he original form of all dwelling [Die Urform allen Wohnens] is existence not in house [Haus] but in the receptacle or a shell [Gehäuse]."⁷ In fact, "[i]n the most extreme instance, the dwelling [wohnen] becomes a receptacle" instead of living in a genuine house. Wondering if any other time period other than the nineteenth century was pathologically obsessed with spaces for dwelling, he enumerates "pocket watches, slippers, egg cups, thermometers, playing cards" as evidences. When such cases are lacking, adds Benjamin, people made "jackets, carpets, wrappers, and covers" instead. According to this prescient German critic, however,

⁶ "Should we be searching for hidden spy cameras in Airbnbs and hotels?" *CNN* 2019.4.19. <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/hidden-spy-cam-airbnb-scli-intl/index.html>

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, band 5. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982, pp. 291-292. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Einland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 220.

even such shells or casings have “disappeared” while “dwelling has diminished.” But how and why? As the hotel rooms replaced the house for the living, crematoriums served to play the role of, say, cemetery.⁸

How does a house [Haus] turn into a receptacle [Gehäuse]? Where does the obsession with the latter come from? Put differently, how houses become something other than themselves? As an answer to these questions, Benjamin pinpoints “porosity and transparency, tendency toward the well-lit and airy” among architectural tendencies of the twentieth century. Exemplary here is the Crystal Palace of the U.K., i.e., a glass building. What is a glass building if not an architecture in which walls no longer operate as walls, or the interior is exposed to the outside to the point of not being the interior anymore? In this precise sense, Benjamin’s analysis paved the way for the age of Airbnb *avant la lettre*.

In a note prepared for *Come to My Place* (2015), Min wrote that the work functions “literally as a receptacle [그릇 geureut]” which stores cultural identities one touches, collides or intermingles with, and gets separated from. “Though the English phrase *Come to My Place* does not correspond to its Korean title *Come to My House for Fun*,” adds the artist, “such disparity makes room.” Essentially a scene of an Italian coffee pot, a steamer, “a saucepan one can discover anywhere in the world,” along with a square-shaped white rice, just about to enter the oven or fresh out of it, on which the phrase “COME TO MY PLACE” is written with rice colored by oriental soy sauce, this work, I argue, captures the oscillation between the house and receptacle. *Breathing Space* (2016), *Being* (2017), and *Hidden Image* (2017) are Min’s other works in the same vein. Not unlike in *Come to My Place*, the boundary between receptacles and stuff that gets stored in there is fuzzy at best while lines between the inside and the outside, visibility and invisibility, and transparency and lack thereof are no less ambiguous.

Though each balloon in *Breathing Space* is transparent, the sum total of balloons the artist allows viewers to create at will amount to an opaque membrane, if not a wall per se. These “transparent balloons,” Min writes in her notes, “show surroundings while hiding people who enter [the space created by the balloons].” Worth noting here is that what serves to divide the inside and the outside is oval-shaped balloons rather than, say, a wall. (Imagine Donald Trump would erect a wall of balloons on the border between the U.S. and Mexico) Here spectators are situated not so much inside as *outside* of each balloon. Nonetheless they find themselves *within* the space created by a group of balloons. The inside at stake here, to be sure, does not serve to constitute the inside and the outside in conventional sense, nor does it play the role of a genuine border. (*Beach Ball House* (2018) is another variation in which a sphere (3D) is replaced by a circle (2D), only to become none other than a wall. From the beach ball as the figurative embodiment of the quotidian space suspended, along with an extension of the ball(oon),

⁸ Ibid.

the artist eliminates volume, and leaves the circle as a two-dimensional figure, before using it as a wall through which to see people in the streets) *Being* is made up of a series of egg-shaped objects one could find in a science fiction film such as *Alien* (1979). Each of its object has a small hole. When one gets close to this orifice to peek inside, however, the view is blocked as the viewer gets in the way of light. Instead, when one either spins or shakes the object, she can hear some sound from within. It is precisely in this sense that the inside or something in there “exists” [“있다 itdah” or “Il y a” in French, is the original title in Korean] as that which is not visualizable but merely audible. What about *Hidden Image*? This work comprises eight wooden bars, stacked in a way that “shows or hides” the object or a spectator entering its interior space, depending on the angle, height, and lights installed inside with different keys. The line between hiding and revealing, concealment and exposure is rendered here in a deceptively facile, intuitive fashion. Still, both are not so much clearly distinguished in a zero-sum game as intermingled on a continuous line, albeit with different intensities.

These works are strictly coextensive with the contemporary historical conjuncture in which walls are no longer walls, or the inside obscurely overlaps with the outside.

Surviving like a Fish Out of the Water: Translating Habit(at)s

Compared to the works we have explored thus far, there are a group of Min’s works which seem to stand out as oddballs. *The Journey of Fish* (2009/2015), *Crane* (2011), and *Animals* (2012) are such works in which animals are explicitly foregrounded. *The Journey of Fish* is born of the artist’s repeated experience of getting lost in France and mistaking French friends or simple being unable to recognize their faces, after which she wondered if she were fish whose memory is said last only three seconds. *Crane* splices bronze and paper, while *Animals* joins hard stone with a tail made up of animal hair. How can we read these seemingly disparate works in line with Min’s other oeuvre?

In a nutshell, these works engage with the issue of translating habitats or habits. Let’s take *The Journey of Fish* in which the artist in plain clothes walked about and eventually slept in the gallery. With a mask of fish on her face, in a size one could readily find in a theme park for kids, she seemed nowhere close to real fish. What we encounter here is the issue of survival or the awkwardness of an organism plucked out of its original “habitat” as the work stages the well-known phrase, “a fish in the water” in reverse. If Min’s work remains intriguing, it comes from her refusal to lock this kind of problem into a conventional binary opposition of ‘native vs. immigrant’ implicit in the figure of a ‘foreign student struggling to adapt.’

This peculiar aspect has to do with the artist’s own formative experience. Her parents had studied in France before they returned to Korea. Min later followed her parents to study in France only

to realize some of verbal phrases she used to repeat in her childhood were grounded in France rather than Korea. With this mind, we begin to see how *Crane*- whose heavy bronze head is touching the floor while its light body of paper (reflecting Korean cultural “habit” of making ‘paper cranes’) is virtually floating in the air- embodies the weight either gained or lost during the process of migration between Korea and France. Similarly, *Animals* partakes of the same series under the rubric of ‘time-space of taxidermy’ as it visualizes organisms which survive displacement or migration out of their proper habitats without decomposition.

Out of the Mask (2012) comes closes to this question of survival or ‘life and death,’ accompanied by the translation of habit(at)s. This performance work took place in Benin, Africa where the artist put on a winnow or “키 ki” on her face like a mask while wearing Korean traditional dress, socks and a pair of shoes. As she covered her entire body with an African coat of straw, Korean items remained virtually invisible. What is striking in this case was that she had to risk her life. As her performance was essentially an attempt by a female foreigner, trying to translate an act of a male shaman in a male-oriented society of Benin, Min was given a warning that it could lead to her own death. To make matters worse, she did hear a news of a young Benin artist who recently died minutes before the performance, as if it were today’s weather. This otherwise exceptional episode accounts for the ways in which migration of habitats or habits often leads directly to the issue of life and death. In contrast to the threadbare metaphors of ‘salad’ or ‘bibimbap’ which often paint translation or the hybridity discourse as a rosy fantasy, this work dyes them in bloody red color.

Life and History Between Thickness and Transparency

The ash box of *Trans-migration* in this exhibition summons this shadow of death acts of translation often accompanies and translates it materially. On the one hand, this transparent ash box made up of resin continues the motifs of ‘a wall that is no longer a wall’, ‘a receptacle without its contents’, or the indiscernible borderline between the inside and the outside. On the other hand, this work inscribes the transition from one state to another, or translation as migration onto the register of time rather than that of space. For instance, the blisters captured at the heart of *Trans-migration* are crystallized oxygen from wood powder caught during the process of oxidation. Upon scrutiny, they correspond to another irony of the work, i.e., that the element of resin in the ash box suspends decomposition of wood powder while the ash box itself stands on top of fine charcoal powder, which is nothing but another state of wood or trees. That is to say, these two powders are reducible to wood in the last analysis. Still, while one is suspended inside of the ash box, another is to disappear in the subtle air current spectators create.

These disparate states of time, or rather, distinction of material states sustained by different speeds are operative in *Single Slit* (2019) as well as *New Moon* (2019). In the former, powder made up of wood furniture is suspended by resin across different metal plates. In the latter, cheap black plastic bags are suspended between two glass plates, visually replicating the phenomenon in which moon is rendered black or invisible when it is suspended between sun and earth. The real kernel of *New Moon*, however, consists in these vinyl plastic bags. As that which can withstand decomposition for three or four hundred years, these bags stand for duration or survival. Nonetheless, this survival is miles apart from the positive idea of ‘life’ in opposition to ‘death.’ As is well-known, Martin Heidegger links dwelling [Wohnen] to (human) existence as a mortal being.⁹⁹ With this sense of dwelling in mind, it is hard to regard the survival of plastic bags or their occupation of a space called Earth for several hundred years in terms of ‘dwelling.’

This subtle distinction between survival and dwelling strictly resonates with a group of works Min created in which the inside and the outside no longer play their conventional function. At the same time, one can translate this motif in terms of defiant traces refusing to disappear, or life as differing modes of duration as *Caravan* (2015) and *Let There Be Light* (2017) emphatically attest to. Made when Min was chosen as one of the artists in the Triangle Workshop in New York, the former is a virtual caravan. With a series of plates on which melting wax was repeatedly placed till hardened, this work captures and reanimates traces of melting wax when the latter is exposed to day light before returning to its solid state at night. Illuminated by the light inside the caravan at night, these traces testify temporal aspect of space. On the other hand, *Let There Be Light* partakes of another lineage of temporality, i.e., origin and destination, or alpha and omega as the ash box in *Trans-migration* vividly manifests. In particular, *Let There Be Light* foregrounds the famous phrase from the Bible in neon light, on top of red clay in Myanmar, one of the World Cultural Heritages. The tension between the two is the one between cosmological time and historical time. Min’s interest in origins as manifested in her early work *Adam and Eve* (2009) returns here in full swing. the time of human species or her History vis-à-vis cosmological time appears ridiculous if not in vain in this work. As such, it creates a fascinating contrast with the idea of History as secular traces (e.g. RABIHAMA’s awkwardly long title), along with the illegible traces of different languages in *Common Language*. In what sense?

The idea that History of human beings is nothing but a heap of vain organisms destined to become dust is not different from the conventional idea of translation, in which rubbles of misreading are fated to evaporate before the Origin as intention. As *Common Language* powerfully demonstrates,

⁹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper & Row, 1971, p. 145.

however, accumulation of such translations leads not so much to transparent inner mind or a clear origin as opacity. In fact, as the ash box of *Trans-migration* eloquently illustrates, even transparency has a kind of **thickness**. (As we discussed earlier, this tension between transparency and **thickness** was given an additional twist in *Beach Ball House* which eliminated volume from sphere, thus reducing it to a two-dimensional circle)

Outro: ‘Mauvais Pas’

Let me close my extensive musings with *Happy Flags!* (2017), another work of translation or trans-migration by Min. At stake here is ‘Poong-eojae [豊漁祭]’ or a ritual for a big catch of fish’, one of the ‘Important Intangible Cultural Properties’ of Korea. As can be easily expected from the nature of the original ritual, the varying degrees of hues of death surrounding <Out of the Mask> and <Trans-migration> are virtually minimized here. Min made 300 flags with bamboo poles and set them up near a fishing village in Marseille, France. And due to the six vibrant colors including ‘Ohbangaek’ or, Five Cardinal Colors, plus green in place of black, many of these flags resemble some national flags of European countries when seen in distance. Provided one regarded the Korean ritual as the so-called ‘original,’ this optical illusion would readily amount to an indisputable ‘misreading.’ By offering the French villagers rationales behind the original ritual and her own performance in advance, however, the artist effectively did away with such hierarchical reading mechanism- or at least suspended it.

What merits our attention here is the peculiar name of the village where this work took place, i.e., ‘Mauvais Pas.’ In French, this term refers to a place (e.g. a cliff or a cape), an area difficult to climb or pass. Or, more metaphorically, it signifies an impasse or a difficulty. When one read them literally, however, these two words can be interpreted as ‘a bad step/move (mauvais pas)’ or ‘not bad (pas mauvais),’ that is, two antagonistic- if not mutually exclusive- attitudes vis-a-vis the act of translation itself. Is (y)our life or History as an act of translation ‘a bad move’ or ‘not bad’? My- and perhaps’ Min’s- wager is that, our life and History are bound to oscillate between these two poles.