



Looking for Home

Yona Lee at the Boundary between
Migration and Settlement

by Jungah Lee

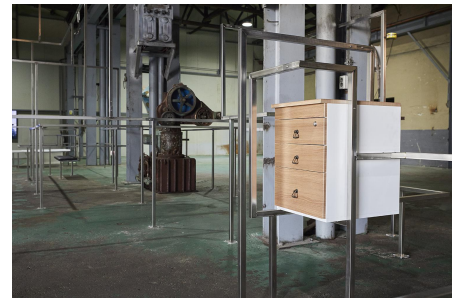
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Yona Lee, *En route home*, 2020. Installation view, 2020 Busan Biennale, South Korea. Courtesy of the artist, the 2020 Busan Biennale, and Fine Arts, Sydney.



Yona Lee, *En route home* (detail), 2020. Installation view, 2020 Busan Biennale, South Korea. Courtesy of the artist, the 2020 Busan Biennale, and Fine Arts, Sydney.



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Working drawings of *En Route Home*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



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Independent curator Jungah Lee reviews Yona Lee's site-specific work En Route Home, a project for the 2020 Busan Biennale which took place amidst the coronavirus pandemic in South Korea from September - November last year.

Developed with guest editor Amy Weng, this essay reviews Yona Lee's installation and its references to migration, the concept of 'home' and our new and developing relationships towards stability and roots in the era of globalisation.

In contemporary society, the development of mass transportation has drastically increased the physical mobility of people, while the rapid evolution of technology has freed individuals from space-time constraints. The networked space where virtual movement is feasible beyond geographic and social boundaries has expanded the scope of our senses, as well as our thinking, experiences and relationships. Amid such historic changes—which have enabled people to move and migrate anytime and anywhere, untethered physically or virtually—it may be with some scepticism that we talk about a unique connection to place that implies a point of

origin, or of an unchangeable identity that is attributed to a place or is the result of one's attachment to a place. On the other hand, the home/homeland is no longer viewed as a fixed place that a diaspora might hope to return to, but an imaginative place that exists in collective memories and records. Hence, in this age of diaspora when mobility increases in line with globalisation, home becomes a notion that seeks its meaning in terms of 'routes' and 'migration' rather than 'roots' and 'settlement'.

In Korea, where people move frequently for better education and jobs, houses (especially apartments) have a heightened meaning as a measurement of accumulated wealth and investment beyond the concept of a formal dwelling. Given this local distinction, the idea of holding one place and settling down is sometimes regarded as an outdated concept, at least in an economic sense. While these viewpoints may appear reasonable to some, they situate the idea of a hometown or place of origin in a negative context, overlooking the importance of the relations between human beings and places. From an ontological perspective, it is clear that individuals cannot live their lives without having a relationship with any place, even if only to return or depart from. In fact, the incessant pursuit of mobility within contemporary life seems contradictory to our desire for stability, both emotionally and physically. Just as the identity of diasporas can be described as "changing same", the concepts of 'roots' and 'moving' co-exist in every culture.^[01]



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En Route Home (2020), a project built in-situ by Yona Lee for the 2020 Busan Biennale, presents a housing structure where conflicting ideas such as ‘route’ and ‘root’, or ‘migration’ and ‘settlement’, cross each other in complicated ways. *En Route Home* exists as a temporary intervention within a warehouse located in Yeongdo, a southern district of Busan, where a ship repair yard was once located. The artist, who was born in Busan, Korea, but moved to New Zealand as a teenager, has taken a site-specific approach similar to her previous *In Transit* series (2016–ongoing), spending time on location and working with local manufacturers. The site and its location adjacent to the port, as well as Busan’s significance to Lee personally, is closely tied to the meaning of home that the artist attempts to investigate. The shipyard was once a place where ships were temporarily moored to be repaired, mended and made fit for activity. It also correlates to the artist's unique situational experience; although she left Korea years ago, she regularly returned ‘home’ and departed again.

In contrast to the round tubes she has used previously in the *In Transit* series, here Lee uses square metallic pipes, zigzagging through the space, forming the linear architecture so typical of the artist's work. Domestic items such as a bed, a bathtub, seats or a roll of toilet paper cling on to the pipes, suspended from the floor. In *En Route Home*, the pipes are used as handrails, supports and handles, ensuring protection and safety, connecting or isolating spaces around the site and creating passages and doorways for the audience to pass through. At the same time, they guide and restrict the audience's movement, closing off space, obstructing our passage. While Lee's previous *In Transit* series represented movement and routes in the public sphere by deploying objects associated with public transportation (such as bus seats, safety rails, stop buttons and bus handgrips), *En Route Home* uses a similar tactic of controlled movement and spatial awareness in a private, domestic space.



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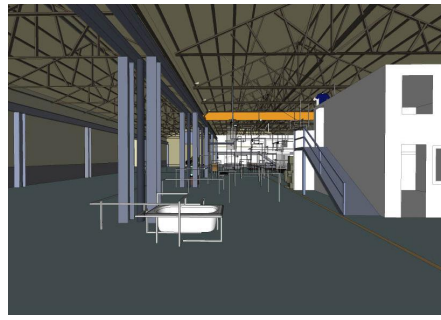
Beyond serving the function of controlling users' safety and movements, square pipes are frequently used in kitset furniture as they are easy to assemble and move. DIY furniture optimised for movement and migration is especially favoured by younger generations or migrants moving frequently for practical and

economic reasons. Lee's use of materials associated with temporary settlement suggests an ambivalence toward the notion of home. As someone who left her hometown (her roots) she demonstrates that any place, wherever it is she chooses to settle, can become her home/roots, consequently strengthening its meaning in opposition to her actual hometown (as it happens, the Busan Biennale is her first exhibition in her hometown.) We might read this attempt of hers as akin to "a homing desire", described by Avtar Brah, that is distinct from "a desire for a homeland" as a geographical substance.^[02] Lee's working process of constructing a home in an unfamiliar place with her sensory experiences and imaginations recalls Brah's argument that "paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'".^[03] The concept of diaspora presupposes a home as the centre and the point of departure from which dispersion begins. Here, home does not only aim to satisfy the physical need for accommodation and shelter, but to emotionally satisfy a sense of stability and belonging.

For a diasporic subject like Lee herself, the reality is that one can hardly return home and expect to find it just as one left it. If a home/hometown involuntarily provides rest and identity as well, 'a homing desire' is about a voluntary, autonomous search for a place that can give a sense of stability and belonging. Here, home can become fragmented, removed to a second or third place, or to borrow Stuart Hall's description, it may well become a site of "contingent and arbitrary stop".^[04] Home is not simply a fixed, substantial thing. It is created during the practice of specifying one's position in the historical, socio-cultural topography. The position is arbitrary and indefinite. Lee's house consists of spatial dispersion and convergence, movement and pause that indicates the boundary between migration and settlement, and also one that may be both a destination and a starting point at the same time. Her place is where the anchor is temporarily dropped, but at the same time, she can configure a relationship with the terrain in which she is located and transform it into something meaningful. As such, Lee's work lets us meditate on the meaning of 'home' in the 21st century, an era of extreme displacement and migration.



Working drawings of *En Route Home*, 2020.
Courtesy of the artist.



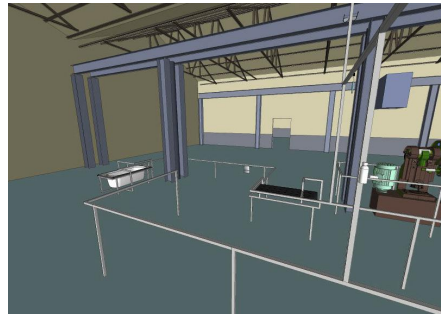
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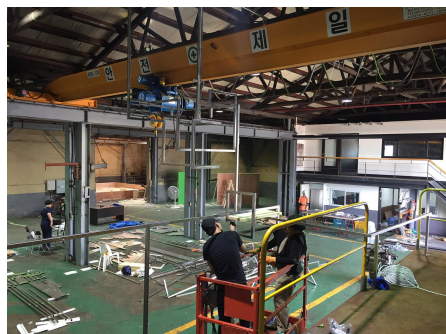


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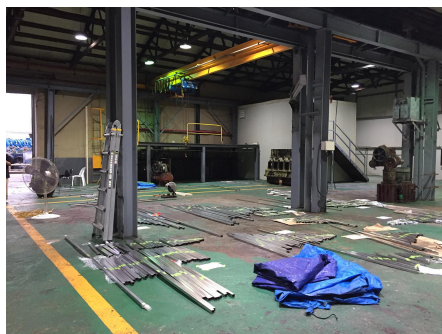
Meanwhile, in constructing a metaphorical house, Lee attaches a specific life and sensory, bodily relationship to the location as viewers are able to enter the installation and wander through it. Objects such as a bathtub, a bed, a set of drawers, shelves, kitchen utensils, insect screens, indoor staircases and other household items used in everyday homes serve as signifiers of the interior landscape of a universal home. Our memories are stirred by the tactility and familiarity of these everyday objects. Through this, the artist seems to suggest a notion of home as a concrete place, rendered familiar by domestic objects, one where viewers might feel like the space is reminiscent of home due to its domestic furnishings and objects. To use Sara Ahmed's phrase, the lived experience of "being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other."^[05]

But in reality, *En Route Home* is too heterogeneous and strange to feel comfortable and cozy like home. Even though the divided spaces that make up the entire house seem to be organically connected to each other, each of them is kept afloat from the ground like islets or independently conceived spaces, so that an anxiety and tension permeates the familiarity of this standardised

private space. Nevertheless, *En Route Home* operates as a haven implanted in an unfamiliar place, a space that creates a special meaning in dialogic relation with the diasporic subject.



Installation of *En Route Home* (2020),
Yeongdo Harbor, Busan, South Korea.
Courtesy of the artist.



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The artist explores the relations between the original structure, facilities, and equipment in a given space by introducing new elements that fit in with its physical properties, instead of removing and altering the space. This working method draws an analogy to the placemaking process in which a subject interacts with a new home—whether a new house or a new country—and forms a physical and psychological connection with that place. An immigrant might seek a connection with a place of settlement by transposing their own cultural identity onto it, thereby creating a new, hybrid third-place. Similarly, Lee's work is a complex

aggregate where the work connects, collides, and negotiates with the existing space.

By blurring the boundary between migration (route) and settlement (root), Lee disproves the binary opposition between homeland and strange land, the rooted and the uprooted. Instead, she reveals how the subject and each new settlement permeate one another by building an organic relationship. Lee encounters her childhood home as a renewed place in her journey in which she can search for meaning: how does Busan relate to her?; what does it mean to her?; how might it transform her? Lee's work invites us to ruminate on the spatial and psychological dispersion of contemporary diaspora and the meaning of home through an installation that is at once familiar and unfamiliar, intimate and uneasy, while temporarily anchored at the 2020 Busan Biennale.

Footnotes

01. Paul Gilroy, "'Not a Story to Pass On': Living Memory and the Slave Sublime," in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 198.

02. Avtar Brah, "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identity," in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 192-193.

03. Ibid.

04. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 397.

05. Sara Ahmed, "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (December 1999), 341.

Biographies



Yona Lee lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand, and completed MFA at Auckland University Elam School of Fine Arts in 2010. Yona Lee's work has recently been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions including the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand; Te Tuhi, Auckland, New Zealand; and Westspace, Melbourne, Australia. Her work has recently featured in thematic exhibitions including the 2020 Busan Biennale, Busan, South Korea (2020); 15th Lyon Biennale of Contemporary Art, Lyon, France (2019); and Changwon Sculpture Biennale, Seoul, South Korea (2016). She undertook residencies at SeMA Nanji and Geumcheon Art Space, Seoul, South Korea in 2016, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand in 2020, and will be resident at Cité internationale des arts, Paris, France, in 2021.

Jungah Lee is a Seoul-based independent curator. Recently, Lee curated *2020 Move on Asia_Observing Screen Life*, hosted by Korean Culture and Information Service, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism including *In the Flat World* (the outdoor media art show, 2019) and *2018 Changwon Sculpture Biennale_Special Exhibition for Media Art*. From 2014 to 2017, Lee was the senior curator at Alternative Space LOOP. She has participated in numerous art projects at LOOP: *Asian Arts Space Network*, *Open Call for Emerging Artists* and *2017 Move on Asia_Mobilized Representation* and others. She has also participated in diverse curatorial projects such as *Da Vinci Idea Project* at Seoul Art Space Geumcheon and *Artko Imdae Project* at Arko Art Center of Arts Council Korea, *Busan Biennale Sculpture Project* and etc.

