

**Gallería Soledad Lorenzo**  
**Do-Ho Suh**  
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**Exhibition Catalog Text**

I am the space where I am  
By Paco Barragán

At the door of the house who will come knocking?  
An open door, we enter  
A closed door, a den  
The world pulse beats beyond my door.  
PIERRE ALBERT-BIROT<sup>1</sup>

The super-modernity in which we live questions the identity of the subject by breaking up the harmony of his own micro-world. The hometown, the place, the home, the house are all terms whose value has worn away or been deeply altered. If, according to Marc Augé, this is the century of generalised exile, where nobody is in their own place or lives an important part of their life away from it –whether by obligation, decision, or vocation– and where that tension between universal thought and territorial thought named “globalisation” is shown on a planetary scale, then perhaps it is reasonable to think of solitude as one of the most characteristic experiences which can devastate the individual conscience.

This demand of solitude however, is not introduced in an even way since, contrary to what we have learned to live with, globalisation is a condition that has not yet been internationalised and considered as normal in all places. As Okwui Enwezor reminds us<sup>2</sup> “Nowadays the elaboration of these terms must really consider the different experiences of modernity that each country experiments; experiences that in many places are not continuous, nor the same and which are governed by different motivations and different relations. In this case the question of globalisation is related to the different ways which the different areas have of reaching it. “

The solitude of the home, the home in solitude, we no longer define ourselves through

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Albert –Biot, poem “Les amusements naturels” in *Poésie VI*, Rougerie, 1945-1967, pg. 217.

<sup>2</sup> Interview to Okwui Enwezor carried out by the author Paco Barragán, “La bienal como deseo de globalización”, published in the magazine *Estilo* year 9, number 34, (March 2001), Caracas, pgs 49-53.

this concept. And the home is, after all, a home in so far as it is effectively imagined as such. Peter Sloterdijk considers in a general way the individual house as an “escape point” from civilisation: “Each time there are more and more people who, due to their way of life and the conscience that they show, can be discovered as nomad islands. In this “apartment individualism” that exists in large post-modern cities, insularity becomes the actual definition of the individual himself.”<sup>3</sup>

What does truly define us is the unlimited access to underground or train stations, to airport terminals and computer networks. Travel is not only understood as a pleasure, business, study or virtual trip, but also as exile, Diaspora or the emigration of disorganised and restless masses of people coming from a silent way of life without any history. For it is of course true that it is only the lucky few who can embark on a trip in the classical sense, like a pilgrimage that makes up human life itself, in the same way as Ulysses when he returns to his homeland Ithaca. “Alcinous broke the silence and said “Oh son of Laertes! Since the heavens have brought you to this palace of bronze paving and high ceiling, no storm nor harm will trouble your return, no matter how much you have suffered in the past”.<sup>4</sup>

Travel, home and intrahistory are basically the pillars which have established the proposal of the Korean artist, Do-Ho Suh, who settled in New York after deciding to emigrate there at the age of 29 in order to continue his art studies. It was during the year 2000 when I had my first contact with his work in the collective exhibition Greater New York at the PS1. There I came across a reproduction of a Korean house made of silk hanging majestically several metres high from the ceiling. From then onwards his career has developed in a coherent way in a continuous discourse that reflects on the so called anthropological themes –family, private life, places inside one's memory- at the same time that his work questions the symbolic institutions like school or the army. In his visit to Madrid to the Soledad Lorenzo gallery in what will be his first exhibition in Spain, he is literally carrying “his house on his shoulders”.

## TRAVEL

After several months in New York Do Ho Suh finds himself, as one would expect, in a situation which could be described as homesick, in all the different acceptations of the term: he has been separated from a community to which he belongs, he finds the new

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *In the Same Boat, an Essay on Hyper-Politics* (Published in Spain as: *En el mismo barco. Ensayo sobre la hiperpolítica*, translated by Manuel Fontán del Junco, Ed. Siruela, Madrid, 1994, pg. 96-97)

<sup>4</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, Rhapsody XIII, translated by Alejandro Bon, Ed. Populares Iberia, Barcelona, 1932, pg. 77.

situation strange and misses what he used to do. The need to find more economic spaces in which to live, which are logically smaller and which make him move apartment several times, make him reflect upon both the physical and metaphorical codes of his surroundings, codes which find in architecture itself their maximum exponent. After all, the challenge for the newly arrived is to establish a dialogue with an environment whose syntax is not familiar and where only through distance itself can one become assured of the value and scope of one's own "personal space".

Mr Suh himself has explained in relation with this: "...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."<sup>5</sup>

Every space that is in fact inhabited carries with it as its essence the notion of house/home, together with a rhetorical (and not so much geographical) element associated to it in a classical sense; that of id est, the sense of feeling comfortable with the rhetoric of the people that you share your life with and making yourself understood without too many problems. In the case of Do Ho Suh this was translated as an unconscious pursuit for his childhood house. The result was a life size scaled reproduction of his parents' traditional Korean house carried out in meticulously embroidered silk, entitled *Seoul Home*<sup>6</sup> since it was created in 1999 in Seoul. Once it had been transferred to Los Angeles and exhibited in the Korean Cultural Centre, Seoul Home becomes *Seoul Home / L.A Home*, which later in New York becomes *Seoul Home / L.A. Home / New York Home*. In this way his houses and apartments acquire by means of travelling the complement of the place where they are exhibited, in such a way that the concept of "home" becomes something portable, transferable, capable "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."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Interview given to Priya Malhorta, "Space is a Metaphor for History" in *Tema Celeste*, 83/ 2001 (January 2001), pgs. 52-55.

<sup>6</sup> This work is –as Do Ho Suh has explained himself on several occasions – an exact replica of his parents house, which is in itself another replica of the house which one of the kings of Korea had ordered to be built inside his palace in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a plebeian style, in order to be able to experiment the life of the everyday people.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 5.

**HOME**

Home is in its original sense a place where someone lives (with his/ her friends and family) in their intimacy and where they develop their private life. It is therefore, a physical space, but also a mental image. For the late French Philosopher Gaston Bachelard it meant the instrument for analysing the human soul. “It is where not only our memories, but also what we have forgotten “lives”. Our soul is a dwelling. And by remembering the “houses”, the “rooms”, we learn to “dwell” in ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

However, when Do Ho Suh himself states that “I am interested in the space that surrounds me and moves with me both physically (clothing, house) and mentally (space of memory). My desire to guard and carry around my very own intimate space makes me perceive space as infinitely movable.”<sup>9</sup>, he is converting the house / home into a non place –if we force the term in the sense given by Marc Augé- together with everything that is implied by these places of transit in so far as their lack of definition and stability, their provisional and changeable nature. Home then loses its distinctive features: its place of relational and historic identity. (There is in fact no harm in pointing out here that that very much used concept of Augé falls short nowadays, since one only has to refer to the church or museum as authentic non places of our time).

Do Ho Suh converts the house into a *contradiction en terminis* that reflects that nomad side that characterises us so much. The home has stopped being a fixed place in order to situate it here or there, finding it wherever one may go. It is like a tent: easy to transport and equally easy to put together. It is, definitely, a concept that the artist often returns to. From *Seoul Home / L.A. Home...* to the different versions of his New York apartments –*The Perfect Home I* and *II* or *348 West 22<sup>nd</sup> ST., Apt. New York, NY 10001* –the metaphor becomes more and more complex and sophisticated.

However, between his maternal house and New York apartments we come across both important formal and conceptual differences that are worth pointing out. The Korean house is made with translucent silk held up by steel tubes, floating in the air and bare on the inside. The Apartments, on the contrary, are made of industrial nylon held up by tiny rods, that rest on the floor and which have the form of the different elements: the bathroom, the kitchen, the staircase, the passage, the toilet, the taps, the fittings, the light switches... If here even the most minimum feature has been recreated with the most admirable attention to detail, then there the house has a phantasmagoric aspect; if here the

<sup>8</sup> Gaston Bachelard, Published in Spain as *La poética del espacio (Poetics of Space)*, translated by Ernestina de Champourcin, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Madrid, pg. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Taken from the catalogue of the Biennale held in Sydney 2002, “(The World May Be) Fantastic”, Biennale Sydney, pg. 209.

material used reminds us of a system of chain production, there the silk brings about a remission of a craftsmanship society; if here we are firmly anchored in the present, there we can float in the past; if here we speak of nomadism, of being separated from one's roots, of dislocation, nostalgia, survival, there we can speak of security, identity, family, relations, experience, tradition.

Bachelard comes once again to our aid when he affirms that “ the real houses of our memories, the houses that our dreams bring us back to, the houses enriched through a devoted state of oneirism, resist any type of description. To describe them would be like showing them! Perhaps everything can be said about the present, but not the past!”<sup>10</sup> The past and the present contradict each other, they interfere and excite each other. The absence of any personal value is striking, as if this were totally superfluous inside the ideal house.

Do Ho Suh has brought to the gallery an entire house that is built up of a traditional Korean door –*Gate Small* (2003)-, hanging from the ceiling and made out of silk and stainless steel, through which we enter into the house; after this we come across the doormat made out of hundreds of tiny little figures of polyurethane rubber- *Doormat: Welcome Back* (2003) that welcomes us; we continue along the translucent passage of nylon inside the apartment –*348 West 22<sup>nd</sup> St., Apt. A, New York, NY 10011 (corridor)* (2001) –to end up treading on the floor –*Floor-* of his “living room”, where hundreds of thousands of miniaturised guests prepare themselves to hold our foot marks; and finally, the “conjurer –*Karma Juggler* (2003)-“ accompanies us through several houses “perfect –*Perfect Home 1* (2003)” and “haunted –*Haunting Home* and *Haunting Houses* (2003)”, with lively and colourful brushstrokes of ink and watercolour on paper, towards the doormat of the back door –*Doormat: Leave Me Alone* (2003) reminding us that the nostalgic visit has already reached its end. The passageway takes on a vital importance in so far as it empowers like a walkway the connection with the past, the present and what may come, confronting and going beyond geographical and cultural differences. In the end, it is not the house of Do Ho Suh that we can see, but our own that allows us to put ourselves on the threshold of a dream.

## INTRAHISTORY

The notion of personal space leads inevitably to a socio-political position of occupation that can be translated in the relation between the subject and society, between the power of a few and the anonymity of the masses, between the fragility of the individual and the strength of the community. To form part of the group or to resist is the dilemma that

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid 8, pg. 43.

stigmatises the contemporary human condition. Between the perverse capitalist individualism and the annihilating collective Asian strength it seems that there is no medium term. To belong to a group requires its individual sacrifices. That is the tension that *Floor* and *Doormat* transmit to us with its thousands of compact, abstract, multiplied and repeated little figures, of different sexes and races, fragile on their own but strong together in a block, capable of holding the footmarks of those who walk above (if in the previous doormat there is a protective glass, in this we are invited to tread directly on them). The presto smile of *Welcome Back* soon becomes sonorous in *Leave Me Alone*.

In other previous works like *Who Am We?*<sup>11</sup>, a contraction between “who am I” and “who are we” (which refers in addition to the lack of distinction between singular and plural in Korean) or *Some/ One*<sup>12</sup> (whose title implicitly alludes to both the individual as well as to the group), Do Ho Suh analyses emblematic structures like the school or the army, who with their uniforms (the most intimate and minute of spaces which we can inhabit and transport) make up the personality of the individual by means of eliminating any differentiating feature.

With this Mr Suh is simply referring to “intrahistory” in the sense given to it by Unamuno, to those silent lives of millions of women and men without history that all over the world continue with their dark, silent and eternal everyday labour and of which a few –including even ourselves- take advantage. It is not that the artist wants us to live in a state of “restlessness and full or yearning”, in view of today's major problems or in “a perpetual state of anxiety” –as Unamuno would propose –so as to unchain “a delirium, a frenzy, any type of madness”, but there is however a clear desire to wake us up–and here Suh does coincide with the philosopher –from “our spiritual drowsiness”. In this sense the sculpture *Public Figures* (1998) is revealing, no matter how one looks at it, in so far as it presents an empty pedestal, held up by thousands of little figures made of PVC, and constitutes a subtle and ironic reflection with reference to those hundreds of thousands of public figures standing on top of other pedestals. And with the unknown, anonymous, antiheroic citizen below what is it that does (not) occur?

In these works, the same as in *Floor* or in both versions of *Doormat*, the scale plays an important role since it allows one to reflect the tension between the individual and the group. This element of strangeness brings us back to our childhood and to its “game-like reality” with tin soldiers and miniature doll's houses. This “Lilliputian” world, in which values and faults are reduced and condensed, makes it easier to cast our gaze around through other eyes reminding ourselves with self assurance of the relativity of things, the

<sup>11</sup> Which was made of sheets of wallpaper with diminutive dots that represented, seen close up, portraits of his school mates taken in 1999.

<sup>12</sup> An armour made in 2001 with thousands of identification tags like those that are worn in the army.

absurdity of many situations, but also of the fanaticisms that still continue to move the world.

Do Ho Suh asks himself and asks us “How much space do I and can I carry with myself? What is the size of my personal space? How much space does one need? What is the space that defines a person, or a group of persons?”<sup>13</sup> The answer to these questions could be as simple or as complex as the proclamation of “I am the space where I am”.

Translation by Lorraine Kerslake

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid 9.