

## Do Ho Suh: Speculations

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*Do Ho Suh: Speculations* will be a chance to experience the artist's reflections on life and the world, as well as his speculations about the future by employing "speculation"—a term encompassing meanings such as contemplation, inference, and introspection—as a strategic approach, the exhibition reconfigures the themes of time, space, memory, and movement that the artist has persistently explored. Suh has previously demonstrated the potential for movable, site-specific art by rendering the spaces he has physically inhabited—such as his home or studio—in fabric. Unlike solid materials used for fixed sculptures, Suh's fabric homes, made of light-permeable and soft materials, can be easily transported to exhibition spaces. If his previous works provided an experience of his spaces, *Do Ho Suh: Speculations* allows viewers to experience Suh's process of contemplating future possibilities. 'Speculation' encapsulates Suh's contemplations and imaginative processes concerning interactions among individuals, communities, and environments. Through speculative thinking, Suh questions social falsehoods and inequalities, while also exploring new realms we can dream of and challenge. The exhibition also offers an opportunity to discover ideas and plans for Suh's many projects that could not be materialised due to physical, technical obstacles. For example, *Public Figures* (1988), a work presented in the Korean Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale, could not be operated due to technical difficulties; today, after 20 years, it is possible to present its kinetic version as the artist originally envisioned it. Together with the artist's imagination and conception of several public projects such as *Public Figures* (2024), *Do Ho Suh: Speculations* introduces works on 'passageways' and 'transitional spaces' that have been of interest to the artist since the beginning of his artistic journey.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition presents Suh's attempt to create the 'perfect home' through various formats, including hypotheses, diagrams, drawings, models, animations, videos, and texts.

*Do Ho Suh: Speculations* consists of three main chapters. The first revolves around the *Perfect Home* project, in which the artist attempts to connect the cities that were once his homes. In *A Perfect Home: The Bridge Project* (2010-2012), Suh attempted to connect his former homes of Seoul and New York, and in *The Bridge Project* (2024), he connected his current home of London with Seoul and New York to create a perfect home at an equidistant point between the cities. Through these projects, as well as *Fallen Star* (2012, 2024), the exhibition recounts the artist's thoughts on the perfect home. The second chapter presents a series of works that connect (or link) places where the artist once lived, including works such as *Bridging Home Liverpool* (2010), *Bridging Home London* (2024), *My Home/s, Positive* (2024), and *My Home/s, Negative* (2024). Finally, in the third chapter, the

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa G. Corrin et al., *Do-Ho Suh* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2002), 31.

exhibition introduces the artist's proposal for public art. The film works *Robin Hood Gardens, Woolmore Street, London E14 0HG* (2018) and *Dong In Apartments* (2022) will be screened in Space 2.

As such, *Do Ho Suh: Speculations* captures the process that begins with the artist's imagination and gains its potential life through a collaborative process with experts in various fields. Among these works, some have been realised, while others are still in the research stage. Describing his creative activities as a "process of speculation," the artist uses diverse storytelling approaches to share new possibilities for engaging with the emotional and physical complexities of life.

### Perfect Home

The notion of home is a long-standing theme and an important element throughout Suh's work. While his earlier works focused on bringing his past home to a different place by rendering it in fabric, his latest work is an ongoing, unfinished project that focuses on the idea of building a perfect home. "What or Where is the perfect home?" To answer this question, Suh plays with the idea that he would be halfway between two cities he then called home - New York and Seoul - perched above the ocean on a bridge linking them. Conventionally, the concept of home is associated with a building that is fixed in one place. For Suh, however, a home is something that can be made of fabric, something that can move freely from one exhibition space to another or even fly and land in the middle of another city. These ideas are first expressed in drawings and then materialised over a long period of time. *A Perfect Home: The Bridge Project* shows precisely this process of transforming a seemingly impossible idea into a work of art over a long span of time, through collaboration and exchange of ideas with experts from various fields.

This ongoing project is about a hypothetical plan to build the perfect home as envisioned by the artist. Even after the project was presented at Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York in 2010, Suh continued his research, engaging with more data and experiments, and arriving at a 6-channel video work in which he imagines building a house at the exact centre of the bridge (which corresponds to a point in the Pacific Ocean), derived from drawings and architectural data needed to construct the bridge. With contributions from architects, biologists, physicists, theorists, and industrial designers, *Perfect Home: The Bridge Project* (2010-2012), combines a speculative reflection on intercontinental travel via an ocean-spanning bridge combined with Suh's drawings and designs for a house that can withstand the harsh conditions of the Pacific Ocean. Although this is a hypothetical project, the artist strives for theoretical perfection, as a scientist or architect would.

For the next iteration of *The Bridge Project*, Suh adds his current hometown of London and envisions a "perfect home" located at an equidistant point between Seoul, New York, and London. This perfect home is located in the Arctic around the Chukchi Plateau adjacent to the Beaufort Sea (coordinates: 77°55'33"N 161°23'49"W). Suh's second *Bridge Project* responds to the questions of our sense of boundaries and belonging as we migrate to different places or the question of thresholds of redrawn borders. The work thereby imagines the possibility of leaping beyond these arbitrary spatial divisions. However, the artist shows himself giving up on this project. The perfect home he envisions is his challenge against impossibility. And yet, although he continues to research and

experiment to realise his idea, the artist finally decides that it is better to give up on the perfect home, considering the environment and various other conditions.

### Connection

"I kept thinking about passageways. Passageways resonate with my personal experience of being physically moved from South Korea to the United States.... It's like a passageway that bridges the enormous chasm between nostalgia for the culture of the 'place of birth' and the culture of the migrated place."<sup>2</sup>

Interested in the transitional spaces we pass through as we move from one place to another, Suh installed a hanok model on an overpass on Wormwood Street, which is only used as a fire escape as opposed to a passageway. *Bridging Home London* (2018) reveals the artist's personal memories and feelings about nations and cultures, and further responds to the history of immigration in London. Furthermore, by attempting to relocate his childhood home to another city to which he has immigrated, Suh questions how we retain memories as we move from place to place, and how such experiences shape an individual. In this exhibition, Suh presents a scaled down model, recontextualising it through the detailed and elaborate nature of the architectural model.

*Bridging Home Liverpool* (2010) marks a key moment in Suh's exploration of the reverberations generated by his experience of migration. Suh presented a scale model of his childhood home wedged between two buildings in the industrial city of Liverpool, UK. This model subtly reframes the simplistic notion of a "cultural clash," while also alluding to the lack of space often experienced in a metropolis. In the style of real architectural models, Suh presents an elaborate 3D model of these three strangely conjoined buildings colliding with each other.

Begun in the late 2000s with the question of "what if the architecture of one culture flew out and crashed into the architecture of another culture?," Suh's *Fallen Star* series has gone through several stages of transformation.<sup>3</sup> The following text, which forms the basis of the *Fallen Star* series, is an allegorical story that describes the emotions Suh felt when he first moved to New England, USA, to continue his studies. "A wind that suddenly had begun one day turned into a tornado and carried the house he lived in into the sky. From inside the house now airborne, he saw another house flying away in another tornado (Dorothy's house) and eleven swans wearing crowns. He also saw from the air a bridge crossing the Pacific. After seeing these, he did a few things to prepare for a safe landing. First, he cast away unnecessary heavy things in order to lighten the weight of the house. Keeping just a few things needed for survival, a toolbox, clothing, and a metal jacket, he made parachutes—first for the house, and then for himself. The tornado stopped and the house plummeted in a free fall, but the house and he landed safely thanks to the parachutes. At this time, his Seoul home crashed into his American home, the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Young-Paik Chun, "Do Ho Suh-Traveling home, public exhibition of private space", *The Elephant's Room*, (Gyeong-gi: Doosung Books, 2016), 192.

apartment building in Rhode Island he first settled in.”<sup>4</sup> Part of a series of works that visualised the culture shock he experienced at the beginning of his studies in the United States, *Fallen Star, Colliding Home* showed the process of one place being displaced to another and crashing into it. If *Fallen Star, Colliding Home* is about the Korean hanok moving to the United States, *Fallen Star* (2012), was realised at the University of California San Diego. The work consists of a typical American cottage that has been picked up, as if by some mysterious force, and “landed” on the roof of the university’s Jacobs Hall.

The work consists of a typical American cottage that has been picked up, as if by some mysterious force, and “landed” on the roof of the university’s Jacobs Hall. Sitting crookedly on the roof of a seven-storey building, cantilevered out over the ground, the house resembles a typical American cottage with a lush garden. The interior of the house is familiar—popularised in the cultural discourse surrounding American domestic life—but the floor and the house itself are at different angles, causing a sense of vertigo and dislocation. *Fallen Star*, with its fairy-talelike title, explores our search for belonging as well as the spatial perception of home and the question of cultural displacement. In addition, the interior of the crashed house shown in *Fallen Star, Colliding Home* resonates with the two film works presented in *Space 2. Robin Hood Gardens and Woolmore Street, London E14 OHG* and *Dong In Apartments* respectively show the two residential buildings Robin Hood Garden and Dongin-siyeong apartments before their demolition. The scenes of these apartments, which are about to be demolished shortly after their inhabitants have moved out, offer glimpses into the traces of life, memory, and time through the altered interiors and decorations left behind by the former residents. Similar to the artist’s Rubbing Project carried out in Gwangju, in which he used the technique of rubbing to remember the space, the two film works trace out the space through the camera lens. Rather than insisting on a fixed viewpoint, the works convey what is felt through the camera. According to the artist, “it was a process of materialising the memory of the space. It reminded us of how transparent and fleeting life is.”<sup>5</sup>

*My Home/s, Positive* and *My Home/s, Negative* brings together all of Suh’s previous dwellings and studios in a single architecturally modelled installation. The work is painstakingly crafted so that the transitional spaces and doorways of the buildings—the locations of which range from Korea, the USA, Germany and the UK—intersect with one another in an architecturally accurate way. Although the spaces become a near-functionless mass of building blocks when rendered at this scale, the buildings assume a new life in their incarnation as a portrait of Suh’s life and movement, transforming into an unrecognisable city or dreamscape that combines the styles of different eras and regions. Resonating with Suh’s profoundly felt notion that home is not something fixed but something we carry with us, the work evokes an image in which the breath has been sucked out of the buildings and the lifeless places are solidified anew.

### Public Project

As with the aforementioned *Fallen Star*, which can only be seen by visiting San Diego, public art is often produced

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<sup>4</sup> Do Ho Suh, *Home within Home*, (Seoul: Leeum Museum of Art, 2012), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Do Ho Suh, 2024.

in a specific location and therefore can only be experienced by visiting that location. In *Do Ho Suh: Speculations*, however, visitors will be able to discover the ideas behind his public projects through animations and videos. All the works in the exhibition can be understood in the context of public projects. This chapter explores the significance of Suh's idea of publicness and place, and how the art historical concept of public sculpture is extended in his artistic oeuvre.

Struck by the pervasive weight of the monument's Imperialist language following his arrival in the USA from Korea in the 1990s, Suh started to test new models of memorialisation. *Public Figures* (1998) is a key work in his oeuvre, in which he withdraws the figure from above the pedestal and installs it below, reducing its size and anonymising and multiplying it. Instead of placing yet another individual hero on the pedestal, Suh places the reduced, anonymous multitude below it. The masses occupying the space beneath the pedestal stand in orderly rows, their arms outstretched to support the considerable weight of the stone. Do they know that there is no one standing on the pedestal? The absence of heroes or leaders on the pedestal reminds one of the issues of nationalism and constructed histories discussed by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983). As the viewer was invited to look down instead of up, the stone of the pedestal gave way to the sight/site of the multiple individuals and the anonymous mass supporting and resisting the heavy stone pedestal. Suh presents a new kinetic 1/6 scale version of this work, challenging the static, site-specific nature of statuary. Through a dynamic form, in which animated figures freely move the pedestal around, the artist finally realises his original ambition of *Public Figures*. *Public Figures* can also be connected to Suh's other works such as *Floor* (1997-2000), *Paratrooper* (2001-2003), or *Cause & Effect* (2009).

*Inverted Monument – Plaza* visualises an anti-monument idea Suh has been engaged with since the beginning of his career. Unlike a typical monument, in his work the figure sits at the centre of a civic square before it is pulled in on its own body to create an inverted form of the monument. The work subverts the vertical orientation of the monument, which evokes the violence of imperialism, and creates a hollow space, as if burrowing a cave down into the depths of the square. The work reveals the emptiness of human history, a history written by means of gaps, erasure, and selection. Works such as *Public Figures* and *Inverted Monument – Plaza* in which the pedestal has been removed and the sculpture is experienced as part of the architecture or the environment, also resonate with the work of Anthony Caro or Carl Andre.

While *Public Figures* and *Inverted Monument – Plaza* examined the concept of public art through sculpture, *In Between Hotel*, *Secret Garden* and *Monument for the USA* explores ideas of transience, the landmark and site-specificity. For the Gwangju Biennial in 2012, a travelling hotel appeared quietly in alleyways, car parks and side streets, tucked between the buildings that make up the majority of the city's fabric. Nearby shops and houses became temporary neighbours of the *In-Between Hotel* and were engaged to provide a meal for its guests. The hotel challenges the binary division between art and functionality and offers a new model for a typical biennial temporary 'monument.' In *Secret Garden* Suh's childhood home and garden are replicated at 1/16 scale and loaded onto the bed of an eighteen-wheeler truck. The truck is the sort of vehicle that forms as much a part of the American landscape as its buildings and monuments. Following the route that people of Korean heritage travelled

for centuries through Alaska and beyond, the truck journeys across the US, before parking in Madison Square Park. The proposed *Monument for the USA* is an eighteen-wheeler truck with a vast mirror attached to its flatbed trailer. Constantly in transit, this monument encounters myriad sites that make up the vastness of the American landscape: cities, rural lands, artificial, and natural. The reflections on the mirror are equally in constant movement. By challenging the notion of a monument, an object seen as stationary and grounded is given the opportunity to travel, discover and evolve. Essentially a giant billboard when stationed at a given destination wherever it may be, the work offers viewers a reflected image of what already exists, in other words, its most direct representation. The potential spaces reflected on the truck transform into an intimate/private moment for the viewer, and each individual is entitled to their own unique perception and reading of their America. This site-specific and user-specific work yields a rich spectrum of American identities through the audience.

*Proposal for Sach'ŏnwang-sa* is an attempt to engage with one of Korea's archaeological sites. According to the account in the *Samguk yusa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms)*, the temple of Sach'ŏnwang-sa was hurriedly erected in the city of Gyeongju in the late seventh century, to provide the site for a Buddhist ritual, invoked to protect Korea from the Tang dynasty. The structure, one of the earliest known sites of Korean Esoteric Buddhism, is said to have been made only of colourful silk fabric. The project was partially realised in London in 2021, as a large-scale prototype constructed over the ancient remains of the Roman temple of Mithras. The skeletal tent structure was revealed over time as the fabric degraded, demonstrating Suh's exploration and expression of memory changing over time and the subjective interpretation of history. Eventually, Suh hopes to construct his rendering of the temple – informed by rigorous historical and architectural research, as well as artistic sentiment – in a performance work at the original site.

### Closing

Among the works developed from Suh's speculative thinking, works such as *In Between Hotel*, *Fallen Star*, *Bridge Project*, and *Public Figures* have been realised. These are cases in which speculative thinking and reality merge. If so, can they still be considered as speculative? One could say that the speculative nature in Suh's work lies in the simultaneity of memory. Although memory belongs to the past because it happened in the past, it exists in our minds of the present when it is recalled. Suh's works turn memories into a place by treating them in a non-place. For example, in one scene in *The Bridge Project*, he transformed his favourite restaurant into a Ferris wheel to be visited at any time, considering it as a condition for a perfect home. Food is an important element that solidifies our relationship with memories through the sense of smell. The scene creates a device that allows us to revisit the restaurants we have visited in the past, a device that summons memories into the present at any time. Existing simultaneously as past, present and future, memories deny a linear understanding temporality. The nature of memory is therefore speculative. Such a nature of memory resonates with the concept of home (as distinct from "house"). The element of memory transforms a non-place into a place.<sup>6</sup> The artist creates a relationship with a space and shapes identity by evoking his own memory in an uninhabited place.

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of "non-place" is drawn from Marc Augé's *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (1992).

When Do Ho Suh said he was going to recreate his house out of fabric, or that the figures supporting the pedestal would move, or that he was going to launch *The Bridge Project* connecting Seoul, New York and London, I could not help but think, 'Is this actually possible?' But his ideas have indeed been realised over the course of several years, even decades. And I am always curious to see what comes next. *Do Ho Suh: Speculations* is an opportunity to discover such ideas and thoughts of the artist. Because this exhibition focuses on the artist's ideas and the various processes that follow their realisation, it may seem like an architectural exhibition and feel unfamiliar compared to conventional art exhibitions. Since industrialisation, we no longer pay attention to the process of creation, but rather focus solely on the result, placing value only on the finished product. On the contrary, *Do Ho Suh: Speculations*, allows the visitor to observe the process by which Suh constructs the world he imagines, as if taking a glimpse into his mind. The exhibition hopes to encourage visitors to envision a different future through their encounter with the artist's imagination and processes.