

# *The Traveling Mind*

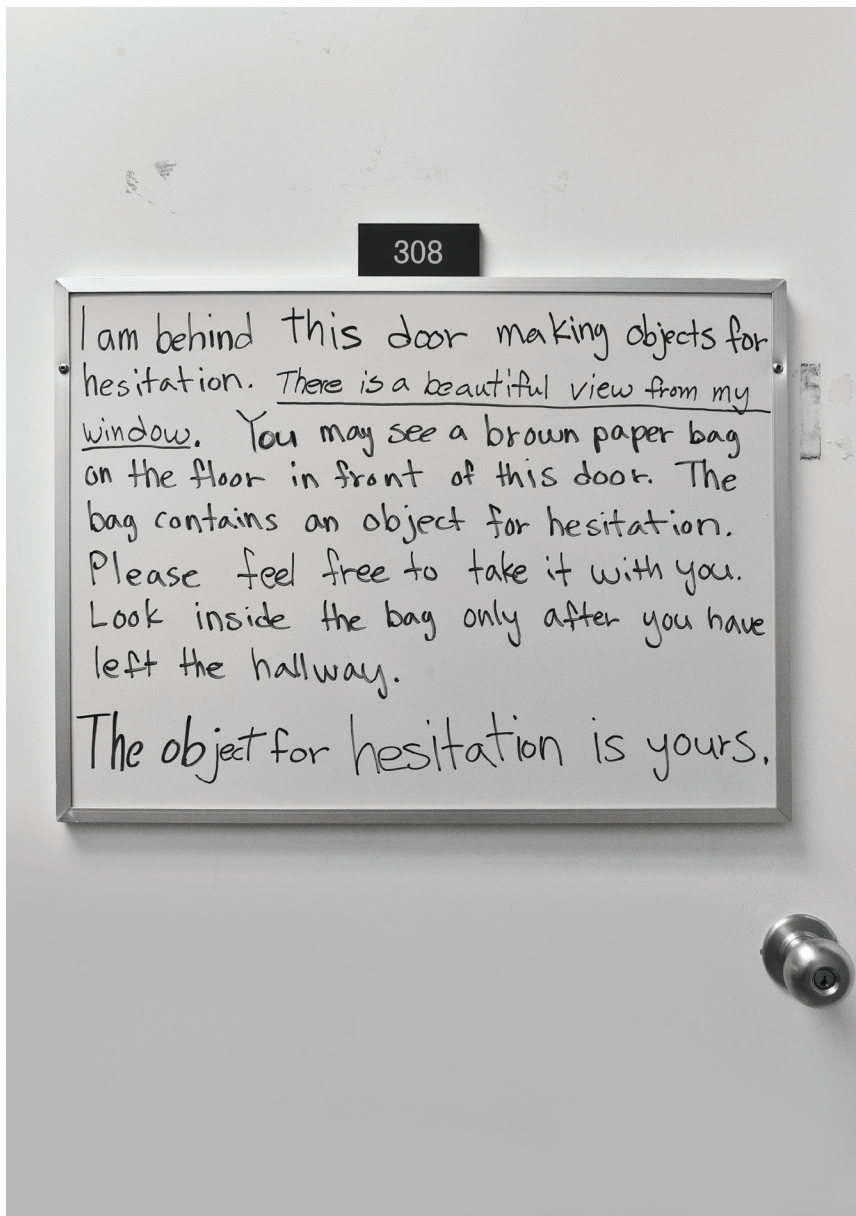
## — Essay by Renske Janssen

One of the characteristics of today's art world, and of contemporary art practice, is that people travel. More than ever, meetings are set on an international stage, artist's subjects are perhaps touching upon "local" ideas or situations, but they almost always involve universalist assumptions; they are placed in some kind of general discussion or canon, if you will. However, here I would like to discuss how images come about and how they are interwoven with parallels in life. This is, to stress once again, how art and life -- and "life" here means "nature," too -- are closely linked.

In the past many artists have attempted to bridge the boundaries between art and daily life. Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), for instance, championed an artistic practice that moved art into the everyday through performance, happenings, and posing the idea of the "un-artist." In other words, he considered everyone as a potential artist, and everything as a potential art object or art form. Recently, former Zero and 83 year old artist herman de vries (the preference for lower case his, in order to avoid hierarchy) is praised at the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennial because of his outspoken modest gestures that include life and nature; specifically, stones, pigments, plants and rubbish. They are presented as casual as *Objet Trouvés*, but honored in the space of the art gallery and museum. But one shouldn't forget that without Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), these art practices and mentalities might not have been possible at all. Duchamp was the godfather of the question: how can one make works of art that are not "of art"?

In 2013, in a global condition of post-financial crisis, heightened awareness of changes in the environment and renewed interest in the representation of humanism, I met Korean Canadian visual artist Helen Cho. At the time, I was an artist-in-residence at The Banff Centre in Canada, there to write about the relationship between nature and contemporary art. Cho, was participating in the thematic residency "Society is a Workshop," and mounting her performance, *The Object for Hesitation Is Yours* (2013) and *21 Objects For Hesitation* (2013-on-going).

In her first performance, Cho hid herself behind closed doors. She wrote a text on the (studio) door in which she offered an object to the passerby and revealed what a wonderful view she had from her window. Inside the enclosed room, she had with her a bucket of water, block of clay, an egg timer, tissue paper and paper bags. Cho would set the egg timer to allow herself a production time of one hour for the first object, 50 minutes for the second, 40 for the third, 30 minutes for the fourth, and so on. Upon completion of each object,



she wrapped the artwork in tissue paper and put it in a bag to be placed in front of the door. *21 Objects for Hesitation* is the overlapping performance, and paved the way for Cho's ceramic phase.

I noticed how my heart was pounding at the thought of obtaining an original art piece by this mid-career artist, secretly thinking my efforts to get it would be an investment in my modest art collection at home. However, it was unfired and before I even got home, the object had broken into several pieces. It was just too fragile to travel.

#### FORMS OF LABOR

"Remember I told you about the night-time underground economy of dew-worm picking by immigrants in Ontario?" Helen Cho asked in one of our email conversations. I replied that, in all honesty, I didn't know the phenomenon. Soon after, I researched this multi-million dollar economy through which many immigrants find a way to overcome poverty and make a living, and found out that Cho knows about this industry because her parents took these jobs when they first arrived in Ontario from South Korea in the early 1980s.

Over the last couple of years, this family-historical fact inspired Cho to deepen her artistic practice to center on the mundanities of everyday life and otherwise trivial, small gestures -- the materiality of things. In order to gain new fuel she researched her Korean roots and experiences of diaspora and displacement.

In 2013, Cho moved back to Toronto for various reasons, including the wish to assist her now elderly parents. At the same time she rediscovered clay, a core material from the earth, and started to make small objects with her hands. After having lived and worked in Berlin for a decade, now an overly saturated town with a plethora of artists, it seemed the right time to leave. In Berlin or any cultural hotspot, one can disappear. (Nowadays it doesn't really matter where one lives anymore; with Internet and plane travel, one can easily communicate and move around the globe and be, literally, anywhere.) Cho moved into a new studio in downtown Toronto and, to regain ground and reconnect, she decided to walk through the city on a daily basis.

Without knowing what she was consciously looking for, images and objects that led Cho to her immigrant roots seemed to appear. She was piqued by a hand-written Korean advertisement that was pinned onto a utility pole. The first photograph for the project, *Subterranean Harvest* (2013-ongoing), is entitled *A posting on a utility pole in downtown Toronto, looking for temporary workers for the underground economy of dew-worm picking industry in Ontario*. It reminds us that certain forms of labor -- the jobs nobody wants to do -- contribute to the world economy in subterranean ways that reflect the social inequality of that labor. Cho's parents' attempt to become (literally) grounded in Ontario almost four decades ago, to re-root themselves, is reflected in Cho's choice to document the sign through a black & white photograph, as if to recall a memory from the past when someone close to her once tore off a phone number to call.

#### BACK TO ZERO

Continuing her wandering and searching through the streets of residential Toronto, Cho found a selection of rocks in random parking lots, corners of city streets and bus stops. They were the kind of rocks used for decorative





(15)



(16)

gardens of suburban homes, office buildings or malls. They are smooth, having lost their sharp edges, and are relatively light in color. Using the ground beneath her as the starting point (part of a period where Cho made a short video, *Earth* (2013), featuring raindrops falling in a pool of water), Cho began to collect random things she came across, as if searching for lucky coins or clues to some secret history. From such found objects, some of the most beautiful, expressive art forms are created and find a place in art history. Think of Kurt Schwitters's ironic appropriation of a torn piece of newspaper from Kommerz und Privatbank; only a fragment, "merz," was visible, and he took it very seriously. He embraced the coincidence of this found word, and it became a verb in the lifelong practice of an artist for whom earning money through his artistic work was never a reality. Nothingness, randomness, coincidences -- what if we would just welcome them in life? Wouldn't we become in sync in the moment and embrace it? And wouldn't it take away the pressures of strategy in the arts?

The rocks that Cho was collecting began to form the basis of a new approach in

(15) Helen Cho, *Uncertain Act Two*, 2014, HD video still

(16) Helen Cho, *Tentatively Entitled: Shadow*, 2015, HD video still

her artistic practice. When awarded a residency at the European Ceramic Centre in Oisterwijk, The Netherlands, she had planned to bring the rocks with her in order to make new rocks from clay, to reinvent them through a form of materiality. But the load was too heavy for the plane ride so she decided to construct 21 rocks from papier-mâché. They are made from the Korean community newspapers available free from the local Korean supermarket where Cho shops for groceries in Toronto. Everyday activities like grocery shopping and daily walks come together in this new prosaically-inspired body of work. These lightweight replicas, or rather, new "originals," are provided with special ceramic sculptural bases for their exhibition at Onomatopoe.

Cho's approach to these rocks is derived from a Korean tradition of *suseok*, or "viewing stones" as monuments to nature and living things. While massive rock formations, often slightly sculpted, were conferred with "souls," it was the small naturally-occurring rocks that were traditionally valued and mounted on bases. Similar to Chinese scholar's rocks laid on a study table or Japanese *suiseki*, these objects of contemplation could signify religious or spiritual vows. *Suseok*, which can weigh more than a ton or less than one pound, and be of any color, was ultimately prized for the expressivity of its shape, with mid-size ones often being placed in traditional Korean gardens. Cho reimagines the idea of traditional *suseok* in everyday life, and this exploration is a main focus of her Dutch artist-in-residence. These objects, whether found or constructed, have no real original per se: the original found stones are at home in Canada, the papier-mâché rocks are a reconstructed and reimagined *suseok*, created from her own contemporary displaced/relocated perspective. There are spaces and structures still in the world for an artist to grow and explore, and reconfigure the gallery space into the garden of the artist's imagination.

The mindset that Cho brings to her recent works, how she dares to encounter and involve daily life, the things she sees and the people she meets, is what shines through. Tai Lam, the man in Cho's video who feeds his faithful pigeons twice a day, is as relevant to this process of discovery and reconnection as the rocks she collects during her many walks through Toronto. These walks, to no destination in particular, but as a deliberate act to think and contemplate, to feel what happens, are unstaged, occurring from the necessity of trying to ground herself again in her hometown with "new eyes," so to speak. Beyond "identity politics" or conceptions of diaspora, today's culture needs new frameworks to accommodate fresh visions and specificities, new particularized subjectivities.

In the contemporary art world, where artists and artworks are strategically positioned for money-based enterprise, there is a tendency to employ overdramatic, out-of-context terminology from our media and advertisement-driven culture. In this new global condition, such terms are appealing but devoid of meaning. The truth, if there is such a thing, is that people are scattered around the globe, each trying to exist in one's own way. There is no "safe" group and everybody has his own agenda to survive. There is just you, under a global sky. Cloudy at times, yes, but I still believe, mostly clear and bright. The traveling mind is the kind of mind that knows, discovers, remembers and creates anew.