



TEXTILE

Cloth and Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rftx20>

Received, in Shadows and Silence

Review of Do Ho Suh Exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art
Australia, November 4, 2022–February 26, 2023

Anuradha Chatterjee

To cite this article: Anuradha Chatterjee (2023): Received, in Shadows and Silence, TEXTILE,
DOI: [10.1080/14759756.2023.2168842](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2023.2168842)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2023.2168842>



Published online: 07 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Exhibition Review

Exhibition Review

Received, in Shadows and Silence: Review of Do Ho Suh Exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, November 4, 2022–February 26, 2023

As a transnational academic in architecture who moved from India to Australia late 90s as a student, and then again as a permanent resident; moved and relocated between India and Australia three times in the years after that; lived and worked in China; lived in three cities in Australia, one in China, five in India; and moved homes seven times in Sydney, I know something about the potency of spaces of belonging and identity. Like many, mine too was a journey of multiple fractures and dispersions, putting a light of reality on the misunderstood (and glamorous if you like) label of being a migrant, migratory, itinerant, transnational academic practitioner, at once at home, and away from home in two cultures, and not at home in either.

As we measure the stuff of our life as cubic meters for the removalist's quotes, mindful of the increasing cost of sea freight, and knowing exactly how many boxes your life will fit into, we become more cognizant of how much of our home we can really carry with us. I became aware of Do Ho Suh's work in 2015 and I was drawn to it due to his interest in issues of migration, home and belonging, which were thought through the

medium of something as ethereal but also as eternal as textile. I had been waiting for many years to be in a country where Suh's work is being exhibited, and for me this became a reality as the show was announced at the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Sydney, November 4 2022–February 26 2023.

Do Ho Suh's works address "complex relationships between the body, memory and space (MCA 2022)." Curated by Rachel Kent and Megan Robson, this is Suh's first exhibition in Australia, and it includes a "wide range of media including installations, sculptures, drawings, printmaking, and video works." Characterized as a "survey [that] spans three decades, from the 1990s to the present," the exhibition is spread over two levels in the MCA—Level 3, which features the Rubbing/Loving Project: Company Housing of Gwangju Theater (2012); Staircase – III (2010) from the Tate Collection at a scale of 1:1; Metal Jacket (1992–2001) which "comprises stainless steel military identification tags overlain like roof shingles;" Hub Series (2015–2018) which are "interconnecting structures that replicate transitional spaces"; Who Am

REVIEWED BY ANURADHA CHATTERJEE 
Dr Anuradha Chatterjee is a feminist academic practitioner in architecture and design based in India and Australia. She is the Chairperson, Academic Advisory Council, Cindrebay School of Design, India and Senior Researcher at PTW Architects, Australia. She is the author of three books, and Area Editor (Asia) for a fourth publication, *The Bloomsbury Global Encyclopedia of Women in Architecture 1960–2015* (eds Karen Burns and Lori Brown, forthcoming 2023).
architecturalhistorytheory@gmail.com.

Textile, Volume 0, Issue 0, pp. 1–8
DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2023.2168842



© 2023 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

We (2000); and Floor (1997–2000). Level 1 North also features the Rubbing/Loving Project: Seoul Home (2013–2022), a replica of Suh’s childhood home as a “series of large-scale graphite paper rubbings.” Underpinning Suh’s works are his words: “Home – how we build, hold, and carry it – is both a universal and urgent concern” (MCA Australia 2022, exhibition catalogue).

Whether it is the process of “drawing, rubbing, measuring, or stitching,” Suh’s work is always about mapping, tracing, and reconstructing spaces that he has occupied in Korea, and after leaving Korea, all of which require patience, intimacy, and a lot of “devotion and caring through the process (Kent 2022, 11).” The projects which required rubbing produced traces “alive with human activity,” as the rubbings recorded erosion of surfaces worn down through use and touch (Robson 2022, 143). Irrespective of the media, all of Suh’s work require you to walk around, and engage with it with your body to fully appreciate it. Nevertheless, the uniqueness is that it is always about interrogating the notion of home, as “personal and shared experience,” as memory, longing, and anxiety, and as a response to “movement between places and cultures (Kent 2022, 13, 15, 14).”

Clothing, textile, and home are naturally imbricated, as the idea of being in the world (in clothes) leads to the idea of being at home, with clothing as “connective tissue (Kent 2022, 15).” Suh’s works, which celebrate the act of remembering through remaking and tracing, also represent a process “both ritualistic and healing (15).” While passing through transitional spaces in domestic environments (as in the Hub series)

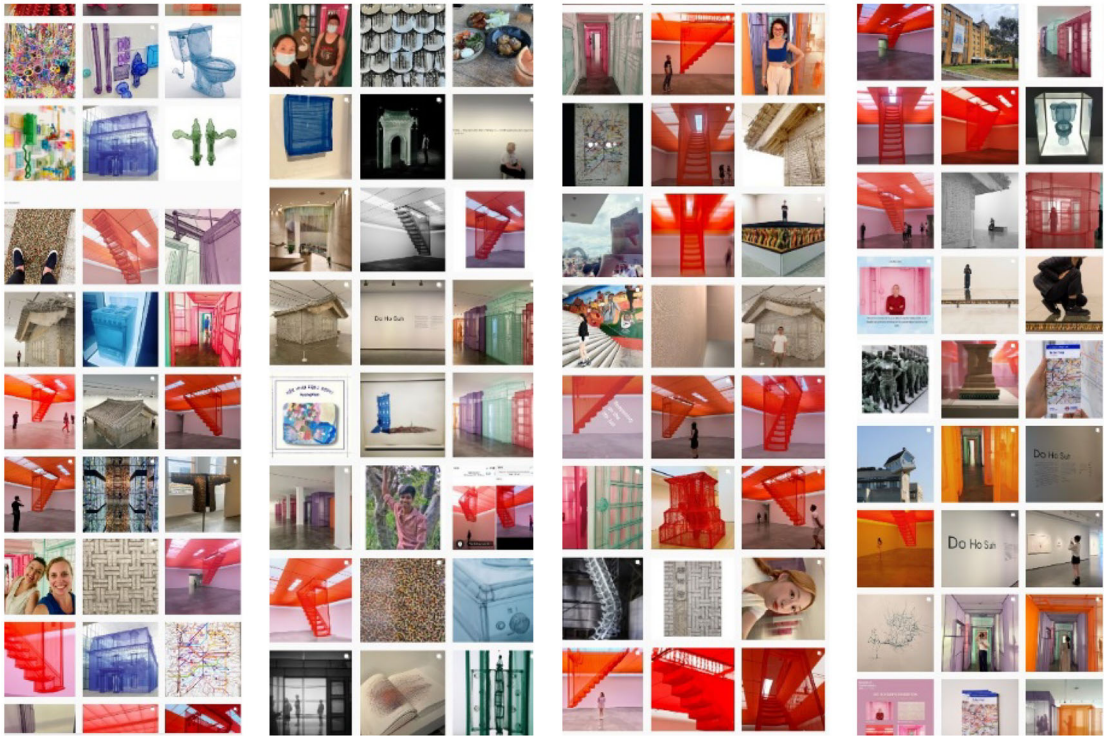
highlights the experience of “moving through,” Suh intensifies the perceptual focus on elements of our world (switches, knobs) where our corporeal energies converge and accumulate, which are otherwise ‘invisible’ to us. His transnational subjectivities become evident as he transforms the transparency of the Korean house into a series of translucent and colored fabric enclosures tightly held together through the linear perspective of the Renaissance, western tradition (Brennan 2022, 159–160). Above all, Suh’s work is a process of making sense of and letting go.

As a reviewer, however, it is challenging to say anything about art when everything has already been said. This is even more true in the age of digital media publishing and the content available in relation to this and other exhibitions are usually so many, so explanatory, so exhaustive that is hard to say anything at all. This (a crisis) is captured superbly by James Elkins in his 2003 book *What Happened to Art Criticism?* in which he notes the sheer volume of writing that one cannot keep up with or may not even read, in part also because it is not taken seriously because of its lack of “interaction with neighboring kinds of writing such as art history, art education, or aesthetics. Art criticism is massively produced, and massively ignored (4).” Elkins offers seven avenues along the lines of increasing rigor; having a voice; applying systematic concepts and rules; becoming more theoretical; being serious, complex, and rigorous; reflecting on judgements; and having a position (2003, 56–77).

While I am not a professionally trained art critic, I am *many* things—a member of public, an architectural historian and theorist trained in

spatial design, with experience in art writing and curatorial projects, whose work is also connected to the thresholds between architecture and art, with a specific kinship to textile “constructions” emerging from my scholarship on John Ruskin that argued for architecture as a dressed (female) body. Without seeking to describe the exhibition or narrativize it like the curatorial essays in the catalogue, my review (which overlaps with critique, but is distinct from it) will offer insights into my troubled reception of the exhibit, my doubts, without making judgements on the work itself, about its value and virtuosity or excellence. It will try to focus on how and why a work of art might unsettle how we receive it (Figures 1–4).

As I write this piece, I am also reading Kylie Budge and Lachlan MacDowall’s timely publication, *Art after Instagram*, which discusses the phenomenon that informs the reading of art everywhere in the world. Budge and MacDowall explain that “from the late 1990s to the 2010s, attitudes to visitor photography in art museums shifted dramatically, and the photographic and network capacities and ubiquity of mobile phones also increased exponentially (MacDowall and Budge 2021, 1).” They explain further that the “capacities of mobile phones and digital photography became fully unified with the launch of the digital app Instagram. Of the wave of apps that followed the release of the iPhone, Instagram was the first to be specifically designed for mobile phones (2).” They also discuss the likeness that the Instagram gallery has to the white cube, offering a “decluttered minimalism that would allow images to be fully appreciated,”



Figures 1–4

Screenshots taken by author, 05 January 2022, Instagram #dohosuh.

which was complemented by captions reduced to the minimum (2).

Budge and MacDowall note the extent to which art spaces permeate Instagram, offering a space “where people increasingly encounter art (3).” And even though, this platform shifts power dynamics and existing hegemonies in the art world (to some extent), it also gives rise to what they term as new “ocular and tactile habits,” and an art experience which is now “closely intertwined with Instagram as audiences use the platform to respond to art and art spaces (6, 7).” Not only are artists increasingly using more Instagram, but it is also important to note that esthetics is also an important “part of how Instagram is used and experienced,”

especially because it is regarded as the “‘king’ of the visual” (8, 9).” Whilst not arguing against Instagram, it is appropriate to argue, through Lev Manovich, how this platform offers has created an “*aesthetic society*” with “its own vision of the world and its own visual language.” Manovich uses the term “Instagramism” defined as “refined sensibility” expressed through designed photos that emphasize “still-life and flat lay genres,” perfected through filters and the square format of the app that cuts out imperfections (2017).

Whether or not it is intended to be so, all art is now created in the shadow of social media, specifically Instagram but not limited to it, as the esthetic pervades the

entire “internet of digital images.” And without overstating the ubiquity of smart phones and digital technology, we inhabit public and private spaces, with and through our phones. Our digital lives are archived on open access platforms, and our realities are verified by networked images and the ways in which these are received. This is especially so in spaces of spectacle, which may include restaurants, marketplaces, art galleries, or even a quiet residential street, but there is always a larger public that bears witness. And no matter how diligent we might want to be (or wish to appear to be) with regulating our own participation in visitor photography in art galleries and other visual

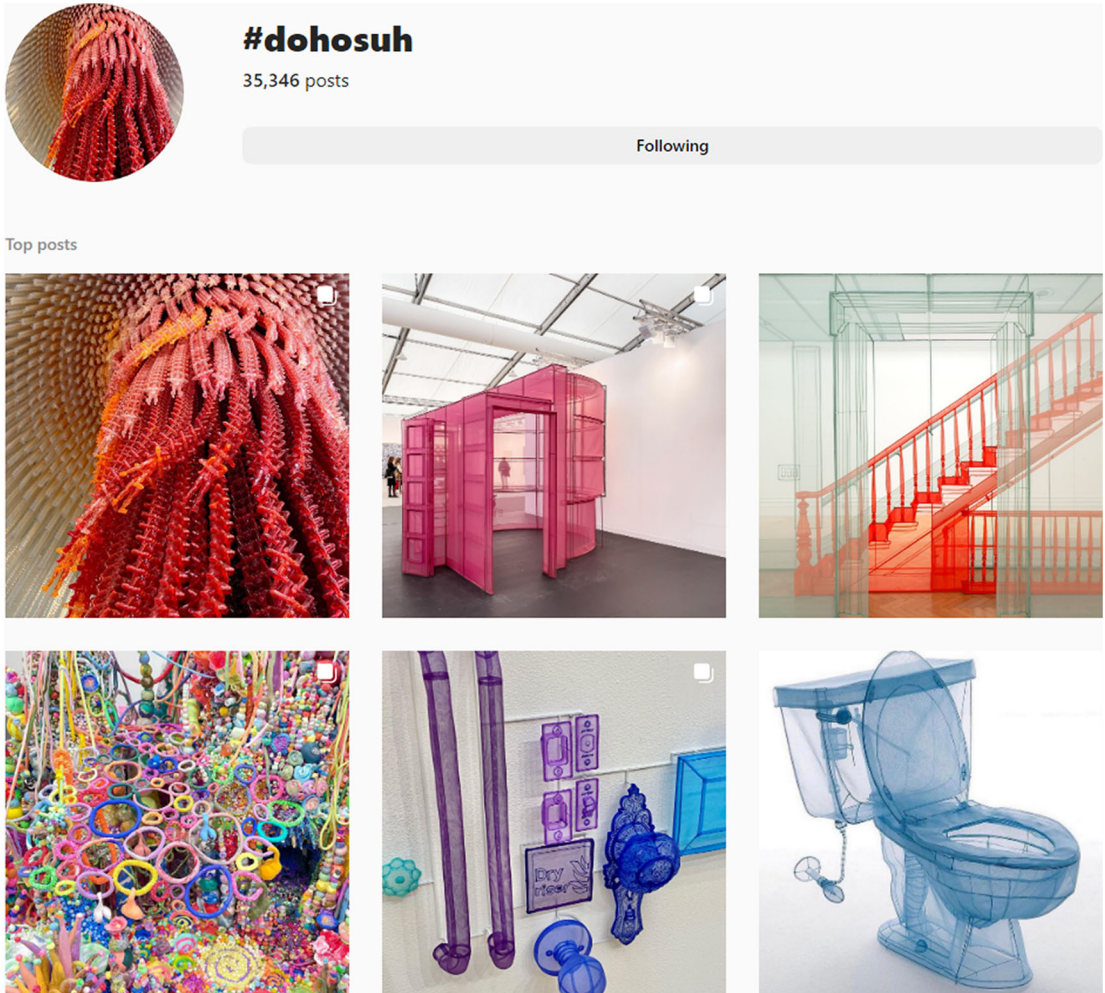


Figure 5
Screenshot taken by author, 05 January 2022, Instagram #dohosuh.

environments, we are almost always in a bid to stage our resistance to becoming unwilling subjects to this phenomenon. Do Ho Suh's show is no exception to this rule. The hashtag #dohosuh in Instagram shows images created in likeness, and they are not totally different to the ones found on Google images. And before one has seen the show, one has seen the show, many times, or at least one's esthetic experience is shaped by it (Figures 1–5).

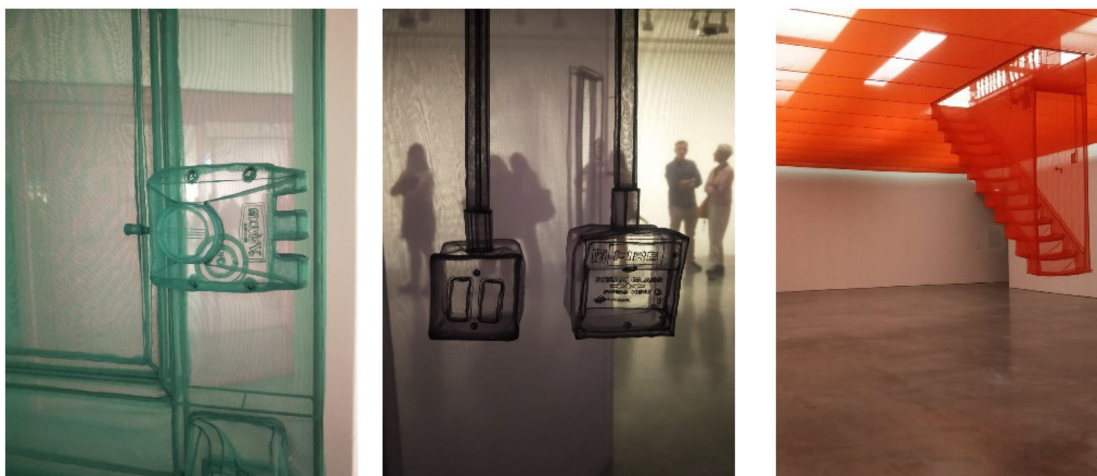
Without repeating the key points about Suh's works discussed above, I was attracted to the ghostly apparitions, the almost X-ray like spectrality that the exhibits offered (Figures 6, 7, 8). It was almost as if the membranous enclosures represent haunting memories, and above all our minds that transforms everything that passes through it into shadowy silhouettes. I found that there was something quite profound and

paradoxical about a work that is about place and memory, and yet it can be placeless, in the sense that I have seen this work as an image before, and it is able to be transported across the world and installed in a gallery for a period, before being dismantled and moved around again, until it reappears as image and matter in yet another space and time. Is it possible then that this strangeness, this 'commodity like' nature of the



Figures 6, 7, 8

Do Ho Suh Hub Series, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photos: Anuradha Chatterjee, November 2022.



Figures 9, 10, 11

Do Ho Suh Hub Series (close up views); Figure 11 Staircase, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photos: Anuradha Chatterjee, November 2022.

exhibit, may serve as a potent and nuanced commentary on the emplaced placelessness of migrancy? The whole theme of placelessness or sitelessness plays to the notion of being uprooted yet deeply emplaced in memories of spaces—not lost but forever present. But then again, these works are traces, and all traces are portable. We too are traces, we too must move, reinstall

ourselves, perform, and become meaningful in many locations.

Media photos on social media and gallery sites promise a screen esthetic—luminous, dreamlike, and streamlined—like a wireframe model made of a series of taut, hard, almost crystalline surfaces. The screen esthetic is furthered through the angle of the photos, evoking a digital model that one can zoom in and out of, pan, move, and walk around and under.

However, the reality is quite different, and this brings the question back to the tyranny of the digital image, the quality of my Android phone camera, and my physical inability to flatten my surroundings into a perfectly orthogonal image, because my body, my eye, my vision is imperfect, not trustworthy, as compared to the spectrality of perfection promised by the combination of the phone cameras and the apps.



Figures 12, 13, 14

Figures 12, 13: Do Ho Suh, *Blueprint* (2014), cropped views; Figure 14. *Self Portrait/s* 2007-2021, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photos: Anuradha Chatterjee, November 2022.



Figures 15, 16, 17

Do Ho Suh, *Self Portrait/s* 2007-2021, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photos: Anuradha Chatterjee, November 2022.

I redirect my displacement as I find myself attracted to the material imperfections embedded throughout the installations—the saggy steps of the Staircase exhibit, the somewhat deformed switchboards, and deadlocks in the Hub series exhibit—which speak to me and talk about the fragility and impermanence of these textile constructions. They speak also about human

fallibility and imperfection (Figures 9, 10, 11). I am drawn also to the thread works on canvas which spoke to me powerfully about the thread as part of the connective tissue, upon which we must rely, as itinerant agents who continue to negotiate the continuous and the discontinuous, variously through thickening, knotting, and layering (Figures 12, 13, 14).

As Suh's works are about the personal and the shared, I asked myself if I felt moved by the exhibition, whether I was in a space of shared empathy, and was I even supposed to be in it? What was my role as audience, reviewer? Certainly not to confirm, test, and verify that which had been published, printed, and promoted repeatedly? Was I able to participate in Suh's losses,

rememberings, and remakings? (Figures 15, 16, 17) The answer was no, because the works were overly visual to be affective, or that the experience of it was—created through all the prehistory of textual and visual publicity. I kept thinking about the real question—the “loud silence” that pierced through all that noise, and “spoke” about the unspeakableness of the experience of loss of home, family, and community.

This is what Susan Sontag’s 1967 essay, the “Aesthetics of Silence” brings focus to, which is when the artist “continues speaking, but in a manner that his [sic] audience can’t hear.” Sontag locates the “ascetic affirmation” of the artist at the “sensory or conceptual gap between the artist and his audience, the space of the missing or ruptured dialogue.” While Sontag is clear that this silence cannot exist by itself, or even as a property of the artwork, it remains a “form of speech,” requiring to be articulated in an “environment of sound or language.” This may suggest future possibilities of “new prescriptions for looking, hearing,” or creating art that is “unviolable in their essential integrity by human scrutiny.”

As I left the gallery that afternoon, to catch the tram home, through the sea of tourists, distracted by the view of the Sydney Opera House that I have grown accustomed to, I kept thinking how I had nothing profound to say, other than the simple fact that the search for home is the one universal thing that not only ties us together, but it also transcends our humanity.

ORCID

Anuradha Chatterjee  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7112-0411>

References

- Brennan, Ann Marie. 2022. “Representations of Space: Literal and Phenomenal Transparency in Do Ho Suh’s Artworks.” In *Do Ho Suh*, 147–162. Sydney: MCA.
- Elkins, James. 2003. *What Happened to Art Criticism?* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Kent, Rachel. 2022. “Remembrance of Home: Do Ho Suh’s Art of Intimacy and Recall.” In *Do Ho Suh*, 11–20. Sydney: MCA.
- MacDowall, Lachlan, and Kylie Budge. 2022. *Art After Instagram: Art Spaces Audiences Aesthetics*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Manovich, Lev. 2017. “Instagram and Contemporary Image.” Accessed 10 January 2023. http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/161-instagram-and-contemporary-image/instagram_book_manovich_2017.pdf.
- MCA Australia. 2022. *Do Ho Suh, Exhibition Catalogue*. Sydney: MCA.
- MCA Australia. 2022. *Do Ho Suh*. Sydney: MCA.
- Robson, Megan. 2022. “Acts of Care: Do Ho Suh’s Rubbing/Loving Artworks.” In *Do Ho Suh*, 137–146. Sydney: MCA.
- Sontag, Susan. 1967. “The Aesthetics of Silence.” Accessed 10 January 2023. <https://www.ubu.com/asp/aspensand6/index.html>