

The Pictorial Method of Installing Melancholy

Kyung Hee Youn (Korea National University of Arts)

Before it is an art, installation is an everyday act that we all do. Observe a very young child: as she begins to sense the difference between self and other, as she develops the desire to outline and occupy a space into which an other cannot freely invade, the child begins, of her own initiative, to put installation into practice. First, she chooses a place in the house that pleases her. Under the big and ugly chair, behind the potted rubber-tree plant, inside the traveler's suitcase in the corner, in the crack between the wall and a natural veil of clothes-hangers—empty nooks, their very existence unrecognized until the child's instinctive surveying techniques delineate them as independent spaces of their own. The place may not always be three-dimensional, like the flat surface of a door; it may be as diminutive as an empty box or the small pocket of a rarely-worn coat. To this chosen place the child brings objects collected by her own rules—often old, grimy, broken, or cast off and reclaimed—and arranges and installs them, again according to her own rules.

Collection and installation cannot be completed at one stroke, so the place necessarily takes on a coat of temporality. Through the interaction of the objects with time, the place becomes more and more complex, more and more chaotic. To another person the place may seem like a dumping-ground of things that must be thrown out, but to the child the place is now more than a place; it is her own imaginary body. It is a brain that represents, remembers, and stores in compressed form the space and time in which her body has lived, and the events and experiences within it. The landscape of that small space is a three-dimensional anatomical chart of the child's brain.

If we adults were wise enough, our job would not be to clean out this space and return it to its original state; it would rather be to encourage its growth. Not looking in too closely, nor ignoring it completely; recognizing its existence as something with an ever-changing life of its own.

And then, the time will come—the time when the child destroys the place herself. The materiality of place and object will be obliterated, and memory will be stored only in the actual brain. The child has come to know not only the difference between herself and other, but also that between her actual and imaginary bodies. Experience can now be retrieved through the brain's retrospective faculties anywhere, anytime, without the help of visual-tactile places and objects. Therefore the child's voluntary destruction of the installation stands for the success of abstract symbolization. It may now even be all right for experience to be forgotten altogether; if so, the destruction of the installation is also a process of mourning the dismantling of her imaginary body. Just as a fully grown insect discards the shell of its larval stage.

The child will repeat such installation and destruction as she grows. In another historically, geographically, and socioculturally specific space and time, collecting new experiences and memories, with new media and tools, she will make, destroy, and make again new landscapes and new anatomies of her body and mind.

Modes of storing experience change according to the growth of the individual and the development of technology. For the past quarter-century after the introduction of the personal computer to households in the '90s, there have been floppy disks, CDs, USB drives, and mobile clouds, in addition to more traditional book-like forms such as diaries, albums, and scrapbooks. These tools are evolved forms of the first installations and collected objects of youth. From actual to virtual, in a more convenient and compressed form.

Repeatedly gathering and casting off, installing and destroying, storing and deleting, the individual grows and progresses. However, this necessary process of removing and emptying out is not always easy; more than an issue of tools and methods, this is an issue of emotion. Memory is bound up not only with the content of the experiences we undergo, but also with the emotion attached to them. When we make up our mind to do away with material memory devices, analog or digital—diaries, scrapbooks, photo albums, memos, files—we do so after having come to the rational decision that the life ahead of us will not be unduly damaged by completely forgetting what they contain. However, as we look through the chaotically collected and stored objects in order to sort out what to trash and what to keep, reason succumbs to the influence of emotion. Emotion resides not only in the content of the past, but also in the old devices that store it. What we hesitate to throw away is often not the content, but the memory devices themselves. A long-expired message, a hand-worn leather notebook, a floppy disk that no longer even fits into the new computer. These objects store a nostalgic melancholy for times past, and these emotions cannot be erased by any physical means.

What happens when we instead provide an optimal memory device for these inerasable things? Installation begins from such a shift in thought. In an age where memory is virtually compressed, the work of Eusung Lee moves in the opposite direction, noticeably expanding the materiality of the memory device. Ruined photos, silly drunken snapshots, cheap travel memorabilia, eagerly collected but shoddy stickers, sticky notes scribbled with meaningless words—with painstaking devotion, Eusung Lee gives a durable artistic form to these ephemeral and flimsy things that reason would send to the trash bin in a moment. Eusung Lee attempts to preserve materially and temporally vulnerable objects through textiles and paintings, techniques with a long historicity. By creating frames with the laboring toil of a craftsperson, she seeks to show that what is placed inside is not a mere collection of abstract image fragments but a personal history of temporality and emotion. Moreover, the contents of memory, probably long erased from the digital devices themselves, resist oblivion all the more fiercely as they touch and overlap in the frame and on the canvas. The resistance of these images, striving so hard to survive, thickens the emotion of melancholy to its highest saturation. It is this emotion that we see in the work of Eusung Lee.