

Familiarity, chance, weight, giving, work:
5 Small Essays for Helen Cho at G Gallery
by Daniella Sanader

1. Familiarity

According to a 2011 study, pigeons can recognize – and remember – individual human faces. Numerous pages gleaned from my Google search indicate that pigeons are even “not to be fooled” by changes in clothing, as if the creatures are maliciously keeping tabs on our actions. [1] [2] [3] Perhaps it’s the commonly unsavoury reputation of pigeons on city streets that has led to these articles framing this capacity for recognition in a negative light – with more than one Hitchcock joke thrown in. However, in Helen Cho’s ten-minute video *Tai Lam: memory of hunger finds its form* (2014), recognition lends way to a modest routine of generosity.

Every day but Sunday, Tai Lam takes a break from working at a pizza place near Spadina Avenue and Harbord Street in Toronto – once in the morning and once in the afternoon – to step into an unused back lot and throw bird feed in wide arcs through the air. The pigeons recognize Tai and never fail to make his twice-daily meeting time, flooding the lot in a wave of grey feathers. Helen noticed Tai as she re-explored Toronto, returning to the city after living and working abroad for over a decade. Over three months, she chronicles his actions with a video camera. When she asks why he continues his routine/ritual, Tai explains to her that he knows all too well what hunger feels like.

Like many other refugees in Canada, Tai’s relationship to the familiar is a difficult one. It stretches across borders and oceans, laced with nostalgia, affection, and loss. Tai arrived in Toronto in 1986 after escaping Vietnam in a smuggler’s boat and spending almost five years in an Indonesian refugee camp. He lost family members through the same arduous dislocation. The mutual warmth in Tai’s inter-species routine is by no means a cure for traumatic pasts; and we all know that those pigeons could get their fill elsewhere. But perhaps their twice-daily meeting acts like an everyday salve of something familiar. Tai’s arrival prompts an excited flutter of feathers, and he responds with an affectionate whistle.

[1] <http://www.livescience.com/14895-pigeons-recognize-human-faces.html>

[2] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2011161/Pigeons-forget-face-arent-fooled-change-clothes.html>

[3] <http://io9.com/5817934/pigeons-are-completely-incapable-of-forgetting-a-human-face>

2. Chance

Helen and G Gallery organizer Ella Dawn McGeough devise a method of naming Helen's exhibition by cutting up words from the instructions for her *21 Objects for Hesitation* (2013-ongoing) and re-arranging them at random. See *Object Paper Hesitation*. At first I'm not sure if I like it, yet I've grown to appreciate its deliberately choppy cadence. And after all, Helen's work negotiates with chance in more ways than one. By happening upon a paper bag in an alleyway with a set of instructions, you need to be in the right place at the right time to participate in *21 Objects for Hesitation*. Take the bag with you, look inside after you turn the corner, the unfired clay object is yours.

Helen's own research practice is equally mitigated by randomness. Walking across Toronto, she finds meaningful patterns in haphazard occurrences and assortments of city debris. A cluster of rocks on the side of the road, a stack of old Korean newspapers. (Or, like the secret language of observation developed by the clerk and the graduate student in Kim Seungok's novel *Seoul 1964 Winter*, as adapted by Helen into a reimagined poem pasted on the gallery wall.) An object is placed on G Gallery's front stoop for every day the exhibition is open, whether it is found or not. *21 Objects for Hesitation* allows passers-by to participate in Helen's process: if they happen to be wandering down the Foxley Place alleyway, looking for the signs.

I wonder how chance figures differently into *21 Objects for Hesitation* when it is presented in this quiet alleyway. Before, the objects were placed outside of Helen's studio during residency programs at the Banff Centre and the European Ceramic Work Centre. The project was also performed at Onomatopee, a project space in the Netherlands. G Gallery already seems subject to the whims of chance; with an address sometimes difficult to locate off of Ossington Avenue, the gallery does not rely on substantial foot traffic from passers-by on the otherwise busy street. Happening-upon G Gallery could feel like happening-upon an *Object for Hesitation*: sudden, unfamiliar, serendipitous.

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“Of the streetlights that are lined up in front of Pyonghwa Market,
the eighth one from the east is not lit.

And of the windows on the sixth floor of the Hwashin Department Store,
light was visible only from three.” [1]

[1] Helen Cho, Reimagining as a poem: A conversation between Kim *hyeong* and Ahn *hyeong* from Kim Seungok's short story “Seoul 1964 Winter.”

3. Weight

If you visit Helen's website[1] you will be greeted by images of women carrying large bundles on their heads. It's a well-known (and often racialized) image of women's labour, one that Helen takes up in *Re-imagining Myself* (2015), a work-in-progress installation that supports her *21 Objects for Hesitation*. Helen's weight to bear is a giant ceramic headpiece – something between an old diving helmet and a tumorous growth – that she dons whenever she exits G Gallery to place an *Object for Hesitation* on the ground. Is it valuable (cargo), protective (armour), restrictive (a burden)?

When not in use, the ceramic headpiece sits on a low table, next to a mound of kneaded dough. When Helen arranges the headpiece to wear, she places it on the dough, kneeling to hoist it on her shoulders. With each repeated use, it makes a deeper impression into the soft, floury matter, marking its weight.

There's physical weight (mass) and then there's the affective kind (force, power, significance). In the Korean tradition of *suseok* – or “viewing stones” – naturally occurring rocks are imbued with spiritual value. The large can act as monuments on graves, the medium as markers in Korean gardens, and the small as signifiers of meditative thought on a scholar's desk. Helen's *suseok* are perhaps more mundane, just rough shapes found on the streets of Toronto. However, their contemplative strength is deeply – and *continuously* – shaped by that which supports them. Their value is never final. At G Gallery, her imagined plinth for viewing stones is *Ceramic base in search of objects: Suseok*, and the project is dated as (2013-ongoing).

And Helen's headpiece may continue to flatten the mound of dough under its unbearable weight, but that influence is reciprocal. Every time she picks it up to cover her head, its dark, smooth surface is spattered with white flour.

[1] <http://helencho.net/>

4. Giving

Earlier, I wrote of the chance-based nature of “happening-upon” *21 Objects for Hesitation* in G Gallery’s alleyway. Yet, I’m reminded that while alleyways may be liminal spaces, they are also community spaces. In Toronto’s laneways, residents grow gardens, children play games, employees commiserate over smoke breaks, neighbours meet to gossip. The cold parameters of chance aside, there’s a network of relationships built through generosity and care in Helen’s work that finds its equivalence in Foxley Place as meeting-place.

Tai Lam’s routine offers up a picture of everyday kindness, and Helen trades in his handful of bird feed for a hand-formed clay object in a paper bag. (“The object for hesitation is yours.”) Passers-by are asked to only examine their gift upon leaving the alleyway, the scope of the performance complete. The remaining objects are displayed in G Gallery on a low bench covered in gold vinyl, and even maintaining them requires a level of attentiveness. Armed with a spray bottle, both Helen and gallery attendants regularly moisten the objects as if they were houseplants: after all, they are unfired, and will grow brittle if dried. They need to be taken care of. At the end of each day, the unused objects are carefully re-wrapped in moist paper towel and placed in a sealed bag. A tiny makeshift greenhouse; another intimate structure of care.

And like everyone always says, gift-giving is not about ownership but rather the pleasure of exchange: an object to signify the strength of a human connection. (That’s why re-gifting is tacky, or so I’m told.) The dynamics of generosity are undoubtedly fragile: buttressed by social expectations, material needs, and the immediate desire to connect. Can you give a gift if no one is at the other end to receive it? What about a gift too vulnerable to survive the exchange?

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In “The Travelling Mind,” an essay discussing Helen’s work at Onomatopée, curator Renske Janssen writes of receiving her own *Object for Hesitation*: “before I even got home, the object had broken into several pieces. It was just too fragile to travel.” [1]

[1] Renske Janssen, “The Travelling Mind,” in *Helen Cho: 21 Objects for Hesitation and Reimagining Their Many Selves* (Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2015): 23.

5. Work

I visit Helen as she is working through a problem for *See Object Paper Hesitation*: how should the *21 Objects for Hesitation* be displayed? On the floor of the gallery, on a desk, on a coffee table? In what is perhaps another happy accident of urban wandering, she finds a long, low bench in the backyard of a café that neighbours her studio. Covering the seat in cheap gold vinyl, Helen likens the bench to similar pieces of furniture found in markets and social spaces throughout Korea.

We speak about the surfaces upon which we work: a vinyl-coated bench for sitting as you chop vegetables at a market, a wide table in a studio supporting a giant block of clay, a laptop and desk (or second-hand couch, from my current standpoint) littered with post-its and scrawled notes. Helen tells me about *chaekkori*, a painting trend common in 18th- and 19th-century Korea. Designated to the studies and libraries of men, *chaekkori* are painted screens featuring still-life arrangements of scholars' desks: books, papers, inkpots, *suseok*, and plants. All necessary features for a privileged intellectual life.

However, in *Queer Phenomenology* Sara Ahmed writes the structures of emotional and domestic support that are typically made invisible in order for the (male) philosopher's Great Thinking to occur: "Being oriented toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background, but also might depend *on the work done to keep the desk clear.*"[1] In my mind, there's no shame in acknowledging that which supports us. I think Helen would agree.

See Object Paper Hesitation is filled with the material and practical supports of Helen's labour. There are the utilitarian kitchen cloths used to cushion the weight on her shoulders as she wears her ceramic headpiece. There is the photocopied shadow of a stapled seam down the centre of her poem, a trace of the book's physical shape. There are the tiny table legs holding up the objects in *Re-Imagining Myself*; borrowed moulds from another ongoing project. These items are not simply practical leftovers, but rather, they carry as much meaning as any *suseok* ever could.

[1] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects Others* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006): 30.