



The Poetics of Threads and Space: Boundaries and Belonging in the Art of Do Ho Suh and Chiharu Shiota

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Abstract. An ancient Chinese saying goes, “Far yet not estranged, near yet not rude[1],” which means that even if people are physically distant, they can still maintain a close psychological and emotional bond, showing concern and understanding. Conversely, even if people are in close relationships, they do not lose the necessary respect and propriety, avoiding overfamiliarity and impertinence. The saying often describes the ideal state of interpersonal relationships, advising people to maintain an appropriate balance and distance in their interactions. With the rapid changes brought about by technological advancements, contemporary individuals, compared to the ancients’ understanding of relational balance, now emphasize the concept of personal boundaries based on absolute freedom. This often involves setting overly strict or extreme boundaries between oneself and the outside world, which can lead to excessive psychological defenses and alienation between people. While the conveniences brought by technological and economic developments have reduced the cost of communication, they have also fostered more psychological isolation, breaking the balance between a sense of boundaries and belonging. So, what causes this phenomenon?

Keywords: Do Ho Suh; Shiota Chiharu; Personal emotion; Space; Boundary; Memory; Social problems; Artistic analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman mentioned, “In the fluid modern society, interpersonal connections tend to break[2].” Indeed, in a rapidly developing society, the veneration of personal boundaries has become a common trait among the younger generation. They embed zero-sum thinking into their interpersonal relationships, thus being unwilling to relinquish personal space and even choosing to abandon intimate relationships to protect their sense of security. Anthropologist Desmond Morris, in his book *Intimate Behavior*, pointed out that the pursuit of belonging is a natural psychological process that gradually unfolds throughout a person’s life, and boundaries are also born out

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of intimate behaviors[3]. The sense of belonging and boundaries are not opposing; belonging essentially stems from an individual's growth environment and social context. If one excessively indulges in an independent "hive," they will eventually fall into the swamp of loneliness due to a lack of belonging.

Many artists have attempted to describe the balance between boundaries and belonging through their creations. Among them, Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota and Korean artist Do Ho Suh have conducted personal, in-depth research on this topic through their work. Both artists, having lived abroad, use their works to showcase their migratory life experiences, evoking the audience's reflections and resonances on themes such as memory, space, and interpersonal relationships. I will explore the artists' interpretations of boundaries and belonging through the visual language and creative backgrounds of their works.



Fig. 1. Do Ho Suh: Apartment A, Unit 2, Corridor and Staircase, 348 West 22nd Street. (2011-2014). The Contemporary Austin - Jones Center, Austin, America. <https://www.thecontemporaryaustin-jonescenter.com>

2 CITATIONS

The memories of artists Do Ho Suh and Chiharu Shiota have gradually become blurred amidst changes in geographical locations and life circumstances. Consequently, themes such as the individual, identity, memory, space, and the relationship between the individual and the collective have become recurring subjects in their works. [Fig. 1.] Despite the differing visual results, both artists have independently chosen to create spatial art installations using fabrics to render personal memories transparent, amplifying and refining emotions of self-perception and resistance to reality from different times and spaces. This has woven a unique artistic nest. Entering their artistic theatres signals the commencement of a journey exploring boundaries and belonging.

2.1 Do Ho Suh's Spatial Boundary

Born in South Korea, artist Do Ho Suh has lived and worked in New York, Seoul, and London for many years. This migratory lifestyle has led him to develop a mindset that automatically adjusts his identity in response to changes in the external environment. This directly reflects his re-examination of the definition of “home.” According to the Oxford Dictionary, home is “a place where family members live for a long time[4].” However, with increasing population mobility, “permanently residing” in one place is no longer a given for many. For global wanderers, “making a home everywhere” is not just a mindset of adaptability but a stark reality[5]. Moving from one city to another, from one “home” to another place of residence, this fluid lifestyle makes the artist yearn even more for his distant hometown. The emotional overflow induced by this homesickness fuels the artist’s creations.

Transitional spaces such as corridors, staircases, bridges, and porches frequently appear in Do Ho Suh’s spatial installation works. These works use semi-transparent fabric materials, giving them a unique visual transparency. The blurred boundaries mix the internal with the external, private spaces with public ones, further emotionally separating the sense of intimate belonging from the sense of isolated boundaries. Through his creations, the artist explores the complexity of personal space boundaries and the relationship between people and spaces.



Fig. 2. Do Ho Suh: Passage. (2017-2018). Bildmuseet, Umea University, Stockholm, Sweden. Lehmann Maupin. <https://www.lehmannmaupin.com>

In the work “Passages” [6] [Fig. 2.], Do Ho Suh pieces together fragments of spaces from his former residences across dimensions. The structure, which appears in the form of architectural shapes, constructs a corridor that visitors can walk through and experience within the interconnected installation space. Although the various passages are interconnected, they are distinctly delineated by clear colors. The artist uses the same fabric material and several colors to create the prototype of the work, which corresponds precisely to the title “Passages.” This corridor, a transitional space linking one space to another, is neither a beginning nor an end. It perfectly interprets the artist’s migratory life over the years while subtly releasing his longing for a sense of belonging. The minimalist composition of the work makes it appear more pure and ethereal. When interacting with the piece, visitors will find that the corridor does not have a single exit. Each visitor must choose which exit to take to return to the public exhibition hall. This choice, shaped by the environment and the

underlying sense of unease, is precisely what the artist intends to convey—transmitting complex emotions about belonging through the multilayered space.



Fig. 3. Do Ho Suh: Home within Home within Home within Home within Home. (2013). National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea. Lehmann Maupin. <https://www.lehmannmaupin.com>

Living in Western countries has gradually led the artist to embrace the integration of identities under different cultural contexts, contemplating the influence of varying cultural backgrounds on one’s identity. This dual perspective of emotional attachment to Korea and empathy towards the Western civilization where he has lived long-term shapes his worldview. The work “Home within Home within Home within Home within Home” [7] [Fig. 3.] perfectly illustrates the artist’s understanding of “home” and “belonging” during this phase. This large-scale piece replicates both the artist’s rented apartment building in Rhode Island and his home in Korea. The traditional Korean

house is nested and suspended within a French Neoclassical building, thus indicating his thoughts on dual cultural identities. When viewers observe from the outside, the two houses merge into a single entity. However, when exploring the interior, a sense of cold alienation pervades, with the distinct and defined boundaries between the inner and outer structures becoming palpable. This boundary arises from the temporal distance between the artist's past and present and the cultural differences between the East and West. Nevertheless, the Eastern and Western "homes" in the installation create a balanced viewing experience. The intricate traditional wooden house and the simple, square modern building form a complementary relationship of density and openness, metaphorically representing the artist's identity—a Western presence with a Korean core. Constantly in an "in-between state," Do Ho Suh experiments through his art with constructing the phenomenon of "home" in different times and spaces, balancing the sense of boundaries and belonging brought by dual identities.

2.2 Chiharu Shiota's Emotional Sanctuary

While Do Ho Suh infuses his pursuit of "home" and belonging into spatial works that manifest boundary sense, Chiharu Shiota's artistic expression takes an opposite approach. Behind the dense, encompassing threads she creates, she hides a healing of personal emotions and a defense of independent space.

In the tradition of Eastern art, artists often use lines to reflect expressions of emotion and rhythm: straight lines convey a sense of calm, while curves represent liveliness and movement. Chiharu Shiota, starting from herself, uses lines as brushes in space to depict the contradictory relationship between her inner world and the external environment.

A single thread, extending from line to surface, then to space, creates a tangled and intertwined network where gentleness and tension coexist. Countless threads weave and spread, connecting scattered philosophical themes, extending into a new space of consciousness within the gallery. As the artist says, "Lines accumulate and gradually form a surface. I create infinite space, forming a universe[8]." The artist's personal emotions and thoughts are infinitely magnified in the ethereal net-like universe. The waves of sound resonate with the viewers' hearts, who carefully experience her emotions within this realm—red threads represent the connection of life, while black threads forewarn of loneliness and unease.



Fig. 4. Chiharu Shiota: Where are we going? . (2016-2022). Chiharu Shiota: The Soul Trembles, Brisbane Museum of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia. Garland Magazine. <https://garland-mag.com>

In the installation piece “Where Are We Going?” (Picture 3)[9] [Fig. 4.], countless black threads hang down, intertwining with small wire boats that gradually appear to float, drifting towards the unknown. In this journey into the unknown, the interweaving of black and white threads offers viewers an open-ended interpretation, allowing them to integrate their life experiences into the work.

The white boats resemble individual souls, floating in a fog of black threads. The complex web of lines blurs the boundaries of the boats, as if these individual vessels are collectively being drawn toward the same exit. In Chiharu Shiota’s work, black threads often express the uncertainty of the future, while white threads symbolize hope[10]. In this piece, the white threads, shaped into boats by steel wires, merge into a sea of black threads. This juxtaposition of the calm, safe surface and the underlying tension and loss of control reveals the artist’s inner state—despite being among a crowd, she is filled with anxiety and fear. Shiota’s instinctive use of threads as a medium for emotional expression recreates her profound memories, displaying the complex emotions resulting from the loss of security during her growth, and serves as a derivative and self-healing process for her emotional wounds.



Fig. 5. Chiharu Shiota:Uncertain Journey. (2019) Chiharu Shiota: The Soul Trembles, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan. <https://www.architecture.com>

The experience of solitary boat trips on summer nights during childhood has left an indelible impression on Chiharu Shiota, making the image of the “boat” a recurring theme in her works. When viewers first step into the realm of “Uncertain Journey[11],” [Fig. 5.] they are enveloped by dense red threads. Countless red threads stretch tautly upward, radiating outward from the boat’s body. Although there is a certain distance between the boats, the extending red threads intersect and connect them into a unified whole, resembling countless confused and anxious souls converging at the anchoring point called “city,” forming a sprawling relational network.

Threads tangle, intertwine, and break around the viewers, while the small boats float, traverse, and touch within the exhibition hall. The boats and threads weave a deep network, giving Shiota’s works a theatrical sense of care. People who have experienced drifting unknowingly project themselves onto the solitary boats, and thus, surrounded by the dense red threads, they feel a mysterious sense of belonging. However, upon awakening, they realize they are merely trapped in the ever-expanding boundaries of this red ocean. Only by leaving this realm can their inner turmoil settle, and in this emotional disparity, they become acutely aware that they have intruded into the artist’s woven, melancholic dream, maintaining a psychological distance. The spatial installation is an emotional sanctuary for the artist, hidden within which is her relentless quest for an independent space.

3 THE BALANCE OF BELONGING AND BOUNDARIES

Humans are social creatures, and the interplay of boundaries and belonging under different social conditions is an unavoidable life issue. Each person’s growth experience varies, naturally leading to differing definitions and importance placed on boundaries and belonging. Modern philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer succinctly captures the essence of interpersonal problems: “People are like porcupines in the winter. If they get too close, they prick each other; if they stay too far apart, they get cold[12].” This metaphor of porcupines huddling for warmth but pricking each other remains applicable today. The advancements brought by technological revolutions have made communication more efficient and convenient, yet they have not increased individuals’ sense of belonging to family and community. Instead, people live in technological bubbles, reluctant to venture out and fearful of intrusion, clinging to the “security” that boundaries provide. As Desmond Morris analyzed, people remain trapped in the emotional cycle of “seeking personal space” and “longing for intimate relationships.”

In my view, the works of Do Ho Suh and Chiharu Shiota both emphasize individualized emotions within collective sentiments. Aesthetician Bazon Brock points out, “The externalization of inner emotions is not the release or outpouring of emotions, but rather changing its nature, turning it from an irrational impulse into an artistic understanding[13].” In other words, the emotions conveyed by art are not merely personal but also recognized within a specific cultural context. The reason viewers are moved by the works of these two artists is not only because of the strong sensory impact of their artistic language but also because their works contain emotions that resonate with people’s experiences or imaginations, achieving emotional resonance with the

audience. Through the process from sensory to cognitive understanding, viewers can peel away the signifier of the work to seek its core meaning and deepen their contemplation of the balance between boundaries and belonging. If boundaries dominate, individuals will slide into endless loneliness and emptiness. Conversely, if belonging overflows, individuals will face the suffocation of losing freedom.

4 CONCLUSION

This is an era of confusion, where people's spiritual needs cannot eternally evolve like the technology industry that follows Moore's Law. Confronted with identity and homeland, primitive emotions are awakened, and the relationship between boundaries and belonging is a perennial topic. Perhaps through art, people can confront their most genuine inner desires amid the contentious social reality. By analyzing the artistic language and creative motivations of Do Ho Suh and Chiharu Shiota, I have explored the understanding and self-consistency manifested in their works. This desire for reconciliation with oneself is akin to porcupines seeking warmth on a cold winter night, navigating the balance between intimacy and solitude, and finding equilibrium in their sense of boundaries and belonging. Their confusions, adventures, hopes, and obsessions at different life stages are recorded in their unique artistic languages, providing viewers with a personalized approach to resolving these issues, eventually guiding us to reflect on and explore our own lives.

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