Always in Transit

A conversation with Yona Lee

by Aaron Lister

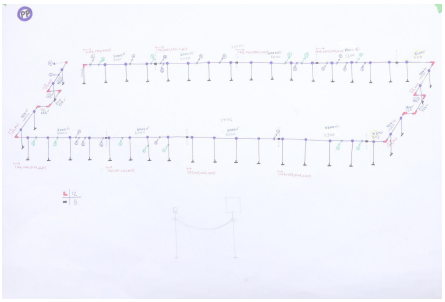
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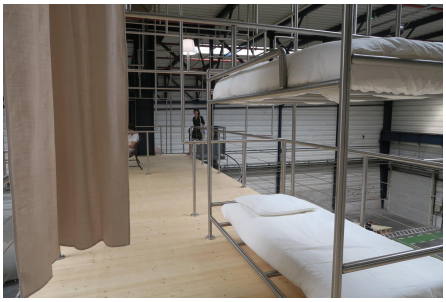
Yona Lee, *In Transit (Highway)*, 2019. Stainless steel pipes and objects. Installation view at 15th Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Fine Arts Sydney. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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Introduction by Daria de Beauvais*, Senior Curator at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and Co-curator of the 15th Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale* 'Where Water Comes Together With Other Water':

I encountered Yona Lee for the first time in 2018, while she was installing her work *In Transit* at the City Gallery Wellington. I was impressed by her capacity to seize space and understand architecture; with the curatorial team of Palais de Tokyo we quickly felt she should participate in the Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale. This 15th edition is devised as an ecosystem at the intersection of biological, economic and cosmogonic landscapes. It bears witness to the shifting relationships between human beings, other living species, the mineral kingdom, technological artefacts and the stories that unite them. Entitled 'Where Water Comes Together with Other Water', it gathers together artworks that are primarily site-specific productions created according to the

principle of short supply chains and that sketch new narratives with multiple perspectives, geographies and temporalities. Yona Lee has integrated this ecosystem with an impressive and surprising gesture.

The artist makes large, immersive, labyrinthine installations, using stainless steel pipes assembled into elaborate linear structures. Incorporating items extracted from urban and domestic spaces (furniture, decor, seats, beds…), Yona Lee infuses her œuvre with an everyday surrealism. Producing site specific works, she arranges systems and networks that can equally seem authoritarian and utopian, utilitarian and playful. The artist analyses the spatial and social peculiarities of the host site so that she can respond appropriately. Her intention is not to colonise this space, but rather to emphasise its natural characteristics in order to create an environment that stretches from floor to ceiling — in the present case, on an elevated platform allowing other points of view on the surrounding works — and become an integral part of the architecture. The exhibition space, formerly a manufacturing facility, is thus both the container and the subject of the piece, linking factory work and artistic work, and evoking the human flow inherent to the site's two uses.

AARON LISTER Yona, your *In Transit* works turn the utilitarian materials of urban spaces and public transport systems into sculptural forms that rearticulate gallery space and the activities that take place there. The project is about being in transit, and, as an iterative project, is itself always in transit. You have recently finished two iterations – at City Gallery Wellington and the Art Gallery of New South Wales (both 2018-19), and are about to embark on the first European presentation of your work at the 15th Lyon Biennale in France. This in-between state provides a good point to consider the history of this project and where you are taking it. But before talking about specifics, can you speak generally to how you approach a new exhibition opportunity, especially its spatial possibilities?

YONA LEE I necessarily bring baggage to every project in the form of the language I've developed, as well as my experience, knowledge and expectations. If I focus too much on what I bring, the space becomes an obstacle. So, I try to put that aside and spend time reading the space. As I start to understand the space – its materiality, logic and flow, the focus slowly shifts from me to it. I'm guided by pianist Yuja Wang's claim that practising is far less important than understanding the intention of the composer. In a similar way, I try to weigh my attention to the understanding of the space. I see my role as activating the space.

AL How strongly does your musical training feed into this?

YL I first trained as a cellist. I am used to performing, where you respond to the occasion, the audience, and the emotions you're feeling. These elements constantly change, even when you play the same music. It's a practice of iteration. When I started making and exhibiting art, I initially struggled with the idea of showing premade objects in a gallery – it felt lifeless and didn't allow for the type of engagement with the space and audience I desired. Music and performance guided me here. Some people read my work in pure compositional terms, seeing rhythm, structure, and so on. Some literally see musical notation, with linear forms as staves, and objects as notes. I agree, to a certain extent, but my interest in music is more closely linked to how string instruments are played physically, and the relationship between performer and composer. These ideas are central in terms of how I relate as an artist to form, space and audience.



AL You then work this all out through an intensive drawing and modelling process. What role does drawing play?

YL First, I measure the space, then I recreate it digitally on SketchUp (a 3D design software). This helps me to understand its logic. I need to reach a stage where I feel like I have my own perspective and that I own the space, and having the digital form is like planting a seed and waiting for it to grow over time. Plus it's practical. I can't visit the space as often as I'd like in the lead up to a show. Alongside the digital drawings, I do hand drawn ones, primarily for calculation purposes. This mode too is starting to develop its own logic and have its own space.

Drawing is my entry point to visualising the work, to remaking it on my terms. Most of the thinking and the decision-making is done in the drawing phase. That's where the excitement takes place. When it comes to making exhibitions, it's about 95% labour. However, I do enjoy it – it's meditative. I've developed my welding skills and treat this as another form of drawing.

AL What's the 5%?

YL Dealing with real space and time. There are obvious limits to the digital drawings – aspects of light and materiality are lost. Due to the differences between the virtual and physical spaces, there are always aspects of the work that change during installation. The actual space always throws up surprise elements, and it's not as easy to control as the virtual one. So I allow the installation process to be a bit improvisational, almost performative. However, there's always the anxiety that any miscalculations may derail the entire work.

AL You have now made five iterations of *In Transit* (Se MA Nanji and Alternative Space Loop, both in Seoul (2016), Te Tuhi, Auckland (2017), Sydney's Art Gallery of New South Wales (2018-19) and City Gallery Wellington (2018-19). What's changed, and what sparked those changes?

YL *In Transit* started on a residency in Korea. The first iteration was a small, freestanding work. I was working out how to bring different spaces (or ideas of different spaces) together within a singular space as a form of collage, which remains the core idea of the project. I wanted to figure out the engineering aspects, to test my ideas in physical form.

For the second iteration, at Alternative Space LOOP in Seoul, I took over the whole building and incorporated new forms and objects. The work connected the two levels of the gallery and considered how people entered and moved through the space. This is when the use of barriers and handrails as a means to demarcate space and direct the movement of the audience came into focus. I came to understand the trust that visitors have in that material. They abide by its rules and are happy to be shepherded. This language also opened up a relationship to the gallery messaging and those devices used to prevent and protect artworks: the 'don't touch' sign, barriers and warning sounds. I started incorporating this institutional language into my own.

Then, another big shift happened. Due to a tight installation schedule, I ended up sleeping in the bed that was part of the work. The experience was surprisingly enjoyable, despite the industrial,

subterranean, windowless nature of the space. I realised then that I was making a livable structure.

I subsequently pushed this functionality in the third iteration, at Te Tuhi, by extending my forms across different spaces such as foyer areas, kitchens, toilets – the places art is not normally allowed to go. This disruption of areas designated for specific activities gives license to audiences to move and act differently.



Yona Lee, *In transit (double-function form)*, 2018. Installation view at Art Gallery of New South Wales (2018-19).



Yona Lee, *In Transit (Arrival)*, 2017 (install view) commissioned by Te Tuhi, Auckland, in association with Auckland Arts Festival. Photo by Sam Hartnett.



Yona Lee, *In Transit (Arrival)*, 2017 (install view) commissioned by Te Tuhi, Auckland, in association with Auckland Arts Festival.

AL It seems that the earlier iterations were more open to the possibilities of interaction and participation, whereas the recent versions at City Gallery and AGNSW were more stripped back, sculptural statements. I'm uncertain as to whether your work is genuinely interactive or a comment on the call for art to be ever more interactive.

YL Yes, the earlier iterations represented my maximalist approach, and carried a high level of interaction. In the more recent work, I've pared things back, amplified the sculptural gesture, and perhaps played more to the specifics of the space than the experience of the viewer. But these elements are always combined. Ultimately, the viewer activates the work simply by walking alongside it, or sitting at one of the seats or benches. For example, we are used to seeing particular kinds of seats in buses and cafés, and seeing people sitting on them. So, when visitors interact with a bus or a café seat that is brought into a gallery as part of a sculpture, they become – or perform – the role of those

people in buses and cafés. As the viewer moves through my work, the work transforms around them: at one moment it is abstract, at another it refers to things and spaces in the world. I want the viewer to experience this flux.

AL The City Gallery work felt a bit nastier than the earlier 'friendly' ones. The structure felt like it was monstrously replicating and spreading – like a virus or a cancer, perhaps more dysfunctional than functional?

YL The viral, cancerous quality has been present in all the iterations, but, I agree, it was more pronounced in The City Gallery work. The colonising of both the space and the experience of the viewer was more overt. This iteration played more on the relationship between functional and dysfunctional elements. This logic applied to the selection and use of objects (some invited interaction, others denied it by being hung out of reach or upside down). It also applied to the choice of materials. My pipes mimicked and traced the movement of the pipes and fittings already in the space, allowing the work to potentially be seamlessly integrated into the architecture. But it needed to do more than just mimic what was there, so I let it spread and replicate, creating tumours or glitches that rebelled against the existing order and the experience it set up. I didn't want the work to completely resist the architecture or the viewers, but I also didn't want to make it too comfortable for them either. This is the core tension my work needs to maintain. It has to be familiar enough to invite or lure viewers closer, but, at the same time, it needs to be unfamiliar and dysfunctional enough to challenge expectations and make them think and act differently.



Installation view of *Yona Lee: In Transit*, City Gallery Wellington, 2018.



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AL This brings us to what's coming up at Lyon. This will be the first time your work based on 'the universal language' of handrails and barriers will be presented in Europe, and also the first time it will be presented in a non-gallery setting. Can you describe how you are thinking through the project, and what challenges or possibilities it brings?

YL I am using the same language and I trust that the universal dimension of handrails, barriers and everyday objects will read and function as it has throughout the Asia Pacific. But there will be differences and challenges to this existing model, which will test the work and the ideas that sit behind it.

As part of the biennial's conceptual framework, artists were invited to collaborate with local manufacturers to produce new site-specific works. This is both a great opportunity and challenge – in my case, I have had to let go of some of the processes, knowledge and relationships that I have previously depended on to make the work. In some ways, I've had to start anew. The complexity of my work makes this particularly challenging. I can't just send a model on a drawing to get fabricated, I had to

restructure the entire system. The biennale team introduced me to CROSO, a specialist handrail company based in France which makes stainless accessories that can join tubes without welding. This is a revelation for my work, and opens a whole new set of possibilities. Their craftsmanship and our collaboration will take the work to the next level.

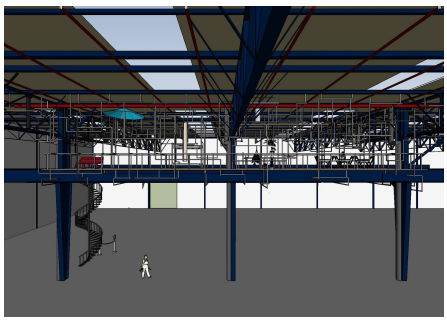
The main venue of the biennale is the former Fagor Factory, a one-time washing machine producer, which continues the art and industry theme of both the biennial and my work. The entire space is 29,000m2. It is a beautiful space, but, at the same time, a daunting one with which to work. It is 12-metres high, and has pre-existing industrial elements, such as overhead gantry cranes. The challenge is to let the space speak, and at the same time, let the work exist on its own terms. It's not just a case of industry meeting art, it's industry meeting art which uses the language and materials of industry.



Entrance to Fagor Factory, the main venue of the 15th Biennale de Lyon, France, 2019. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Yona Lee, *In Transit (Highway)*, 2019. Stainless steel pipes and objects. Installation view at 15th Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Fine Arts Sydney. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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AL How are you shifting your language in response to this, and that central question of how your work relates to its audience?

YL On my first visit to Lyon I was struck by the details and histories that every object seems to carry, from street lamps to wallpaper. Every object or material felt embedded in place and history. *In Transit* initially developed out of my observation that Korea offers the opposite effect – that these same objects are designed with a spirit of efficiency and practicality that speaks to different cultural needs. Every subway station feels the same, we move seamlessly through different but very similar spaces. This is the universal language my work takes from and extends sculpturally. I'm interested in how this element will read in Lyon, and the opportunities the biennale provides for the work to operate in a different cultural space. The work will specifically play to this displacement by incorporating some objects sourced in Lyon within the structure, and by working with the specific industrial history of this site.

I'm building a platform over an existing overhead gantry crane, thereby using height in a new way. Whereas visitors could previously look up at the work (an element I specifically emphasised in the City Gallery Wellington iteration), they now need to climb a staircase to access it. I'm adding a new formal language to my work: the language of the balcony. This, in turn, forces the handrails and barriers to become more than just sculptural forms – they need to be fully functional and protect visitors from falling. The work needs to protect visitors from itself.

AL It's also the first time your large installation-based work is curated into a larger show, rather than taking over an entire space. Are you thinking about how it relates to the other work?

YL I didn't know which artists I was sharing space with until quite late, and it was challenging to plan without this information. I dislike the idea of competing with other artists'

works, and I wanted to find a way for my work to sit comfortably with and respect these other works. This is one of the reasons I was drawn to the idea of inhabiting the upper part of the space. This strategy liberates the work and lets it exist on its own terms, while drawing specific relations to the spatial and historical dimensions of the site. It also provides a lookout platform, from where the other works in the space can be viewed.



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AL Is it more important to you that the work shifts the terms of the space or your own language?

YL Both. These two dimensions co-exist and are interconnected. My language allows me to interpret the space; the space forces my language to adapt. The viewer will see my work but they're also seeing my perspective of the space.

AL So are you seeking to clarify or confuse the understanding of a given space?

YL I seek to clarify it for myself. But, in doing so, I don't think that necessarily clarifies it for the viewer, because I'm bringing all of these different spaces and experiences into the gallery. This changes and potentially confuses the visitors' understanding of the space, and how they move through it.

Biographies



Yona Lee lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand, and completed MFA at Auckland University Elam School of Fine Arts in 2010. Yona Lee's work has recently been the subject of solo exhibitions at institutions including the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand; Te Tuhi, Auckland, New Zealand; and Westspace, Melbourne, Australia. Her work has recently featured in thematic exhibitions including the 2020 Busan Biennale, Busan, South Korea (2020); 15th Lyon Biennale of Contemporary Art, Lyon, France (2019); and Changwon Sculpture Biennale, Seoul, South Korea (2016). She undertook residencies at SeMA Nanji and Geumcheon Art Space, Seoul, South Korea in 2016, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand in 2020, and will be resident at Cité internationale des arts, Paris, France, in 2021.



Aaron Lister is Senior Curator at City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand, where he curated *Yona Lee: In Transit* (2018-19).

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