

# AHL Foundation

## Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Sun K. Kwak
- Interviewer: Juyoung Yoo
- June 29, 2016 / Sun K. Kwak's studio in Upper East Side, New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Juyoung Yoo (AKAA Research Fellow 2015-2016)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Juyoung Yoo (JY): Can you briefly describe your artworks?

Sun K. Kwak (SKK): There are several 3-dimensional works in series and the works done with masking tape are usually identified as *Space Drawings*. *Space Drawings* have a strong performance aspect to them, and as described in the titles, untying\_(place), they are site-specific and can't be done without a place. Untying Space\_ Brooklyn Museum is one of the examples.

JY: Where do you get your inspiration?

SKK: As I mentioned, *Space Drawing* is a site-specific work, meaning that it requires a place. For example, I was very impressed with the Brooklyn Museum. Because of the museum's geographical characteristics, the general public visited the museum very casually. It was very different from what I usually saw with Manhattan museums such as the MoMA or the Whitney Museum. That is, people who seemed to have no interest in the arts casually visited the museum and shared their opinions about the art. That was very impressive. I thought of it as the mission and role of the museum, and I wanted to participate in that covert mission. So, I spent about 280 hours (7 to 8 weeks) in total, going to the museum and leaving the museum as if I was working in the museum. I had the whole 4th floor contemporary section as an exhibition space. The gallery space was not fun visually. The gallery space was rectangular-shaped with a dome-shaped ceiling. There were columns that were cut-off somewhat roundish, had elevators, and the gallery space was connected to other galleries. Thus, I came up with the word "unity". I wanted to unify all the separated visual elements inspired by my impression of the museum's role, which was 'embracing'. I used black masking tape, and I made black line drawings on the walls and negative drawings on the columns. To be specific, I covered the columns with black masking tape, drew lines with a knife, and then pulled off the inner part. As a result, I spent 280 hours performing the 'unifying' act, and the viewers naturally participated by looking at the positive and negative drawings on the walls and columns.

JY: It seems like your works have changed/developed recently, can you tell me about it?

SKK: First of all, space drawings require places. I pack my things, go to the place, and work on the specific site. It requires a performing act, and I work if the place is offered to me. The place becomes my studio for usually about two weeks.

JY: What is the meaning of installing and de-installing the space drawings to you?

SKK: As I briefly mentioned, in the case of the Brooklyn Museum, I spent 280 hours unifying the visually scattered elements and performing the embracing act. Every site is different and has its concept. Thus, Space Drawings are created and disappear in the limited time. I want them to disappear. The overarching concept is "time and space,"

and I think about life within the overarching concept. Limited life is very powerful but futile. But, it leaves its footprint to the people who see it. In that sense, my works are time-based performances.

JY: Your artwork is meaningful because of its process and cycle, but do you ever feel sad about the loss of the work?

SKK: Very... It was especially difficult to let go of my first Space Drawing. I was sick for a week after my first exhibition. It was not easy, but I was offered a bigger space each time. I had to spend more time and effort and dump all the energy. So, I videotaped the de-installation process in the beginning. I think I videotaped my Queens Museum exhibition. However, it got easier. I was practicing to empty myself. I learned not to have lingering affection, and it was personally helpful.

JY: Are your recent works supplementations of the previous works?

SKK No, not really. Space Drawings are place-dependent, which means that it is not something I can practice in my studio. Space Drawing is one of many ideas. I work with general ideas in my studio. My studio is like a laboratory. I have a lot of ideas in my mind, and many are still unborn. I have boxes of drawings I started when I first came to New York, which was like a diary to me. One day, I put my diary/drawings on the table and categorized them by visual similarities. I created a collage with them, and it was the starting point of another series called Collage Time Collapse. Also, I started another series, Sculpture Drawing when I was working in different residencies wanting to use time as wisely as possible. I used Gaffer's tape for Sculpture Drawings. Masking tape is made with paper, so they create organic lines, but Gaffer's tape creates straight lines because they are made with fabric. The characteristics of the lines are different. I can control lines with masking tapes but not with Gaffer's tapes. I started a Sculpture Drawing on a drowsy Sunday afternoon. I didn't know how it would grow, but I develop this series whenever I become lethargic. Some of them took me three years to finish. Also, I experimented with tape for a long time, and it makes a "Shhik" sound when it's ripped like how sawing makes a sound. Sawing makes a beat. It's 16 beats per minute. With that in mind, I created a work titled, Handsaw marks in 16 beats. I intentionally created a rhythm. In that sense, I sometimes lead my artworks, and sometimes artworks lead me. Those moments are fascinating. The concept in fine arts has changed and become more open. However, it was ambiguous whether my works can be identified as drawing, sculpture, or installation. I think my artworks can be all of them: drawing, sculpture, and performance. The process is very important, and my work shows my effort and accumulated time.

JY: Your artworks show your interest in unifying and blurring the boundaries.

SKK: I don't intentionally do it, but I think that is my area of interest. Masking tape is



stuck flat onto the walls, but they make it 3-dimensional because they are on every side and ceiling. I used Gaffer's tape to make a drawing, but since I made it in space, it became a Space Drawing and thus Sculpture Drawing. All these ambiguities are characteristic of my work.

JY: When did you start using colors?

SKK: Space drawings don't have any color. I never thought that I needed color for the series. I used colors for the Children's Museum, and that was the first and last, at least for now, when I used colors for the Space Drawing. I had a sponsor and brought black masking tape for the exhibition. However, the light in San Francisco was different from the light in New York. So, I found all the colored tape in the local stores.

JY: What are the characteristics of masking tape?

SKK: It has its characteristics. I respond differently to its texture, etc. As I mentioned before, masking tape makes organic lines, and I like the accessibility of the material. I concluded that 3-inch rolls are the best to work with, and I used to pack the tape rolls to my backpack when I first worked with the material. I was happy because I had the freedom to work in huge spaces. I majored in painting, I always thought about how I could escape from restrictions. I felt the 'ah ha' moment when I found this material while I was attending NYU. I could develop Sculpture Drawing because the Gaffer's tape makes straight lines. I think artists intuitively respond to materials. Artists find their materials, but at the same time, they learn from their materials and make their visual languages using the characteristics of the materials with their sensitivity.

JY: You told me that the day before yesterday was your anniversary. Can you tell me how you came to New York?

SKK: I celebrated that day. I came to the United States on June 27, 1993 to become an artist. I was not interested in getting a degree, but I simply thought that I should come to New York, which was the center of all arts, to become an artist.

JY: What made you stay in New York?

SKK: I thought about staying in New York from the first day. After graduating from NYU, I studied in the libraries and made portfolios. I received many rejection letters, but the Korean Cultural Center in LA called me. Since I couldn't afford a flight to LA, I asked a friend from NYU, and luckily she connected me to her professor. The professor saw my portfolio and invited me. I gave my first artist talk at the university, and that honorarium was exactly the amount for the ticket to LA. The professor took me to the exhibition place when he took his students to my exhibition as a field trip. So, everything worked out.

JY: I assume it was very rewarding.

SKK: Everything worked out. I couldn't speak English that well, and I didn't think I was eligible, but the professor and the students were very supportive. I received many rejection letters after the LA exhibition, but I got a phone call from a Korean curator in the Asian Art Alliance. Asian Art Alliance in Manhattan was like an entrance for emerging artists. I wasn't accepted to the exhibition, but the curator told me that the curator from the Queens Museum was interested in my portfolio. The curator of the Queens Museum gave me an opportunity for a solo exhibition. The space was too big for me, and it was a challenge. But, I think I grew after all the challenges I overcame. I was happy. I went to the Queens Museum every day as if it was my studio. It was always a challenge and struggle, repeating that every day, and that made me who I am now.

JY: When was your most rewarding moment as an artist?

SKK: When I was an emerging artist, even though I love art, I used to question whether art was only for the few privileged people. I wondered what art means to the bigger world. But, I found an answer after the Queens Museum exhibition. Also, after the solo exhibition at the Queens Museum, the curator called me for a wall drawing project she was planning. I went to see the exhibition space before accepting her offer. She gave me the huge triangular space. I had to use a lift car to reach the ceiling. I was angry at the time, but I think that was another challenging moment, and I thank her for the opportunity. I overcame my fear of space. Every exhibition is different, and there are people who I appreciate. Also, I was convinced of the artist's role after the exhibition. The artist needs to be convinced by him/herself. Then, he/she will not waste their energy. I couldn't answer whether artists are the redundant existence of society or the Bourgeoisie or not, but I think the role of an artist is to provide value that isn't quantifiable. For example, I made a Space Drawing on a window in Germany once. It was before the exhibition at the Children's Museum in 2007. The exhibition space was a glass window on a multi-cultural museum in Germany made by the United States. So, I imagined stained glass and was planning to use colors on the window. But I changed my mind and did not use the color. The weather in Berlin was changing dramatically, snowy in the morning and beautiful sunsets at night. So, I was determined that I didn't need to use artificial colors. So, I decided to control the light coming through the window and connect inside and outside with shadows. It was very peaceful, and I was happy. While the artwork was on view, I heard a scream of a child from outside. The child with autism was responding to my work. He was screaming and dancing, so I intuitively knew that he was responding to my window drawing. I was happy to see the child, and his response was enough for me. Also, I cannot forget his father's happy smile. Another rewarding moment was the Asian Art Museum exhibition. The installation got delayed for 3 days because of a problem. So I told the curator that I need assistants,

and she opened it up to the whole museum. Within a few minutes, people came to help me as if it was their work. All the staff members including the Vice Director and clerks from the museum's store helped me install the work. That was spectacular. The work got out of hand. I was very humbled by the moment when my work was being completed by others. I realized that the artwork had its own life. One of the people who helped me mentioned that he worked for 20 years in the museum's library and he had never felt so lively working in the museum. The museum is a museum of relics. So having a living artist working in the museum was very lively to them. The space got very loud like a construction site. I was touched to hear that they were happy participating in the making process. I am happy that I am an artist, although it isn't an easy path.

JY: You mentioned it isn't an easy path. Can you give any advice to people who would like to go into this uneasy path?

SKK: I think it's difficult. It is not an easy decision. However, if I were to give advice to my sister, I wouldn't say she should or should not, but I would say to choose the path if it makes her happy. Then it will be a happy journey, even if it is more difficult than one might imagine.