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FOON SHAM
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\$9.50US/CAN





qa

*Invasives (detail),
2020.*
Mountain Dew
soda bottles, rivets,
and cables,
dimensions variable.
Installation at Riverside
Park, New York City.



Everyday

Matters: A Conversation with Jean Shin

by Susan Canning

Jean Shin has long operated in the intersection of public art and civic engagement. Site-specific and often temporary, based in community and collective collaboration, and focused on sustainability, her work invites awareness and activism. Through a labor-intensive process, she transforms raw, “crowd-sourced” material—often gathered through open calls for contributions—into immersive, large-scale sculptural installations. Within the performative exchange of recycling everyday objects—everything from pill and soda bottles to sports trophies, sweaters, and computer equipment—diverse groups discover interconnecting narratives and dialogues, shared histories, and associations.

Shin’s recent works have increasingly addressed environmental concerns and the impact of behavior we take for granted. *Floating MAiZE* and *The Last Straw* (2020) played adroitly off their site near the Winter Garden Atrium at Brookfield Place, a shopping center linked to the World Trade Center site. In *The Last Straw*, placed in the windows of a closed Burberry store, colorful plastic straws mapped the waste of unchecked consumerism. *Floating MAiZE*, a spiral made of Mountain Dew bottles fashioned into corn stalks, hovered over the central atrium, whose tall palm trees survived 9/11. Seen from below, against the backdrop of genuine trees, this artificial landscape of tantalizing, translucent green stalks explored our relationship to artifice, consumption, and sustainability.

For *Huddled Masses* (2020), at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, Shin drew inspiration from East Asian rock gardens, to create a sculpted landscape from electronic waste. Rising out of miles of ethernet cables and connectors arranged to resemble waves or raked patterns of sand, three irregular, boulder-size “scholars’ rocks” encrusted with cell phones suggested alternative meditations on art, nature, and technology. Sitting on colorful pods made from cables wrapped around donated laptops and hard drives, viewers could contemplate the impact of e-waste and the ethical and philosophical quandaries of our technological landscape.

Fallen (2021), Shin’s newest project, continues her work with fallen and dying trees, first pursued in *Allée Gathering* (2019)—a monumental picnic table created from ailing maples at Storm King and currently on view at Art Omi. *Fallen* consists of a reclaimed eastern

hemlock trunk from the Olana State Historic Site in Hudson, New York. The tree was part of a grove planted in the 19th century by artist Frederic Church to offset the destruction of hemlock forests by the tannery industry. Deploying the tanner’s tools, Shin peeled bark from the trunk, replacing it with a covering of leather hides fastened by brass upholstery tacks. Refreshed with a new “skin” that both shields and embellishes, her hemlock, reborn as a sculpture, gains a new narrative that recovers the past while making visible the fragility and vulnerability of the natural world.

Susan Canning: [How does public collaboration relate to your process?](#)

Jean Shin: It’s been a key part of my work. As I conceive it, it’s trying to be resourceful and wanting involvement and hands-on experience with people I know, and by

THIS PAGE AND
OPPOSITE:
Huddled Masses,
2020.
Cell phones and
computer cables,
dimensions variable.



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: KEVIN CARDLAND, COURTESY ASIAN ART MUSEUM, SAN FRANCISCO, CA





extension, inviting others to connect to the project. There are vast amounts of underused resources out there, and this allows me to tap into that, as a person and as an artist.

I typically start with a site, and I try to think about who uses that space. I'm making work for an everyday person, people who are not specifically seeking out art in their lives and just happened to encounter it—that's one of the phenomenal rewards of public art. To first engage with the material, I create an open call for specific items or work in partnership with an organization to request those materials. For *Floating MAiZE*, I used Sure We Can, a nonprofit community center in Brooklyn that recycles plastic waste. This creates a circular economy: they're redeeming it, I'm purchasing that labor and having their partnership, and then I'm activating all these materials and bringing them back to the public.

SC: How do these partnerships and collaborations relate to your conceptual concerns?

JS: I do my best work when it connects with the site. Often something in my research or in my visits or conversations acts as a trigger, raising a question that makes me pause or think about something I deeply care about. It feels a little like opening a door. For me, the objects embody our behaviors, our desires, and also our failures. They stand in for all of us, literally representing us as their users and metaphorically representing our society, culture, and collective being.

The meaning is somewhat literally in the work but also hovers around it, as we bring various associations, experiences, and perspectives to it. So, some of the meaning is layered and could be full of paradox, contradiction, and questioning. I hope the work unravels more questions and leads to connections with larger issues beyond the particulars of an object and its history.

SC: You talk about transformation through your interventions.

JS: Transformation is key, but I like to hold a bit of the object's memory and original function. I don't want to use it only as raw material and go overboard so that it's unrecognizable. I want there to be a sense of knowing what this everyday object is, even if it's not immediately clear. The notion of transformation, for me, is about infusing an item that has absolutely no value with



labor. The transformation comes from the repetition of the objects and basic acts, not highly skilled, that over time, resonate and begin to matter—those small, insignificant, everyday, simple things collect bigger meaning than anything that could be done by one act.

SC: *And there's not one specific way that it can be interpreted.*

JS: Absolutely. I know I can't control that in a public space. Artists can't control that even in the studio.

SC: *Do you see yourself as bringing in other perspectives related to your identity?*

JS: I certainly feel that I wear many hats—as an artist, an educator, a woman, an Asian American, an immigrant. These are all parts of me; I can't separate them.

OPPOSITE:

Floating MAiZE,
2020.

Plastic Mountain Dew soda bottles, adhesive, and vinyl tubing, dimensions variable.

THIS PAGE:

Fallen,
2021.

Salvaged eastern hemlock tree, leather remnants, upholstery tacks, and boulders, 40 ft. long.

They inform who I am as an artist, and that informs how I start the conversation and my agenda. We often think that being an artist is just about making the thing; but I'm less interested in the objecthood. I act as a catalyst and activist, raising different histories, bringing together different perspectives, presenting voices that are often under-recognized and marginalized. This is all part of the process. That's what I love about these site-specific projects—I never know where I'm going to begin and end—it's a space for me to play and explore and challenge myself.

SC: *Your work deals with a number of concerns, including the environment, sustainability, and recycling, and you approach them all as a kind of social engagement. Would you agree with that?*

“ The objects embody our behaviors,
our desires, and also our failures.
They stand in for all of us. ”





SEONG KWON

TEXTile,
2006.

22,528 recycled computer keycaps and 192 custom keycaps, fabric, customized active keyboard and interactive software, video projection, and painted aluminum armatures, 2.6 x 4 x 20.4 ft. Collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.



JS: I would, though I think of my engagement more in terms of civic roles than the social. It definitely comes from the community, but when I think about what I really want to do, it's about engaging on a civic level, not a social level. These projects are not only about my interactions with other people—there's something greater that holds us responsible and accountable. Things like the environment and human rights require civic engagement.

SC: It's interesting to think about the notion of civic sculpture right now, as we continue to question the role of monuments and public sculpture.

Your installations are temporary, but they also have a relation to the monument as a commemoration.

JS: I've been excited to see people thinking about memorials and public sculpture and sometimes dismantling them because they are fraught with unacknowledged narratives. This is an opportunity to finally reckon with their history and heal. Some of my works function as memorials, offering sites for mourning and remembrance, but they are not monuments to one person, one legacy, or one narrative. My works create a complex narrative of our lived experience—part of that is our desire and idealism, but also our failure to act, failure to be better.

SC: So, do you see your works as temporary monuments?

JS: I do. I like positioning the works in that way, but the reality is that they're unfixed. Unlike monuments, which are usually permanent, my works move around and are site responsive. Just like democracy or any other experiment, it takes effort to create and sustain them and just as much effort to dismantle them. They all offer possibilities, unlike most traditional monuments. My objects change with people's understanding of their personal histories and connections. One of the vital functions of the monument is that it brings together, rather than provoking protest or soliciting honor. But how does a monument activate people's concerns? Accessibility is one of the most important things. It is not a privileged space.

SC: Does part of that accessibility lie in it not necessarily being seen as art?



OPPOSITE:
Allée Gathering (detail), 2019.
Salvaged maple wood and steel, view of installation at Storm King Art Center.

THIS PAGE,
FROM TOP:
Allée Gathering, 2019.
Salvaged maple wood and steel, dimensions variable. View of installation at Storm King Art Center.

E-Bundles, 2019.
Laptops and hard drives, electric cords, and ethernet cables, dimensions variable.



JS: Yes, I'm curious about how people see the work, because I want there to be a connection to their lived experience, but it should also allude to the penalty of that experience and heighten that to an awareness of larger issues. I think the site, as well as the material, does a lot of that work.

SC: That was certainly the case with *The Last Straw*, which was installed in the window of a closed Burberry shop. It made the connection between the vacated space in the mall, consumption, and the global crisis of plastic pollution, but these relationships were not immediately revealed.

JS: The context of the space was high-end consumerism, and although the Winter Garden Atrium has a history as a space for the public, most people who shop there represent, for me, very high-end, almost fantasy consumers. I'm really tapping into the idea that when you go into a shop there, or even window shop, you're projecting into a fantasy more than reality. The shops are part of the problem, but they could also be part of the solution. After all, Brookfield Place presented this critique of consumerism and its exploitations. There is a conversation we need to have. We need industries and stores, including those at the highest end, to move environmental issues closer. It's not just the average consumer who needs to take personal responsibility, but also industry and businesses. I'm seeking collective accountability by siting it in that place—it's not to shame any one person or company.

SC: In *Huddled Masses* (2020), created for your "Pause" show at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, you focused on technology, creating "scholars' rocks" out of cell phones, computers, and iPads. Are you drawing attention to the experience of technology as well as to the resulting disconnect from the natural world and reflection?

JS: I guess I'm particularly aware of setting up a paradox because in the culture of art we often position ourselves in distinction to both nature and technology. Unfortunately, the reality is that technology is becoming part of nature because its waste is taking over the environment. Our surroundings are going to be covered with e-waste. We also extract precious materials to manufacture our devices, and until we

MetaCloud,
2017.
35mm slides,
metal pins, and lights,
dimensions variable.





COURTESY THE ARTIST



“ I typically start with a site, and I try to think about who uses that space. I’m making work for an everyday person, people who are not specifically seeking out art in their lives and just happened to encounter it. ”

can recycle them, they will become increasingly scarce resources. We don't think about our technology at all—where it comes from, what resources it uses, or what it does to us and the environment. We are too obsessed with novelty, with the next upgrade, and with how we are led to use these tools—we think that technology connects us to other people, but it really keeps us addicted to itself, and to those corporations that use the data to increase consumption. The truth is that technology does not connect us to other people or to ourselves, and we feel worse after using it. It's a huge distraction, if not a waste, of our attention economy.

Part of what I wanted to do was to create a moment of “pause” and invite people to be aware of how often and how long we're using the phone, how it's become such a part of our lives that we can't seem to breathe without it. We wake up and the first thing we do is probably check our phone before checking in on ourselves, kissing our loved ones, or even going to the bathroom. I wanted to create an awareness that the phone is not us, that sometimes we want to take a break and want to retreat to nature. We have learned a lot from the pandemic, which has heightened all of our experiences. It has made us aware of what we miss. We have physical and mental needs that our technologies cannot provide. Certainly our devices have allowed us to carry on, but fundamentally, we need more than what technology can deliver.

The core, the gem, that starts the cabling is almost like a reliquary. Individuals gave me their laptops and storage devices, servers and hardware. Their data had been transferred to me in the project, and then we entombed it to keep it safe. It's a matter of trust. We trust our technology in the same way, whether we like it or not; to participate, we let go and sign off on the terms. In a way, a stranger sitting on these incredible objects has all this data—our hardest work, even our fantasies. Sitting on top of the pods, for me, seems to conjure the aura of the past or our inability to access it; maybe there is something to all our swiping and typing. I wanted people to slow down, to spend time looking at the technology, looking at 20 years of phone evolution and how each of those upgrades has changed our behavior and our relationships, to ourselves, each other, and to this item. ■■■

OPPOSITE:

Elevated,
2016.

Detail of site-specific installation in 2nd Avenue Subway at 63rd Street Station, New York.

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Celadon Display,
2019.

Ceramic shards, dimensions variable.

