

HAEGUE YANG: I did a solo show “Closures” at the Galerie Wien Lukatsch in Berlin in 2010, which was right after your exhibition there, Jimmie. When I started to think about how to place the sculptures, I discovered your wonderful wall paintings. I immediately played with the idea of keeping them because they were somehow very accommodating to my sculptures. So I contacted you through Barbara Wien and luckily you approved. And many people found them to be the best part of my installation. I didn’t feel guilty, but the opposite—I was proud I’d thought to ask for your approval.

JIMMIE DURHAM: That’s nice.

HY: ...and proud of myself for having such a wonderful idea! In German, I’d say it was “halbe Miete,” meaning “half the rent.” It felt like I’d paid off half the rent.

JD: But I didn’t see your show. What did you do?

HY: I have such a bad memory, let me think.... First of all,

but I couldn’t name them as sculptures—they were more a kind of treatment.

MARK WELZEL: You used drying racks in your “Sadong 30” exhibition in 2006, right?

HY: Yes, that was the first time. Sadong 30 is the address of a little house in Incheon, a satellite city of Seoul, about thirty kilometers away, on the west coast. It was an abandoned house, locked up for like eight years. Nobody had entered it; the door was nailed shut.

JD: That’s a long time.

HY: I was surprised by the circumstances of the house, which was about to collapse because it had collected so much moisture. Mushrooms were growing all over it, and dead animals were in there, as well as a lot of junk that the neighbors had dumped. The house was halfway sunken into a garbage heap. So I started the project by cleaning up the house. It was hot summer, July and August...

# WE CAN GET THERE!

it was my fourth exhibition with Barbara and I always find her space difficult.

JD: It’s a horrible, ridiculous space. (smile)

HY: Yes, there’s a kind of aura, and there are books—they’re not necessarily in the exhibition space, but they are so present. The difficulty, I think, has to do with respect. I have too much respect for whatever is in the gallery, as everything is part of Barbara’s personality and activity—so eventually it is no longer a neutral space. In order to “domesticize” the space, I had to come up with some way to transform it. And with your wall paintings it was more or less solved.

I have a tendency to interpret objects figuratively, which is quite common I think—a lot of people see a chair as a human figure. I used to work with furniture this way. Whatever I picked up, I’d use to portray someone—a historical or fictional figure—or an anonymous one. The works in this series—what I call *Non-Indépliables* (2006/2009–2010)—are made of drying racks for laundry, and other things you can fold and unfold. Previously I made works with drying racks,

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JIMMIE DURHAM & HAEGUE YANG  
& MARK WELZEL

JD: You like to be uncomfortable, don’t you?

HY: I do invite such troubles; I have a little religion about this kind of difficulty.

JD: Do you think Jesus likes you, as you suffer?

HY: I have no nameable god to worship. There isn’t even a nameable religious attitude. Yet I invite suffering....

Anyhow, at that house I used a drying rack for the first time as a symbolic gesture, as a sign that the house was active. All around the neighborhood people hung their laundry outside, which looked like flags marking the status of the household—like with a ship. I also used to live in the neighborhood, which is kind of impoverished. And there were a lot of shamans living there too, who also put flags outside. Sometimes you’d see Buddhist flags divided into two sections, red and white. And between those flags, there were often drying racks filled with laundry.

JD: That’s nice.

HY: But with the “Closures” exhibition there were many

sculptures with a tightly tailored outfit. From my research I came to realize that some of the shapes I liked were only available from Francophone countries, and I couldn’t find the same drying rack I used in Korea anywhere in Europe. It was very vernacular, which was astonishing.

JD: Such a thing is always surprising, isn’t it? You think everything is universal. Because you love these things, you just think they must be everywhere.

HY: Sometimes it is a delightful realization, but it can also be limiting, because I work a lot with found materials. If I can’t purchase what I need, and really want, it can take a lot of organization to find it. But it can be just that limitation that makes me conscious of reality. For instance an item easy to get in plastic, elsewhere in Europe might only come in aluminum.

JD: When I’m not working on a project, it is delightful because I’m not in need of anything. But when I’m working,

it is always a problem. I can never get what I expect to get.

HY: Do you think it is a matter of karma?

JD: I think we just have to imagine more time—that our “art life” is longer than we think. On one day something may seem like a disappointment, but we can get it back in seven, eight, twenty years.

HY: I have a similar feeling that working is not relaxing. But why am I so fascinated by working hard? And how is it different from menial labor? And what does rest mean? I think a lot about rest, because my friends keep telling me I should slow down, take it easy, get some rest. I would never doubt the good will behind their suggestions, but I’m not convinced. I can’t accept that there’s a balance between work and rest.

JD: I think you should! From now on work only in really nice, comfortable places, where it’s warm, sunny, dry.

HY: The most painful thing about working on “Sadong 30”





was that I couldn't bathe. There was no running water.

JD: But you were working in the garbage.

HY: I got filthy and dirty. Not only dusty...

JD: Dirt.

HY: Dirt.

JD: Bad dirt!

HY: And smelly! Even disgusting! Rat shit everywhere. Dead pigeons. I thought I would die. The experience of not having water was revealing. I did succeed in connecting electricity after going through a long, bureaucratic process. I planted chrysanthemums and garden balsam in the old-fashioned out-door water basin. Then I provided bottled water in a cooler that people could help themselves to and use to water the plants with. In fact the plants grew very well. I had to go there once in a while to collect the garbage and refill the cooler.

JD: I probably could have done that for you. Call me next time.

HY: Are you good at that?

JD: I used to work as a plumber.

HY: Like the guy in the movie *Brazil* (1985)? Do you know that movie?

JD: No. I haven't seen it.

HY: Robert de Niro has a small part in it as a plumber-revolutionary.

JD: He looks like a plumber, doesn't he?

HY: Yes, he was perfectly cast. He repairs things while the government is completely malfunctioning due to its heavy bureaucracy. But since he helps people without governmental approval, he is seen as a terrorist. Obviously the government doesn't like him.

JD: It's a beautiful story. I've heard of it, but I don't see many films in fact.

HY: I love to go to the movies, but don't go as much as I'd like to.

MW: Have the movies influenced your work Haegue? Or are literary or philosophy texts, for instance, by Marguerite Duras, important to you?

HY: Not really. People often think that I read lots of books, but it's actually the other way around. I grew up in an intellectual family as a rebel, but ironically at school I neglected reading and writing. I underestimated literature. I only discovered Korean literature around 2005 when I had a job at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

JD: There are so many Japanese and Chinese writers translated into English. But I don't know any Koreans.

HY: We call it a "cultural one way." Koreans are eager to import from the West, as are the Japanese, but there is no comparable interest from the other side. I remember a dialogue between two African writers in the book *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) about the topic of South African literature. One writer was asking the other how his career was going, and the other answered that African literature was only made to be sold in Western bookstores. It may be a cynical view, but there is truth in it. Yet, if I compare their situation to the Korean literary scene, it's very different: a Korean poet can sell a million books in Korea, which is a rare phenomenon.

JD: That's beautiful!

HY: The literature scene is incredibly active with many aspiring, eager writers. But it is very self-contained, which is problematic. I think this is reflected in Korea's modernization. We've achieved a broad international economic development but culturally we have been far less successful in expanding outside of the country. Then again, the very colonialist logic of "expanding oneself while conquering others" is unnatural to us.

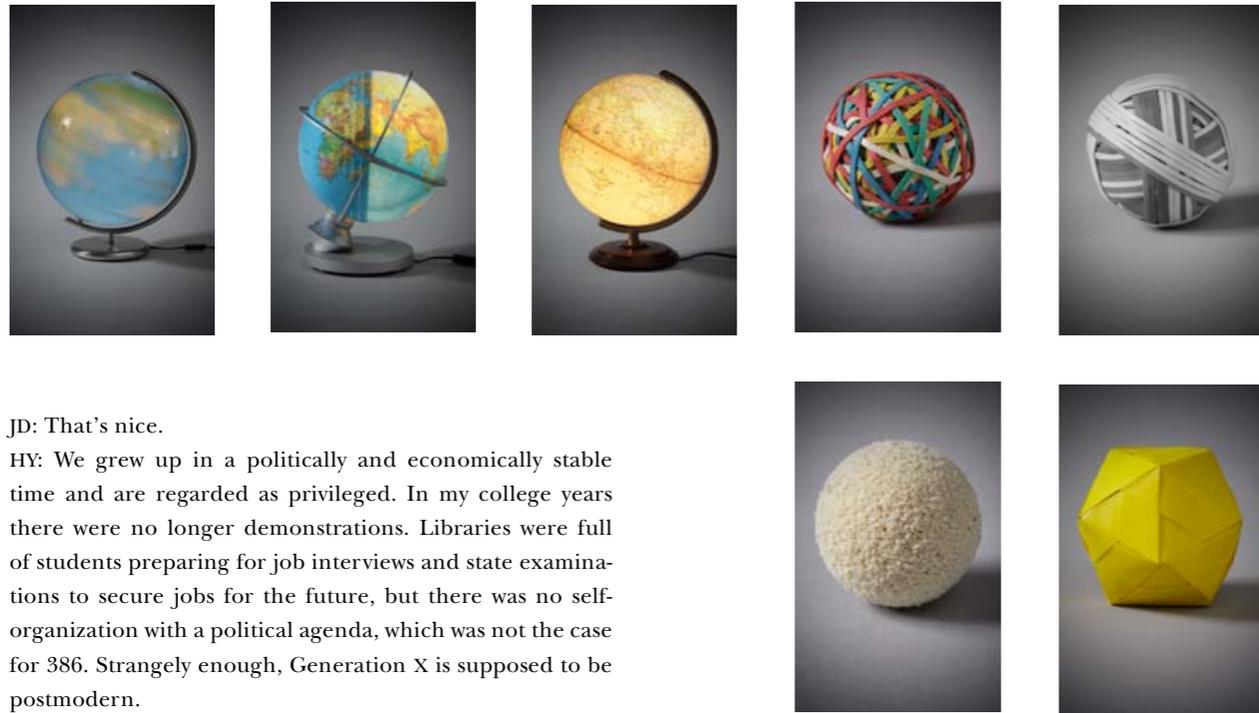
JD: In Latin America, the poets are famous and well loved, but they don't make much money. Mostly they are professors.



HY: Like Neruda. I read his biography and it reminded me of the Korean literary scene because poets here are beloved and regarded as national heroes, even more than novelists. JD: That's marvelous. Most excellent.

HY: But as a member of a younger generation of cultural producers, I have a critical view of the nationalistically driven cultural climate. During the so-called democratization period from the sixties to the eighties, culture was primarily a form of resistance. But artists of my generation are facing a different situation because, even though the democratization process had been fully completed, patriotic and nationalistic attitudes still remain. I often sense this "silent crisis" from the younger generation. In Korea, I am Generation X and the people and generation before us is called Generation 386, a term that originated in the late nineties for the mostly left-leaning students who fought against military dictatorship.

be conscious of and loyal to my generation, because I can't pretend to be of my parents' generation. They achieved so much politically and socially compared to us. But neither can I pretend to be just hip and trendy and absorbed in the self-centered lifestyle and capitalistic viewpoint of today's youth. We are squeezed in between. That is how I am and how I see my generation. And there are a couple of writers and scholars who reflect this situation. But among my generation, I can't find so many role models. Take for example the Korean poet Kim Su-yeong (1921–1968), who was a romantic and enormously resistant and driven activist and spiritual leader. He remained very individualistic and intentionally didn't organize or join forces with other poets. My generation rediscovered this poet, which demonstrates our lack of models. I mean, we had to dig down into an older generation to find someone to make our own. JD: But that sounds like a good phenomenon. Poets who



JD: That's nice.

HY: We grew up in a politically and economically stable time and are regarded as privileged. In my college years there were no longer demonstrations. Libraries were full of students preparing for job interviews and state examinations to secure jobs for the future, but there was no self-organization with a political agenda, which was not the case for 386. Strangely enough, Generation X is supposed to be postmodern.

JD: But it was not postmodern. You were never modern, were you? It's a jungle. I don't think the Americans were ever modern either.

HY: From my point of view, Korea's modernization has never been completed, and the country is still suffering from modernist ideas of progress and development. I try to

did not want to join the front—or to join anything! This doesn't sound bad for poetry; it sounds pretty good.

HY: Yes, but it's enormously difficult. Not to join is painful, I think.

JD: Yeah, that's true. You have to be very courageous not to join.

HY: But normally it doesn't look like courage.

JD: Yeah. I don't have this problem. I join everything. I'm very easily influenced, I suppose.

HY: I think joining can be another type of strategy. Being less selective in terms of factions, yet endlessly politically active and exposed. I blame my family for my indifference about politics; I never feel like I can go to the street like the other members of my family have.

MW: But you have expressed interest in two German politicians, who were founders of the Green Party.

HY: Yes, Petra Kelly and Gerd Bastian. Petra Kelly was one of most important figures in founding the Green Party and went on to be an internationally celebrated politician. Her charisma and devotion were the engines that mobilized people to organize a new party and peace movement. She was an impressive and compelling figure in her ability to pull people out of their cozy comfortable places. But by the time the Green Party entered into the parliament, Petra Kelly became a kind of obstacle because she was too idealistic and radical. She was not ready to compromise and therefore became isolated within her own party despite her growing international popularity and reputation. For various reasons, she seems to me like someone who is post-



humously difficult to ignore, but also impossible to digest since her political career and agenda was filled with contradictions and ambivalences. She showed a variety of mysterious weaknesses and strengths especially in her association with Gerd Bastian, which is highly intriguing and absurd. Of course the most mystifying thing was that Kelly was murdered by Bastian, who then took his own life. And there is another aspect—which is not exactly what I am interested in—that it can be disputed whether Kelly was a feminist since she always had a hero to worship and was never really completely on her own—this is not to suggest that she wasn't a strong woman. But she always needed someone stronger to accompany her, like the Dalai Lama or Joseph Beuys. I guess that she has been more or less forgotten by the public. She certainly doesn't mark a bright side of the Green Party.

JD: But that's what parties are best at.

HY: Politics and party systems are two different things and from my point of view, she kind of marks that difficult split.

JD: Yeah, maybe so.

HY: But I am also interested in her personal weaknesses and vulnerabilities, which make her attractive. Ironically, she was strong, convincing, passionate, but at the same time far too dramatic and emotional for her own good. It is how she worked—she was driven by urgency, desperate about what she believed. It's no wonder that she became anxious and paranoid, on top of being a workaholic.

JD: Yeah, yeah. And you, too, are a workaholic?

HY: I'm working hard on becoming one. (smile) I don't want to fetishize work, but it seems inevitable—not that this is something to boast about. It's just how it is. For me, being at work is peaceful and natural. Even at a party I will tend to volunteer to serve people or bartend, just to be occupied.

JD: There is nothing more fun than work. It is the best fun there is. I don't rest either. And if I can't do artwork, after two days my poetry brain kicks in and I start writing poems, and I write poems until I can work again, and then I kick back over to being a sculptor. I can't do the two things at once, however. But resting is about sleeping, isn't it? You rest when you sleep. That is enough.

HY: Good sleep is very important.

JD: I wouldn't know. I have no good sleep. I have a bad back, so I wake up every three minutes and turn over. I fight going to sleep. I don't like to go to sleep. I don't sleep much and I wake up feeling very bad—full of pain.

HY: I don't know how I'll eventually take this physical mal-



function that comes along with age. Don't you feel angry about it? I'm angry at my wrist, when it doesn't function well. I don't want to obey my wrist. I want to ignore my body!

JD: You have no choice. You have to take it. There's no one to be angry at. I can't be angry at my bones. Sometimes my back is so bad, that I'm in danger of... maybe not dying... but it feels like dying! Like something will break. Then I tell myself, if my back kills me I'm going to come back and stomp on it. But if I come back, I won't have any feet, so I won't be able to stomp on it. Spiritually stomping on your own back doesn't do much anyway. I don't think about it so much, I suppose. When I had cancer in Berlin, the doctor said, "you have cancer; it is very serious." And I said, "ok." Then he called Maria Tereza [Alvez] to have a consultation with me because he thought I wasn't taking it seriously, because I didn't get upset. I feel quite often, "oh yes, I am going to die now." So it is not unusual for me. I am not interested in dying but it is not like I'm very concerned

about it. Because people do die. It is not a fact of life, but a fact of non-life. But when you don't have a choice, there is nothing to think about, is there? I'd rather never die, but it is probably not going to work out that way.

HY: I used to think about death a lot when I was depressed. I don't know why I was depressed. Anyhow I am not depressed anymore and I don't want to pay too much attention to the depression.

JD: Were you depressed because your art wasn't so good? Maybe it was your diet, eating the wrong things. Not drinking enough red wine. If you give me some money, I'll tell you, it was your mother, like Deleuze and Guattari. It's my favorite line from one of their books. In Freudianism, if the

answer is "my father," then why go through all the analysis? You should just go to the doctor and say, "it is my father" and give him some money. I love this idea. So it was your mother Haegue! Now give me some money!

HY: My mother?

MW: Your mother—who flooded your bathroom, so I have read.

HY: Yes, there was that little disaster when she came to visit me in Germany for the first time in 2000. My mom and I wrote texts about this melodramatic event, which became a piece, called BATHROOM CONTEMPLATION (2000). Neither of us is very traditional, yet we both try hard to be really nice to each other in traditional ways which simply doesn't always work out. The climax took place in the bathroom after my mom tried to be a good mom and clean the bathroom for me. She took the shower and sprayed down the entire bathroom with it. At some point I saw water flooding out the bathroom and I was enraged. What caused the disaster was the absence of a drain on the floor, which in Korea would always be there.

JD: (laughing)

HY: I was so angry and annoyed to have my mother around, while I was already overwhelmed and trying to manage my life as a young foreign artist in Germany. I think she was also suffering from her dependency on me. My mom is a writer and that is what she is good at—much better than me—so I suggested that she write about our time together, which I also knew would give her a chance to break away from me. We both learned a lot from the experience as people and as writers. On an artistic level, it was interesting, yet I still don't fully understand the piece. You know, some works are better understood by other people than by yourself.

JD: Yeah, that's true. I don't learn much artistically. I try my best, but it doesn't work very well. Education comes very slowly, doesn't it?

HY: I hide the work I don't like.

JD: I often love my work when I make it, but later I see that it doesn't measure up. I want to do work that is as good as the Flemish painters. I want to do work that good! No one does work that good, but I want to do some important work.

HY: Significant work—as simple as it sounds.

JD: Not so easy. And the Flemish painters had a narrative given to them, so they had an easier job to do. I have to say, they knew how to do their thing, which was painting. And they knew how to paint. They had these Bible stories

that they could illustrate. Their art was a metaphor. But I don't want to do metaphorical art; I don't want to illustrate anything.

HY: Yeah. I think some artists refer to a position and mark a certain area, which can thereafter only be described by naming that artist. Such artists generate a narrative but only through the articulation of their position, which relies on positioning oneself very precisely.

JD: Perfect idea. That sounds excellent.

MW: And also the political notion can change. The Flemish painters and their narrative were in a way directly linked to political power, and you just can't take this position anymore.

HY: With Jimmie though, I believe we can get there! I'm absolutely positive! On one hand there is this fetishizing idea about the artist as a personality, like a celebrity. If you take a close look, you see different types of models other than, say, the YBA's—though they are celebrities, they don't necessarily have positions. It seems to me that the YBA movement has been nothing but a spectacular masturbation. It is very violent and illustrative.

JD: It is very violent, but the fake violence of a horror movie. When you go to a horror movie, you pay to be afraid, but you are not really afraid, you just paid your money to pretend to be afraid. But I don't want to say anything about any specific artists.—only this: if you see a big dead animal in a tank, and you pretend to be thrilled, and you pretend to be afraid, you are joining in with the pretense of that artist. "Ohhhh look at this. I bet you are afraid of this." And you say: "Oh yes, I am afraid of that."

HY: It is exactly like that. You're not even afraid of it, you're just saying that you are.

MW: While reading about both of you, I realized that you each share this kind of skepticism towards language or narratives. I found these quotes: "Build a story and destroy it"—that's from you Haegue. And you said this Jimmie: "Every artist must be against language, in both practical and conceptual ways."

JD: That almost sounds intelligent. I remember when I said it. I was on a panel in Venice with Baudrillard and Sloterdijk and two curators, Hans Ulrich and Hou Hanru, and Pistoletto. And the two philosopher-types said—and this goes back to the Flemish painters—that we have no more art. And at that moment Pistoletto and I said: "Wait, wait! It is because we don't have any more belief." They put art, like I do, in the European tradition, in a cathedral build-

ing tradition, so it is defined in relation to belief. I think surely art must begin when there is no more belief, which is exactly when we can experience art. If you believe something a priori, how can you ever see the “art”? You don’t see a statue of the Virgin Mary, you see only the Virgin Mary.

HY: It reminds me of a recent conversation I had with Abraham Cruzvillegas about “belief.” I think it is significant when one doesn’t know what that belief is in? An unknown religion, without a direction? I was expressing my doubt about this blind faith to him, because it is scary to have an unknown belief in your mind. I don’t know what it is. It doesn’t seem to be a religion but just some sort of belief. The closest term I could come up with is intensiveness. It may not have a shape or a narrative, but can remain abstract and very intensive.

JD: Like your spirits. Your religion. But with no gods attached. Sounds like Buddhism. I think Buddhism doesn’t sound so bad. Sounds workable.

HY: Buddhism I also don’t understand, because it is so gentle.

JD: Except in this dirty message that all these religions have. The message: “don’t desire anything.” It is a horrible message for humans. It is not an intellectual message.

HY: As a trained Buddhist would say, don’t desire even the desire not to desire anything. It goes so radically and intensively towards abandoning everything. That’s the quality of Buddhism as a philosophy.

JD: Yeah, that’s very genius, in fact.

HY: But at the same time, it is admirably gentle, without being aggressive and dogmatic.

JD: Always this idea: don’t embarrass your enemy.

HY: Yes, exactly. And there is another Buddhist anecdote which I love. There are two monks on a trip to train themselves. One day they are about to cross a very big river, and they get some help from a local lady who kindly volunteers to piggyback them across. The young monk goes first and waits for his master on the other side. Finally his master gets taken across on the back of this young healthy woman, and he looks so happy and is clearly experiencing deep pleasure, as he hadn’t been so close to a lady for such a long time. The two monks start their walk again and continued their journey to seek Nirvana. At one point, the younger monk begins to tease his teacher: “Was it good?” he asks. And then the master replies, “What are you talking about?” The young monk then explains timidly, but mischievously: “...good to be carried by a young woman.” The story ends

with this comment from the older monk: “Ah, that’s what you are talking about! I had already forgotten about it.” The young monk finally understands how free his master is! He could feel the joy, like an innocent child but never made himself a slave to that joy. The young monk, on the other hand, had been captured by that seduction.

JD: That’s a very good story.

HY: It is a very humorous, humane story, but then again, gentle. There are many nice stories. But all those stories are old. There was a time when I tried to study Zen Buddhism deeper, to work against my anger, but then I realized, I can’t. This gentleness is not yet in me. No.

Is there anything that you want to ask me? (laughter)

JD: I have been asking questions, haven’t I? But it is not part of my culture; we just don’t ask questions. I read a book review about an English explorer in Greenland who claims that the natives have no intellectual curiosity. “They must have been yaks,” he says, “they couldn’t have been human beings because human beings have intellectual curiosity.” So maybe it is a cultural problem. And when you read on he says, “...they didn’t ask me any questions about my life and where I was from.” But we don’t ask questions. It is very much a European thing to ask questions.

HY: And how is Europe for you?

JD: In Europe I am a stranger and I can participate at the same time. The racism is quite stupid here, but it is not oppressive, and it was oppressive to me especially in the U.S. Here I very often get someone sitting next to me, saying: “Oh I never sat next to an Indian before.” But in the U.S. it was dirty jokes, stupid jokes—“ha ha ha”—these kind of stupid things. The last time I was there was the ’93 Whitney Biennial. Before that I went to my mother’s funeral. But never since.

HY: I am thinking about eventually moving back to Korea.

JD: No, don’t move back home! It is not a good thing to stay home, no one should stay home. Maybe the Swiss should stay home. I don’t know. I liked Geneva, I went back in 1994, when we came to Europe. I have been back many times, because I worked at the United Nations. It was just to do my work. I didn’t do much else. But then, in ’94, when we went back, Geneva had so many Africans, who were quite well off—Ethiopians, Somalians, in those days. And they made Geneva look so much better than before. I was hoping they would all intermarry.

HY: I hope so too. But you said before, you can participate in Europe. You can still participate.

JD: I can still be a stranger and participate.

HY: I think if I could have that feeling, I could stay. But I don’t have that feeling here. I just don’t have the feeling that I’m participating. I’m allowed to live. I’m even allowed to make my career. But I don’t feel like I am really participating. It is not that I miss my home. I don’t think that I have to move back because I miss Korea, I don’t think so. That’s exactly what I am looking for: participation. Maybe I have done something wrong here.

JD: I think I have a great luxury and privilege... because of my looks.

HY: Because you look so good?

JD: I look so fucking English! I look so white. In the seventies, when I was a politician, a lot of us would be put in jail or in prison and I would dress up in a business suit and get us right out. Because they assumed I was a deputy marshal

or something. It worked every time. “Hello I’m Jimmie Durham. I am here to get Russell Means.” “Okay sir. Yes sir.” And so many people here tell me things they wouldn’t tell another Indian ever, because they think they can trust me, because of my beautiful blue eyes.

HY: I was almost envious, when you said that you can still participate. Once in a while it is interesting for me to reflect on what’s going on around me, and then all of a sudden I have a big doubt like, “what am I doing here?”

JD: Oh, I learned something impossibly strange about Koreans. It is about some place they went. But where was the place, as settlers, twenty thousand years ago, crossing the ocean and coming to some place, or fifteen thousand years ago, crossing the ocean like Polynesians? But it was Koreans. But where did they go? I don’t remember. Koreans going strange places.



