

To encounter Hyeree Ro's *flour hat (floor)* (2021), an installation that continually reorganizes its material assemblage into multiply entangled operations of psychogeographic mapping, is to attempt an exercise in navigating zones of contact that never quite reaches a conclusion. You are struck, first, by the simplicity of its formal organization: geometric arrangements of translucent standing screens, variously oriented, loosely triangulate an immense mass of flour that rests on the floor—not quite a perfect circle, but close. On the wall closest to the flour, a single-channel video plays in a silent loop: the artist, with performers Lucas Yasunaga and Armando Cortés, engage in a series of task-oriented performances including braiding each other's hair, a game of Cat's Cradle, rolling out and braiding strands of dough, and so on. Off in a corner of the installation space, a series of ankle-height screens cordons off a small rectangular space; upon a stack of papers in this enclosed space rest three bird-like forms.

*flour hat (floor)* unapologetically insists on and rewards close attention. Each element of the installation is in dialogue with another element; to walk in and around the whole of it (careful not to step onto the flour!) is to set off a series of significations. It is montage-like, this associative process, yet never so simplistic as to “add up” to something definitive. Like geopolitical zones of contact, which the literary critic Mary Louise Pratt once defined as spaces where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today,” the different forms that collectively make up *flour hat (floor)* each differently organize relations in (psychogeographic) space.<sup>[1]</sup> To insert one's self into these zones of contact is to allow oneself to enter a re-encharmed spatial system.

The standing screens triangulating the flour and video offer an early hint. In pre-cinematic times, particularly within South, Southeast, and East Asian cultures, screens were understood in architectural and spatial terms: screens partitioned spaces of privacy and publicity.<sup>[2]</sup> They offered shelter from the unwanted advance and the intrusive gaze. Screens were literal physical barriers, organizing spaces of visibility and modulating the visual field. And indeed, in a map of the installation, Ro identifies the three screen-like components as “screen or fence or sifter” (emphasis mine; more on the artist's naming of the installation's components shortly). Then, the mass of flour that dominates so much of the installation's space. This mass of flour bears traces: a footprint, marks such as those that might be left by large calligraphic sweeps, some clearly-defined pyramidal structures, other tracings retracing earlier traces. It all appears so dynamic, landscape-like—an effect enhanced by its projected backdrop, *flour hat (floor) video*, occupying the lower half of the wall.

Traces, hands, the (cultural) memory of forms: between the flour on the floor and the dough being kneaded in the video opens up a cultural history of nationalism, immigration, globalization, and the inheritances of cultural memory and diaspora. During the United States' post-World War II occupation of Korea (1945–48) and

long afterward, American wheat and wheat flour were, and remain, indelibly associated with concepts of foreign aid and occupation. America's exportation of its surplus wheat flour to US-occupied Korea and the spread of wheat flour in South Korea traces a precise movement within processes of postwar globalization—namely, the shift from Japanese colonial rule to the emergence of global US hegemony. Thus, even today, flour and flour-based foods continue to evoke memories of poverty, war, and food rations to surviving South Korean elders.

Ro tells me that her grandfather worked in a Korean flour factory, processing US-donated surplus wheat. Her father immigrated to the US late in the 1990s. She herself lives and works between continents. She (her website says) “thinks, speaks, writes, dreams in both English and Korean, many times in a mixture of the two.”<sup>[3]</sup> As art historians and critics, we're often cautioned against reading biographically. But when you live in the *in-between*, like her, living and working between formations of subjectivities and languages, thinking, dreaming, creating in ways that elude nation-state affiliations as fluidly as they do formal definitions, doesn't the personal inevitably leave its traces on the political? Or is it the other way around?

Back to those almost-but-not-quite legible markings, which seem to trace the complex temporalities of diaspora across the surface of the flour massed on the floor. The flour that is, in the video, braided carefully by hand, a sequence itself echoing a preceding scene of hair being braided carefully, lovingly, by hand. Or the bird-like forms (will they, like their animate counterparts, migrate beyond their enclosures?) that look strangely like masses of wet, worked dough?<sup>[4]</sup> Form and material is here reworked endlessly, entering into contingent relations within different zones of contact. Always being remade, always-becoming. Each element within the installation, aside from the mass of flour and the video, is named by the artist in a series of alternatives: (*maggie or crow*) or *all purpose flour or water or USPS box*. Or (*screen or fence or sifter*) or *maple or cotton sheer cloth or wood glue or hinges*.

I'm enthralled by this play of deferral that is, itself, always a difference.

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[1] Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40.

[2] Wu Hung, “The Painted Screen,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 1 (Autumn, 1996): 37–39

[3] <http://www.hyereero.com/about/>

[4] These forms are constructed out of shipping (USPS, DHL) boxes.