

2017

Byung Hoon Choi's Art Furniture: Art Furniture Constructing Korean Vernacular Aesthetics

Yeon Shim Chung

Associate Professor, Department of Art History and Theory Hongik University

In twentieth century art, after the development of postmodernism, which sought to eliminate the gap between art and everyday life, many artists conceived of new methods of craft and design that were previously impossible. In modernism, under the modernist assertion that “form follows function,” ornamentation and handcraft, traits that were regarded as properties of crafts, were poorly appreciated¹. Henri Matisse, who dreamed of creating art as soothing and calming an influence as an armchair, also felt anxious that his abstract paintings would appear too “decorative,” and would thus be regarded as a decorative art or a design product such as wallpaper. However, later in the twentieth century, the fields of craft and design underwent radical transitions, just as painting and sculpture experienced unprecedented changes. And Korea was no exception in experiencing these trends.

Going down a new path is not only a challenge to tradition and its existing ideas and terrain, but it is a difficult task in that it denies the expectations of the majority. Byung Hoon Choi has pioneered what he calls “art furniture” for nearly forty years now, continuing to introduce innovations, among them Korean vernacular aesthetics, to Korean furniture, a field that has long been confined to the ideologies of functionality, decoration, and craftsmanship. In what context should we understand Choi's art furniture? One way to understand it is in the context of Korean design history. Another is to look at his designs and projects within international trends. We can also consider what his work means within Korean design history and discourse. This essay aims to explore Choi's art furniture and understand its new directions within these various contexts; We will also discuss his work, focusing on the exhibition at the Gana Art Center.

I. Art Furniture and Kontext Kunst

The recently emerging hybrid projects in the arts present aesthetic experiences that are both familiar and unfamiliar as they attempt to discover new aesthetic sensibilities through *détournement* and reconstruction of existing arts fields. The hybrid trend is exemplified in the recent tendency in contemporary art to replace the terms “craft” and “decorative arts” with “design.” In Western art history, the term “ornament” had become synonymous with surplus and excess. After becoming an aesthetic category in the Baroque imagination, craft had to give way to the Minimalist trends of the Industrial Age. In 2002, the American Craft Museum changed its name to the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD)—a reflection of the changing times. This renaming was in part an attempt to overcome the negative connotation of the terms crafts and decorative arts in art history. But by taking up terms such as design and material culture, which do not indicate specific genres or mediums, it was signaled an attempt to bring contemporary life into the museum. The change in contemporary art vocabulary is a reflection of the reality in which the divide between the domain of art (focused on aesthetics) and the domain of craft and design (centered around functionality and usability) is breaking down, and where more and more artists are working freely between the two fields. Consider the artists and architects associated with Surrealism, Bauhaus, and Russian Constructivism; they were avant-garde artists, who were committed to innovation in the fields of art, design, architecture, and fashion. Their philosophies of innovation and integration of art and everyday life are evident in their visual works, and are especially clear in their craft and fashion designs.

Choi's work reflects the historical avant-garde utopian spirit of art. For example, Choi's art furniture deals seriously with the issue of how furniture's functionality can be organically interrelated

with daily life. For the last forty years, he has pioneered art furniture both in the art world and in academia; he has continually participated in exhibitions, and he has also introduced an art furniture curriculum in university education. His theory is that furniture design should be expanded into a new field wherein it would change daily life and stimulate the sensibility. His art furniture proposes a new status for the existence of furniture. His art furniture can be seen as a piece of furniture that offers a new context for its space; it creates and constructs a new situation in the otherwise changeless everyday space. Choi's art furniture can be discussed in relation to "Kontext Kunst" proposed by Peter Weibel. Recently, the term "design art" has become prevalent in both arts and material culture fields; for example it was used in the Design Miami/Basel (where Choi had a solo show in 2015). In both Choi's art furniture and Weibel's Context Art, usable objects are brought into the environment. Art furniture is art intended to attract and mediate the viewer—an art that results from the artist's attempt to build new relationships and behaviors. It derives from efforts to move away from the culture of white cube, which views a work as a mere object, and attempts to create new situations and environments—a social space so to speak. Choi's art furniture carries with it ambivalence: it is an artwork, that is, an art object, but it is also functional and usable in certain spaces. It thus satisfies conditions of both art and object.

In Korea, Choi's art furniture has been an undertaking to change the paradigm of furniture design, which had long been narrowly defined in terms of functionality. Choi began to lead the change in Korea in the late 1980s; similar trends had already appeared abroad. We may ask: what enables him, a furniture designer, to have so many important solo exhibition opportunities in New York and Paris? Why would Choi receive critical attention at international design exhibitions such as Design Miami/Basel? The answer is that Choi's work is extraordinary: not only does it have a special art-historical value in Korea's furniture design history, but at the same time it is very contemporary and thus has global appeal.

It is important to recognize that Choi has always attempted to humanize his concepts while continually striving to hybridize the functionality of furniture with the aesthetics of fine art. An early remark by Choi, cited in Kim Bok Young's essay for his exhibition in 1993, reveals the then young artist's concerns for finding ways to bring new change to Korea's craft design. In his remark, Choi reveals that he was trying to develop new foundations for self-regulation at a time when in Korea and abroad the contrasting issues of technological development and traditional craftsmanship dominated the field of design. He had already begun his search for art design when he made the following comments in 1987:

Today, the highly scientific civilization is producing an industrial society that is standardized by the machine and that shows to mankind the negative aspects in the loss of humanity. Why I begin with this basic perception of modern society is because I would like to propose directions for today's modern crafts. Modern craftsmen should recognize the spirit of this era, restore humanity with new philosophies of life and art, and create future-oriented culture for contemporary life. My work starts from [such] recognition of the spirit of the times.²

Choi's avowal to "restore humanity through philosophy of life and art" is not just a warning against contemporary design's routine assertion of functionality, but also a self-critique to recover humans into design users. In Choi's art furniture, we can see three elements—artistry, functionality, and humanity—organically united.

II. Byung Hoon Choi's Art Furniture and Korean Minimalism

Choi began to create art furniture at a time when digital media began to emerge globally and new technology platforms such as the World Wide Web began to emerge. Also new in Korea in the 1980s was the rise of popular culture, as well as the introduction of color television. Amidst these

changes, Choi turned his attention to nature, which he felt had been lost in the contemporary art scene. In the late 1980s, postmodernism began to emerge in Korea, and new urbanism was also forming with its proliferation of apartment complexes. Although the use of found objects such as industrial wastes and cements was popular among Korean artists at the time, Choi looked to nature in search of motifs for “restoring humanity,” as already discussed. Within the global context, this also helped develop Choi’s identity in relation to Korean culture.

In an essay on Choi’s solo exhibition in 1993, the art critic Oh Kwang-su pointed out that compared to traditional Korean woodcraft and furniture making, contemporary woodcraft was underdeveloped, and that this was the most illustrative example of the contemporary culture’s disconnect from tradition in Korea³. Because of Japanese colonization, Korea experienced a disconnect from tradition in various areas including art and architecture. In the case of Japan, tradition has always been highly respected in crafts and design. But Korea faced the challenge of rebuilding its own identity in the absence of roots and foundations. In Choi’s early works, we can see that the artist saw the aesthetics of Korean wood furniture’s simplicity as a distinctive Korean characteristic.

Since the late 1980s, Choi has produced various kinds of work, but he has kept his work titles simple. Outstanding examples are the Collected Insects series, which he produced before 1988, and the subsequent Afterimage and Afterimage of the Beginning of the World series, which continue to this day. These series clearly reveal Choi’s aesthetic concerns. He has often employed wood and stone as his mediums—materials that directly address our natural environment. The title “Beginning of the World” refers to the past. Through such titles as “Beginning of the world” and “Afterimage,” Choi brings back and mediates Koreanness and aesthetics—what is presumably missing in contemporary Korean culture, art, and society. Born in Gangwon Province, Choi grew up looking at the ridges of the mountains. In his work, through the use of familiar natural sources such as pebbles and stones, Choi hoped to bring into our lives organic relationships with nature. Afterimage, a word that has long appeared in his titles, refers to an image that remains in one’s mind and memory because of the continuous workings of the sensory experiences even though the actual image has disappeared.

Choi has paid attention to traditional Korean architecture and furniture, in particular the characteristic flow of lines and the void between spaces. In traditional Korean space, there are many middle and in-between spaces, which function to bridge two distant spaces as if a threshold and a room are neutralized with each other. In a traditional “hanok” house, the “daecheong maru,” the floored hall between two rooms, is not only a liminal space through which to enter a new world, but also a bridge between the two different worlds. Traditional Korean furniture and hanok architecture do not use any nails, but are produced by using a high-level assembly structure, relying on a single organic flow. This organic tendency comprises Choi’s unique *matière*; it is also reflected in his choice of materials such as wood and stone. Choi’s art designs highlight naturalness rather than artifice of any kind, and his designs visualize and transform traditional Korean space into contemporary art forms. Park Soon Bho explains Choi’s expression of Korean culture as follows: “When Choi consciously avoids artificial delicacy in order to express his very Asian and particularly his Korean aesthetics, that means he would also have to boldly give up his own craftsmanship.”⁴ Similarly, when Choi’s work began to receive international attention after he exhibited at Galerie Downtown in France in 1996 and 1997, art critic Yoo Jae Kil linked Choi’s Tao- or Seon/Zen-based work to naturalism and minimalism⁵.

The naturalism in Choi’s work, its tendency to return to nature and return to the beginning, is explained as a return to what constitutes the origin of human beings—wind, stone, soil, insects. However, Choi never reverts this return to the origin aesthetic of oriental or exotic forms. In bringing out and utilizing what he perceives as Korean aesthetics, Choi takes precautions against orientalism, and remains contemporary, continually mediating the past and communicating with the present. This means that in production, he does not bring a model or a prototype from the past; rather the

structure has to go through a process of being internalized within the artist's concept. This is a bi-directional process, moving back and forth between the past and the present, with the artist always safeguarding himself from succumbing to the traditional. Choi's aesthetic identity has been to bring Koreanness to contemporary design—an accomplishment that he has achieved through his art furniture since the late 1980s. For the past forty years, Choi has forged a new path in Korean furniture design by actively and widely exhibiting, and also educating people about art furniture.

Although Choi's work shows minimalist and naturalist aesthetics, one should be careful not to relate them the Western Minimalism. The art critic Lee Yil has commented on naturalism as a characteristic of Korean art and as the aesthetic foundation of Dansaekhwa art; it is this naturalism that is seen in Choi's design work, particularly in his use of the rough *matière* of stone. In his essay titled "Naturalism and Minimalism" (1980), Lee Yil defines that Korean Minimalism [unlike that of the West] is "nature-intuitive" and is "an expression of the Korean ethnic taste for artlessness and randomness."⁶

The minimal form of Choi's work is a composition and combination of concise and simple forms. It is like an ink painting completed with a single stroke, with the artist's first stroke dominating the blank paper and creating tension in an instant. In ink painting, unlike the western oil painting tradition, the negative surfaces that remain unmarked are considered active and positive expressions. Without any compulsion to fill in the surfaces, Choi rather empties out, a practice that reveals the Asian aesthetics of paradoxical spatiality. This is exemplified in Choi's space structure designs where he explores the play between positive and negative spaces. Thus produced, the structures are finished with Choi's unique artistic sense, imagination and wit.

It would be a misreading if one linked Choi's minimalism to the Minimalism of the West, which developed its visual style by utilizing the mechanical industrial age's standardized bricks, plywood, and grid structures. It emphasized the mechanical (as in the case of Dan Flavin's work), the standardized, the modular, and the artificial. The Minimalist artists of the West sought to create work that is most contemporary and most mechanical, even by refusing to sign their works—the rejection of unique handmade qualities. In contrast, Choi's minimalist style reflects his attempt to create the most natural flow of lines that emulates wood furniture from the Joseon period of Korea, which is known to have accomplished the simplest arrangement of forms and the most Korean style of curves leaning on straight lines.⁷ His works in stone bring to light the rough surface texture and reveal the material's intrinsic nature. These works function as pieces of furniture so their surfaces are directly connected to the user's sense of touch. Among the properties of the materials he employs, visuality and tactility are most truthfully expressed, and this is also evident in the works presented in this exhibition at Gana Art Center. Choi's art design is a product of his experiments to define Korean vernacular aesthetics, which he approaches in detail through the choice of materials and themes and the expression of space.

Choi is a cosmopolitan traveler, who has explored the civilizations of the Mayans, the Incas, and the people of India. In the 1980s, he lived in Finland and in the United States, where he learned to "otherize" himself and examine Korean aesthetics with critical eyes.⁸ He continues to explore and research Koreanness through his art furniture practice.

III. Byung Hoon Choi's Recent Work in 2017: The Phenomenological Encounter of the Viewer, Object, and Space

Since 1990, when Choi was appointed a professor of Woodworking and Furniture Design at Hongik University in Seoul, he has been leading the new field of art furniture through education as well as through practice in the art world. Though his early works focused on wood materials, he has also experimented with various materials such as granite and marble. In 2001, he worked in Cara-

rra, an Italian village known for marble production, studying the material's properties and characteristics. Since then, he has gradually employed marble in various colors, dramatically juxtaposing different textures and maximizing the works' visual beauty, musical rhythm, and theatricality. His recent works seem to have gained a new sculptural dimension and theatricality; they now embody social spaces, which invite and embrace passers-by, viewers and users.

In his exhibitions at the Friedman Benda Gallery in New York and the Galerie Downtown in Paris in 2014 and 2016, respectively, Choi presented many works in stone, suggesting that his work was expanding its field from art design to sculpture. All the works presented at this exhibition at Gana Art Center are practical benches, but people may not notice them as furniture, because they also appear to be much like an installation art works, composed of horizontal lines. The Afterimage of Beginning 017-477 (2,420×850×650, basalt) shines its most naturalist impact when it induces momentary silence and internal dialogue as it contrasts with indoor and outdoor light. The two bands are neither perfectly vertical nor perfectly angled curves. The mass that connects the two horizontal lines also serves to connect the empty space between the two lines in a stable manner. The Afterimage of Beginning 017-481 (1,800×650×700, 1,400×650×700, basalt), produced in 2017, is a long bench-type furniture design, in which the contrast between the stone's rough surface and soft effect is highlighted. The Afterimage of beginning 017-482 (1,600×800×750, basalt), with a pronounced back, and the Afterimage of beginning 017-483 (1,700×650×500, basalt), designed to have the sitters face different directions, have shapes that are unpredictable from any angle. These shapes are so atypical as to create different experiences for the viewers as they move around them.

That these works are experienced differently depending on where the spectator views them, leads us to say that Choi's concept of space does not come from the Western perspective or a self-centered point of view. Choi's work presents a perspective that allows the viewer to move and experience various angles. This kind of perspective can be seen in traditional Korean space, in particular the visual experience provided by "hanok architecture, where we can view various scenes while moving our bodies on the daecheong" floors. For example, Choi's Afterimage offers not only a site for viewing, but also invites the viewer to sit down, put down human desires, and meditate in a state of Seon/Zen(禪), "nothing(無爲)," or silence. In other words, Choi's work is more than design, sculpture, and object installation; it is a new level of context art, which embraces the users, the surroundings, and the situations.

The works he produced in 2017 are considerably different from his works of 2011. A work from 2011, Afterimage 011-376 (2,400×500×650), employs white marble, basalt, and stainless steel, and utilizes the contrasting effect of smooth marble and rough basalt. The stone's naturalness is contrasted with the artificiality of stainless steel, one of the most commonly used materials today. It can be said that Choi has produced afterimages by juxtaposing visually opposing elements so they contrast with and complement each other. Works in basalt and marble can directly function as utilitarian objects such as a stool, but the structure is supported with the horizontal axis of stainless steel, which ruminates on the surrounding space with the effect of an afterimage.

Choi's basalt works in this exhibition render irregularity that is reminiscent of Korea's mountain ridges—a feature that has constantly appeared in Choi's work. They establish an unstructured world that cannot be produced with standardized modules, a world of indeterminacy similar to Lee Ufan's world of Mono-ha. Choi creates works that never repeat the same effect; each of his works develops a specific aura in a specific space. Choi's art furniture produces different properties depending on the space and light in which it is placed. Furthermore, producing objects that would interact with nature and communicate with us and our society, Choi's art design project has accomplished a new phenomenological meeting of humans, objects, and space.

Choi's art furniture has generated a complete mise-en-scène encompassing the humanness of people's social relationships and organic interactions with the surrounding milieu, in addition to the

pleasure of design users. Art furniture also embodies elements of contemporary installation art. In particular, Choi's works presented at New York's Friedman Benda Gallery evidenced that his work belongs to a new field of art that extends beyond design to sculpture and installation. This marks the beginning of a new chapter in the development of art furniture, something Choi began in the late 1980s.⁹ His design project, which includes context art and social space, among others, provides a platform for new momentum and further possibilities of change. This is how Choi gains contemporaneity in the global art world.

- [1] Louis H. Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," *Lippincott's Magazine* (March 1896), pp. 403–409.
- [2] Byung Hoon Choi, "From the Figures of the Beginning to My Art Furniture," *Jonghap Design (Total Design)*, (May, 1987), p. 40. Emphasis added. Choi's essay written at the beginning of his development of "art furniture" enables us to understand his early works in the 1980s and the way he reaches his definition of "art furniture" in Korea. Choi's writing was also partly quoted in Kim Bok Young, "Choi's Art Furniture, The Symbol of Human Redemption: Choi's Recent Exhibition," 1993. Emphasis by the Author.
- [3] Oh Gwang-su, "Byung Hoon Choi's Art Furniture: The Harmony of Poetry and Function," 1993.
- [4] Park Soon Bho, "Art Furniture as Reinterpretation of Tradition: Byung Hoon Choi as Its Pioneer," catalogue essay of Choi's exhibition in 1994. This essay specifically discusses the way in which Choi's "art furniture" approaches Korean tradition in his own idiosyncratic interpretation.
- [5] You Jae Kil, "Naturalism and Minimalism: Byung Hoon Choi's Art Furniture," (Ellen Kim Murphy Gallery, 1999).
- [6] Yeon Shim Chung, Yujin Lee, Jeung-eun Kim (ed.), *Art Critic Lee Yil Anthology*, vol. 1, (Seoul: Mijinsa, 2013), n.p.
- [7] This tendency is visible in Korean crafts, decorative arts, and furniture design in Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). See Hongnam Kim, *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor and Simplicity*, (Weatherhill, 1993); Korean Wooden Furniture of Joseon Dynasty. Exhibition catalogue. (Gallery Hyundai, 2011).
- [8] Ahn Kui Sook, "Kalpa – Expressing "Kalpa" (an aeon) in "Ksana" (a tiny unit of time in Buddhism)," *choi byung hoon _ art furniture (Hangil Art, 2003)*.
- [9] These features presented in Byung Hoon Choi's art furniture show different trajectories from Wendell Castle (b. 1932) who lead "art furniture" in the history of American craft and design. Choi's idioms are also closely in line with the "contemporaneity" of visual art.