



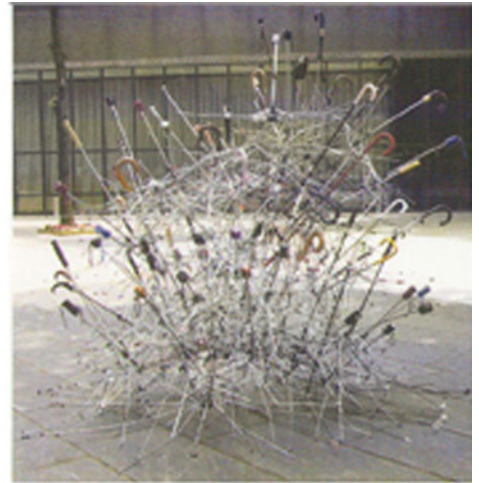
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TRANSFIGURING THE EVERYDAY: THE WORK OF JEAN SHIN
By Susette Min

plein air corp.



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"History can be grasped only in its disappearance."

—Walter Benjamin

Early morning New York City, after a stormy night. A young, dark-haired woman combs the wet streets, sifting and retrieving the "refuse and detritus" of the "half-concealed, variegated traces of daily life of the collective."¹

For months, the scene is repeated after every rainstorm. Artist Jean Shin and her husband scour the city, searching for broken, discarded umbrellas in the streets and sidewalk gutters of the finer—and not so fine—neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Manhattan.

The search ended in the summer of 2001. Shortly thereafter, amid the institutional facades of buildings of Long Island University in Brooklyn, students and passersby encountered a kaleidoscopic burst: a rippling wall of dark hues of blue and green, bright colors of orange, lavender, red, and patterns of polka dots, blue stripes, and floral prints. While *Umbrellas Stripped Bare* (2001) hangs suspended between two trees, billowing in the wind, nearby, the skeletal remains of the umbrellas—curved handles, cheap aluminum frames, steel ribs, twisted spines—lie entangled in a heap of metal.

¹ Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, "Translators' Forward," in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), p. ix.



JEAN SHIN's art practice and the attention she pays to the fragments of societal remains evoke the image of one of the many gleaners profiled in Agnes Varda's film, *The Gleaners and I* (2000), or that of a nineteenth-century ragpicker. The ragpicker, one of the many incarnations of Walter Benjamin's pantheon of urban observers "experiences the city streets as interiors, its traffic and commodities as images of reflection."² Unlike the conventional flâneur, an urban observer—white, bourgeois, and male—who leisurely strolls the streets in order to retain control or to make sense of the city, the ragpicker with her sharp scavenging eye picks her way through the rubbish. As evoked by the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, the ragpicker shares qualities with other characters—the detective, the artist, the dandy, and the collector—by observing and experiencing the signs, sounds, and images of everyday life. Deborah Parsons writes, "In fact, Benjamin's surrealist ragpicker resembles Baudelaire's avant-garde flâneur more accurately than the authoritative figure he is usually attributed with.... Like the modern artist and the ragpicker, Benjamin makes a collage out of fragments of urban myth."³

² Arlie Gleber, "Preface," *The Art of Taking a Walk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. vii.

³ Deborah Parsons, "Flâneur or Flâneuse? Methodologies of Modernity," *New Formations* 38 (Summer 1999), p. 98.



Alterations (detail), 1999/2001

Shin's project of salvaging is comparable to that of the ragpicker and collector in her gathering of discarded objects and new but obsolete materials. In her own words, she describes her process as follows: "I am attracted to certain found materials—like the excess fabric from altered pants, a single sock left behind in a laundromat, or stockings scarred with runs—because they embody a certain history of dysfunction, rejection, and abandonment."⁴ However, unlike the ragpicker who relies solely on the street for materials, Shin usually calls upon friends, family, peers, and colleagues, enlisting them to donate mismatched or lost socks, old shirts, runny nylons, etc. Amassing a surplus of material in trash bags and boxes filled to excess, Shin proceeds to isolate herself in her overflowing Brooklyn studio and embarks on labor-intensive projects that entail considerable amounts of time and energy. Her art practice, involving sewing, cutting, tearing, and refabricating thrown away, forgotten, and useless materials, leads to a visually pleasing viewing experience that revives a history and story left untold. In other words, the end result of Shin's creative reformulation of the cityscape and what Chitra Ganesh describes as the residual trace of experience situates her as a visual historian, extending the roles played by the ragpicker, collector, and gleaner.

Shin's careful consideration of materials and deft use of form creates a palimpsest of time and space, often with a nice sense of humor. A colorful cluster of pant cuffs arranged on the floor comprises *Alterations* (1999/2001).⁵ The installation, filled with hundreds of cylindrical-shaped forms, is a nod to artist Eva Hesse. In contrast, however, to Hesse's "buckets" of fiberglass and polyester resin, Shin's chosen material is simply fabric—excess cloth cut from blue jeans, khakis, and slacks—that comments on her predicament as one who falls outside the fashion industry's "standard size." Shin turns her alterations experience humorously on its head, decoding what is average or inadequate, by stiffening the cuffs of varying sizes and colors with wax, creating a metropolis, an uncanny landscape of Bonaventure-like buildings.

⁴ Chitra Ganesh, "Memory on the Edges of Collapse: Zarina Hashmi and Jean Shin," *Asian American Arts Dialogue* (spring/summer 2001), p. 9.

⁵ The dating formulation of this and other works mentioned in the essay is based on the following: the first date is the date that the work was first created and installed; the second is the re-installation of that work in a different configuration or at a different site.



Chance City (detail), 2001

Shin's installations of urban-like landscapes provide a view from those below, on the streets, rather than a panoramic view of an urban developer, an architect, or a CEO. Her work depends on both her community and the city to generate materials and, in turn, they determine the scale of her work. She presents an urban experience that is less fixed and authoritative, and more aleatory—ever changing and fragmented.

Chance City (2001/2002), as the name indicates, is emblematic of the aleatory in Shin's art practice. In 2001 at Art in General, \$16,751⁶ worth of discarded instant scratch-and-win lottery tickets comprise her *Chance City*. Painstakingly, and with total concentration, Shin balances and stacks the tickets one on top of the other to create a house of cards without any kind of supplementary support. The seemingly vulnerable structure and imminent collapse of the cards toppling over from a mere sneeze or draft metaphorically correspond to the lottery ticket's promise of fast money. Although the easy erasure of latex silver with a coin or fingernail in seconds determines a loss or a win, the gesture underscores the hopes and despair, the dreams and desperations of all those who play. The rectangular-shaped tickets decorated with repeated patterns and catchy logos in high gloss yellow, blue, and red lettering, promising the possibility of winning numbers, appear from afar as a miniaturized "forbidden" city. The denizens of Shin's "Chance City" are by definition losers, as the tickets share a series of unmatched and unlucky numbers: an anonymous monument of lost hopes and dreams.

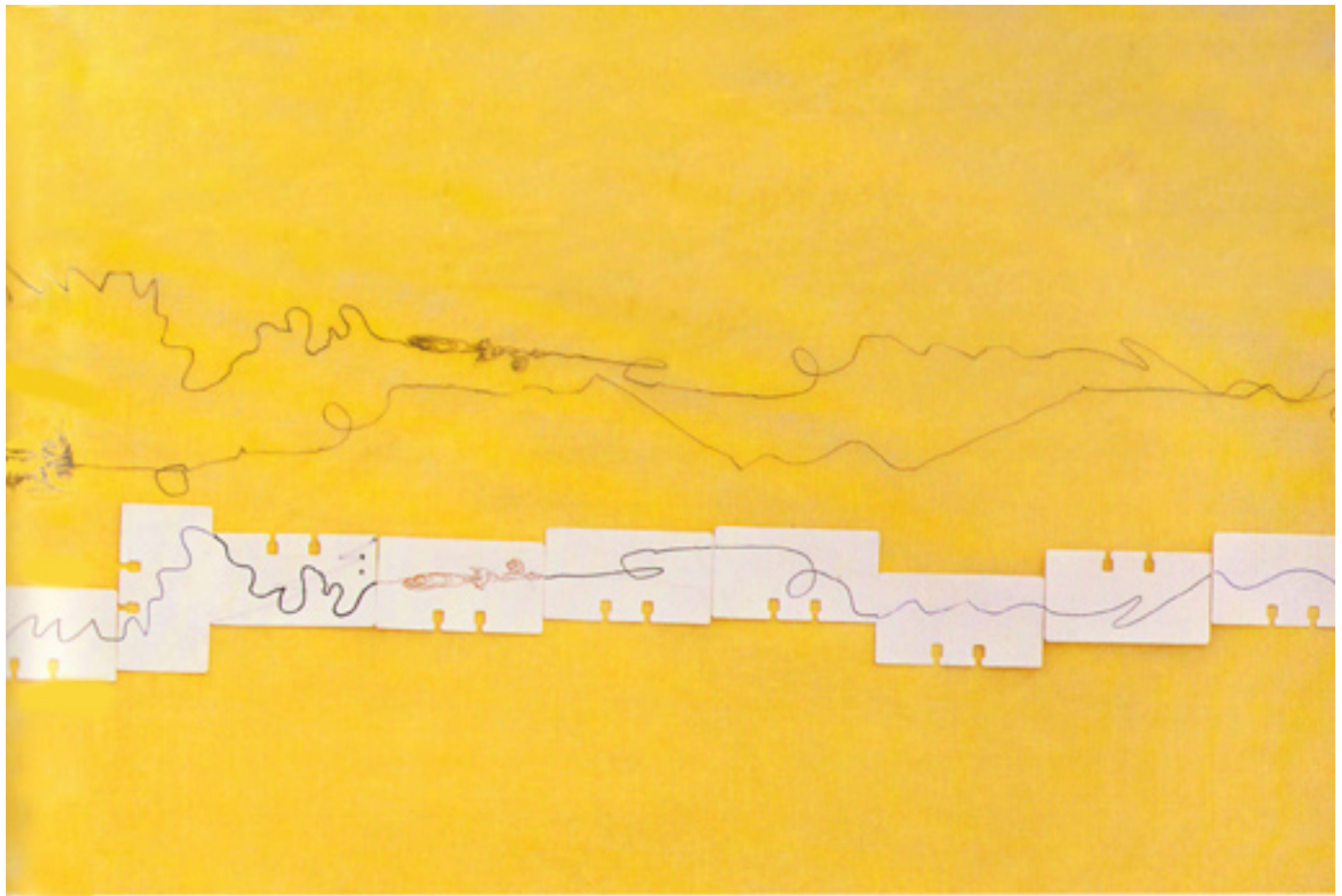
⁶ At Caren Golden Fine Art in 2002, the total amount of lottery cards used amounted to \$17,119.



Drawing Connections (167 Contacts) (detail), 2001, Rolodex cards, ink and pencil on canvas, tracks cover

All of Shir's works attempt to create a physical and psychic space as well as an imaginary community in which boundaries shift, or divides of public and private blur. Note that the use of these everyday items does not necessarily allude to a universal, self-evident, or transparent history, but rather suggests a marginal and fragmented narrative about human commerce. In other words, her work in a larger context locates itself in the production and commodification of goods and services that intersect class, gender, and race relations. Her search for materials leads her to liquor stores, convenience chains, and sweatshops; encounters which leave an impression on Shir, indirectly informing her artistic practice and politics. Her frequent visits to dry cleaning stores, tailor shops, and laundromats have earned her the nickname of "lint or cuff lady" by the many immigrants who themselves emigrated to the U.S. in search of "a better life." Her process and art hint at an immigrant narrative that pictures the city not as "a homely space of belonging and familiarity,"⁷ but rather as alienating and marginalized. In part, the history Shir is creating is also personal:

⁷ Tom McDonough, "The Crimes of the Flaneur," *October* 102 (Fall 2002), p. 103. In the first half of his essay, McDonough critiques Hannah Arendt's reading of Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of the flaneur which she conceived as "...precisely a homely space, a space of belonging and familiarity, and the flaneur became its model citizen."



the collecting of materials as well as her process incorporates her past — her parents owned and ran a supermarket while she was in high school, and later a liquor store in Washington, D.C. — but does not seek to express a didactic identity politics. Rather, that re-created history makes palpable the contours and feelings of an urban and immigrant experience.

Technology, as reflected in Shin's practice, leads to regularity, homogeneity, entropy, and control. It threatens to erase the local and personal history of communities. In *Rolodex Project: Drawing Connections* (2001), Shin asks the observer to leave a unique mark by drawing a line across the front and back of a blank Rolodex card. Along the walls, she places the cards next to each other by way of connecting the lines of each card, not only documenting the gesture of drawing a line, but mapping her life force and contacts; in essence, her community. Here, Shin's project re-interprets a sign — the Rolodex card once symbolized the literal and figurative status of a person in another person's social or professional field — as well as the sign's undoing, as the formerly ubiquitous rotary card file verges on obsolescence with the introduction of the Palm Pilot.



Shin creating *Safety Net* in her studio

During a recent residency in Seoul, Korea, at Ssamzie Space, Shin constructed *Safety Net* (2002). Crocheting discarded yellow plastic straps, Shin's work appears like a canopy across the expanse of the upper floors of a defunct printing factory. Her bright yellow net, made of reinforced nylon, creates a visual caesura, an attempt at sifting and capturing the fragments of a once prosperous time within an abandoned ruin, left in the dust, forgotten by an ever-changing scene transformed by the globalization of capital and the distribution of advanced technology.

In all of her works, Jean Shin leaves a visual register of everyday life, what Michel de Certeau calls "what is left over." Her resourcefulness in gleaning and rescuing myriad ordinary objects in turn transforms them, and produces a communal, collective space, revealing that what we leave behind is constitutive of experience— and that one's broken dreams and waste can be transfigured by another woman's art and vision.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

All work unless noted is courtesy
Mixed Greens and the artist

Cover:

Seams (Red Dress), 2000
fabric (cut clothing)
38 x 26 x 2 inches

Umbrellas Stripped Bare, 2001
broken umbrella metal and wire
6 x 6 x 6 feet
Installation at Long Island University,
Brooklyn Campus

Umbrellas Stripped Bare, 2001
broken umbrella fabric and thread
50 x 6 feet
Installation at Long Island University,
Brooklyn Campus

Seams (4 Shirts), 1998
fabric (cut clothing), wax and hangers
44 x 53 x 5 inches
Courtesy The West Family Collection at SEI

Seams (Red Dress), 2000
fabric (cut clothing)
38 x 26 x 2 inches

Lost and Found (Single Socks), 2000
socks and zippers stuffed with dryer lint
dimensions variable
Installation at the Asian American Arts
Center

Alterations, 1999/2001
fabric (pant scraps) and wax
2 x 22 x 12 feet
Courtesy Collection of Peter Norton
Santa Monica

Worn Soles, 2001
leather soles and heels
dimensions variable
Installation at Rotunda Gallery, NYC, and
Korean Cultural Center, Washington, DC

Untied, 2000
neckties and chain link fence
6 x 30 feet
Installation at Exit Art, NYC

Nightscape, 2001/2003
fabric (garment scraps) and thread
dimensions variable
Installation at DUMBO Arts Center, NYC

Chance City, 2001/2002
\$17,119 worth of discarded lottery tickets
8 x 8 x 7 feet
Installation at Caren Golden Fine Art, NYC

Drawing Connections (167 Contacts)
(detail), 2001
Rolodex cards, ink and pencil on canary
tracing paper
20 x 4 feet

Found Installation (Ribbons), 2002
digital c-print
20 x 16 inches

Found Installation (Seam Tapes and Chords),
2002
digital c-print
19.75 x 13.75 inches

Safety Net, 2002
discarded nylon straps and rivets
dimensions variable
Installation at space imA, Seoul, Korea

Glass Block, 2003
emptied wine bottles and other glass
bottles stacked to fit into the gallery
entrance
87 x 84 x 12 inches
(in collaboration with Brian Ripell)
Installation at Smack Mellon Gallery, NYC

Cutouts, 2003
fabric (cut clothing) and starch on wall
dimensions variable
Installation at Smack Mellon Studios

Suspended Seams, 2003
fabric (cut clothing) and thread
dimensions variable
Installation at Smack Mellon Studios

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgments: The artist would like to give special thanks to these incredible individuals who made this publication possible: Susette Min, Christos Giannikos, Frederieke Taylor Gallery, MS Editions, Paige West, Erin Sircy, Michael Greenblatt, Tanya Rubbak, Ben Cosgrove, Eleanor Williams, Nora Kabat Dolan, and Brian Ripel.

This publication was supported in part by the Faculty Development Fund of Pratt Institute.

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Photo Credits:

Cover, pages 6, 7, 18–20, 22–25, 30, and 31 by Masahiro Noguchi

Pages 12 and 13 by Steve Tucker

Page 32 by Bill Orcut

Edited by Ben Cosgrove

Designed by Michael Greenblatt, Tanya Rubbak



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Mixed Greens sells original, contemporary art online and in its New York gallery. To learn more about Mixed Greens, visit mixedgreens.com.

Published by **plein air corp.**

www.pleinaircorp.com

212.924.6809

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ISBN: number 0-9728833-1-2

Printed in Greece.