

LOGISTICAL SCULPTURE: ON
THE SCULPTURAL PROJECT OF
HYUN NAHM

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Image and Sculpture: Sculpture as
Societal Landscape

Last summer, as I began preparing to write this critical text about Kawah Ojol, Hyun Nahm's first solo exhibition in Indonesia, I visited the artist's studio at his invitation — and the scene I witnessed that day has stayed with me ever since, crystal clear. The kind of desolate ruin one sees in a nightmare; a continuous landscape like nothing so much as the set of a cheap sci-fi movie staging some dystopian world. In this landscape, a chain of unidentifiable warehouses, shipping centers, and garbage dumps, one after the other. It occurred to me that here, indeed, might be a clue to why the artist is so insistent about calling his sculptural works "landscapes." Kawah Ojol, too, moves in the direction of landscape. Kawah Ojol is based on a wealth of information and observations collected by the artist over the course of research trips all over Indonesia. Like an anthropologist setting out to map the structures of daily life that make up a society he has stumbled across, Nahm seeks to map — as landscape — a society of which he himself is a part. Yet the result is a landscape that is material in addition to being visual.

Describing his own artistic process, Hyun Nahm chooses the standalone word, "mining." This refers, among other things, to the way he constructs his visual language by selecting from the spontaneous forms generated by the casting and molding of different materials. For the artist, mining likely

refers to a series of formative practices in the studio, such as melting industrial materials, pouring other materials into them, and hardening the result. In puckishly attaching the word "mining" to the experience of contemplative play and the projection of conceptual images surrounding nature onto stone, Hyun Nahm was likely centering the fact that such minerals are both natural and social. Indeed, for many decades now rare metals — which have become the raw materials for new industrial products — have been the subject of frenzied mining. And we are frequently told that rare earths, germanium, antimony, gallium, cobalt, tantalum, and other unknowable minerals are the resources that will shape the world of tomorrow. These minerals are mined, refined, developed, transported, distributed, and sold. There is not a single speck of nature that is not infused with some social component. So the use of the word mining, here, is not just for show, chosen simply as an elegant way to designate an aesthetic act. It encompasses a critical approach to the language of sculpture, attentive to the sculptural material the artist works with, as well as its formal potential.

A Specific Object?

The idea that the aesthetic experience promised by sculpture ought no longer be that of "sculpture as image" directs us, we might say, to the single most important shift surrounding the language of sculpture. And in this sense, the insistence on producing sculpture as landscape — while also referencing landscape as the most powerful of images — cannot help but be disconcerting. A sculpture placed on a stylobate or plinth functions as symbol or icon. This is because any such piece is an image that has taken on the form of a material object. As such, it is imbued with meaning, and the viewer, in sensing or perhaps even understanding said meaning, enjoys the aesthetic experience of the thing. This is, at least, how sculpture was conceived of by art history before the advent of minimalism. A sculpture is a material object (a block of stone, for example, or a hunk of metal), but it conceals this characteristic, engaging us as an aesthetic object with symbolic meaning. Therefore, what mattered in sculpture was not its material, its so-called substance, but rather the form it took on.

By the second half of the 20th century, however, such ideas of sculpture were nowhere to be found. In the words of Donald Judd, a representative figure in the world of minimalist sculpture, "specific objects" demanded that sculpture be rid of any symbolism or metaphysical notions. And in order to completely strip away any whiff of subjective meaning, they preferred to use mass-produced industrial objects in place of handmade sculpture (which would inevitably retain traces of authorship). Judd argued that both sculpture and painting needed to be three-dimensional, and that as "specific objects," they ought to relate on an equal footing to the other three-dimensional objects around them (whether walls, columns, or floors) in order to produce a phenomenological experience of said objects.¹ In this way, sculpture was now transformed into what we would later come to call installation. Meanwhile, this strong reaction against sculpture as signifier and symbol led to arguments that emphasized materiality over form. This was perhaps best summarized by Robert Morris in his essay "Anti-Form."² Pointing out that minimalist art, despite its insistence on the object, was actually indifferent to material specificity, Morris rejected any art still bound to form. And with that, minimalism once again turned to process art. In essence, Morris took Judd's argument a step further, calling for the symbols and allusions that still remained in such objects to be washed away completely. When we recall the standard art historical summary of this narrative around sculpture and its subsequent development, Hyun Nahm's insistence on sculpture's return to the image cannot help but fascinate.

Sublimation and Desublimation

The work presented in Hyun Nahm's Kawah Ojol is the kind that instantaneously connects two poles. These two poles refer to the two ends of the supply chain of contemporary capitalism: mining, the initial process, and what is often referred to in the industry as the "fulfillment service" or the final delivery to the consumer. In between, of course, are processes of production and distribution that remain completely opaque to us. As such, it is these two practices — mining and shipping — that serve as key indicators of the social processes that produce the myriad goods surrounding us. Of course, it is only through the idea of global

¹ Donald Judd, *Specific Objects*, Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975, 2016, pp. 181–189.

² Robert Morris, *Anti-Form*, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge & London, The MIT Press, 1970.

value chains that we understand how these social processes of production and distribution are monetized. In other words, when we hold a cell phone in our hands with a rare mineral integrated into it, all we actually know about it is its brand, its model, and how much it costs. We might call this “sublimation.” Every commodity has a specific use. But there is only one reason for its production. It is produced solely because it brings in more money; because it increases value, usually marked by currency. As such, we can say that claiming a commodity is produced solely for its inherent value is to abstract it away from its materiality, its status as a material object. Therefore, for a given material object to become a commodity, it must be abstracted into the realm of value. In other words, it sublimates the material itself, transforming it into the abstract object we call value.

Of course, the same could also be said when it comes to the principles of sculpture. When Judd calls upon us to look at sculpture not as a symbolic structure of meaning but as a “specific object,” we might call this gesture “desublimation.” Breaking away from abstract values like “meaning” in favor of experiencing the sensory world formed in union with other material objects — this, to Judd, is the goal of sculpture; and the word that best suits it is “desublimation.” And yet in reality, this so-called de-sculptural impulse, this return to objectivity or materiality, does contain a certain amount of hypocrisy. As Peter R. Kalb notes, Judd worked with “Bernstein Brothers, Tinsmiths; Allied Plastics; Rohn Haas Plexiglas; and Galvanox and Lavax finishes.”³

Judd worked with a variety of different “commodities.” And it can be said that the process of his work was not, as he professed, a process of sublimation, a process of making objecthood perceptible, but rather a re-sublimation of commodity-as-social-production into “specific objects.” In other words, Judd takes the industrial product as commodity and re-signifies it as a sculptural object, stripping it of its materiality as commodity. He then imbues it with meaning as material, an object with aesthetic value. Though Judd declares that he is dealing with sculpture as a transparent object, a material reality, separate from any subjectivity (that he is, in other words, desublimating it), what he was actually doing was nothing more or less than re-sublimating a commodity (a social material object) into an aesthetic object.

Hyun Nahm incorporates this process of sublimation and desublimation — or, to borrow a term from political economy, the contradictory movement between material (content) and value (form) — into the language of sculpture. To simply celebrate Hyun Nahm as an artist who excels at exploring the materiality of sculpture would be a misunderstanding of his sculptural project. Nahm is clearly cognizant of the impossibility of any true separation between the material and the social. Indeed, he often speaks of his work as material moving through a global network of production and distribution, referred to as the global supply chain.

“Iram” and “Adhan,” a series of cell tower sculptures and photographic installations that Nahm revisits in Kawah Ojol, can be understood as both material device and allegorical circuitry connecting the worlds of sulfur mining and shipping labor that populate the exhibition. Serving as a kind of infrastructure connecting the dizzying spatial and temporal differences that span global supply chains, this series offers a sketch of the new landscape now added to the urban landscape. Meanwhile, where “Chain Link Strategy” — which builds on an installation piece that has become the artist’s focus in recent years — directly alludes to the precarity of these very supply chains, and “Erupted” presents scenes that politically symbolize the social conflicts and confrontations entangled in such supply chains, “The Mine” and “Puppeteer(Archipelago)” produce a stark spatial counterpoint, contrasting the vastness of the Indonesian archipelago as a site of mining with the figure of the ojek, or platform laborer, and the microcosmic landscape of mining. In this way, he reintroduces the very image that sculpture and installation sought to banish and recalibrates the dialectic of matter and form in sculpture writ large. And this, when all is said and done, is precisely why Hyun Nahm is one of the most exciting artists working in contemporary sculptural practice today.

³ Peter R. Kalb, *Art Since 1980: Charting the Contemporary*, Translated by Hyejeong Bae, Mijinsa Publishing, 2020, p.27.