

Yona Lee in Conversation with Alex Davidson

AD: You've been working with this space for quite a few months now, is it very important to the work?

YL: *Yea I think it's really important. Because when I approached this space I realized it had a really strong sense of self because of its materiality. It's all concrete and you have to climb up the scary looking metal stairs which is really unusual for a gallery. And it's very prison-like - enclosed and hidden. It's the kind of space you don't often get to experience in modern days; very dusty and old. I was also overwhelmed by the existing yellow metal structures, which are weird looking but I can't really do anything about them. There is also a concrete slab in the middle hanging from the ceiling. So there are many obstacles in the space already. And the space is long - nine meters - and narrow but you don't really realize it because of the existing metal bars in the middle. So when I approached the space I wanted to respect the space as it is and respond to it in terms of context, materiality, its size, and how people walk around it.*

The way the space already directs the flow of movement and the kind of movement that it encourages, is that something that you consider in your work?

*I respect people's movement in the space. And I was also interested in how the wooden trapdoor is directly connected to the foyer space downstairs but you don't realize that when you walk up the ladder, you don't have a sense of the whole building. So bisecting the space in half exaggerates how long the space is and having a rod hanging down to the lower level gives a sense of the architectural structure around you. It follows the logic of the space in a way.*

There's almost no other way to go, as a viewer, you have to walk the length of the room to get around it, and the rods direct your movement.

*I think that was the best solution I could find to occupy the space while keeping in mind what's there naturally, and letting the existing yellow metal structure breathe.*

How do you find working with steel?

*It's been really interesting to work with mild steel. Every metal has a different character to it. The stainless steel I used for the Te Tuhi project its more bouncy so you can't really use it for delicate bending. But I quite like working with this steel because it responds quite well; when you bend it stays there. It is strong enough to hold itself but its soft enough to be flexible and let you do whatever you like with it.*

Did you have someone else produce the rods for you?

*No I made most of them myself. I used this machine that could bend steel using different sized discs. I did a lot of trialing out of different shapes and sizes. The thinner and thicker rods behave differently to the same bending. I think it's kind of similar to playing the cello. You have a limitation of sound that you can produce, but within that you do have a lot to work with.*

You said the light is quite important for your work; do you want to describe that relationship a bit?

*Yeah, when you look at minimalism in the 60s they - Donald Judd and so on - thought the light was an important part of their work and in particular how the surface is quite vulnerable to the light. The time of the day and the weather also affects the way you perceive the work. There is one big*

*window in the space and two small ones, so when you walk around there are parts in which you can clearly see the details of the work because there is a lot of exposure, but when the work is backlit you get a different experience of it again. The play of the shadows is also nice. So spending time in the space you see the work changing all the time.*

*At the same time the materiality of the space influenced the materials I use. I think the industrial material goes well with the space as the space itself is quite industrially made. So the material sort of dissolves into the space and at the same time it brings out the already existing language. And the rods will rust over time which responds to the age of the space.*

The project has quite a long duration in terms of you spending months beforehand making the rods and then installation is two weeks is quite an intensive process and quite long, and I was wondering what happens to the metal afterwards, because metal is such a permanent material, do you reuse it?

*I think the great thing about metal is that you can recycle it, and you can re-cut it and reuse it for a completely different project.*

*In terms of the install, although I have 2 weeks installation I don't work all the time. So I quite like just sitting around and just looking at it. I think it's important to be part of the process of making and the installation because you get a lot of ideas from it. If I had just asked a technician to do it for me I wouldn't have had that much possibility. That's why I'm enjoying this long installation; you discover a lot of new things about what the project is doing in the space.*

You mentioned Donald Judd before, does the work of the Minimalists influence your work?

*I quite like their logical decision-making. They don't make intuitive decisions, and they use industrial materials that someone else has made for them, which gets rid of the mystic artist's hand and emotional expression. They also wanted to deal with the space of the real world, getting rid of the illusionism in the space - everything in the space is physical, there's nothing behind what you see.*

It's interesting because I was reading an interview with Fred Sandback and he said that illusions are facts; they are equivalent to physical objects, and reality is illusion...

How did you go about making the decisions regarding the shapes of the rods?

*I guess I've borrowed the language of how strings behave. You know how strings get tangled and if you pull them it creates tensions. And when they're loose they sort of creates waves. You know if a string is taught or not just by looking at it. So I tried to mold that into the metal rod even though it doesn't normally behave in that way. I guess that's part of the illusion; it sort of gives them a strange contradiction.*

Do you see the actual experience of the work as time-based?

*I think the rods have a progression. They start with a straightforward simple language that sort of develops towards the other end. Like a lot of music which starts, builds up, gets more complex in the middle and then there is a climax towards the end - there's that sort of language going on. So you kind of have to see how it progresses, as the level of looseness and tension changes as you walk around.*