

HELPERS CHANGING HOMES

YUKA OYAMA, ELZA CZARNOWSKI, FRIEDEMANN YI-NEUMANN

ABSTRACT

When home is not geographically bound, when it unfolds in several places simultaneously, how is this home space felt, sensed, and shaped by individuals? How do long-term personal possessions that people carry with them as constants help create a sense of home?

HELPERS CHANGING HOMES (2018) is the first iteration of artist Yuka Oyama's practice-based artistic research *Mobile Personal Belongings* (2017–ongoing). She investigates how personal belongings that accompany people, especially in moments when they experience profound uprooting become vital source of emotional continuity and stability in affirming a sense of home.

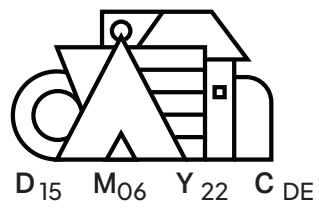
HELPERS CHANGING HOMES consists of a video (7:05), seven wearable sculptures and pendants. This artwork was commissioned by The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand to be exhibited at the exhibition, *Language of Things: Meaning and Value in Contemporary Jewellery* (2018). The production was supported by College of Creative Arts at Massey University and an international artist-in-residence program, *Te Whare Hera*, Wellington. Thirty qualitative interviews with people who had experienced more than thirty transnational/national relocations and a theatrical performance in public space with the interviewees constituted the foundation of this artwork.

This PDF serves as a footnote of *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES* for the exhibition, *MOVING THINGS. On the Materiality of (Forced) Migration at the FORUM WISSEN*, Göttingen, Germany. In Part One, Oyama describes the background of the production, meanings, value, and role of both home and things — personal possessions that have stayed with people — after exponential number of relocations. The Part Two records a conversation between Yuka Oyama, Elza Czarnowski and Friedemann Yi-Neumann on February 14, 2020, who are two of the five curators of the exhibition.

1 Download this document:

<https://yukaoyama.com/download-helper-changing-homes/>





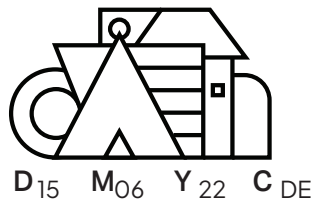
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- 1 Performance view. Photo: Alex Efimoff (AE)
- 2 Performance view. Procession along the water front. Photo: AE





PART I: HELPERS CHANGING HOMES BY YUKA OYAMA

"It is like you are ready to get going. It is just what it feels like, when you are moving all the time, isn't it? You are always getting ready." (Owner of a Strawberry Jar)

INTRODUCTION

When home is not geographically bound, when it unfolds in several places simultaneously, how is this home space felt, sensed, and shaped by individuals? How do long-term personal possessions that stay with individuals as constants help create an affective dimension of home?

As a visual artist, I employ wearable sculptures, performance, photography, and film to elicit and express a sense of home of nomadic people. My personal history of multiple 'home' nations, including Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, USA, and Germany, has inspired me to discover what provides orientation to individuals to cope with frequent uprooting. My original training as a jeweller has also developed my close observation into intimate proximity of adorned objects such as clothing and jewellery, and their agency to affect the wearer's body and mind. My investigation examines how personal possessions that are carried and worn are imperative in creating an individuals' socio-cultural presentation of self (social identity), and how they signal, shape, and provide anchors to the internal. Through wearable sculptures I represent people's stories. I invite the interviewees for whom I have made sculptures, who share similar biographical experiences to meet each other. I then unfold how adornments (worn sculptures) can facilitate a collective (membership) to create performance, where individuals share their personal stories.

HELPERS CHANGING HOMES (HCH) (2018)¹ is the first iteration of my artistic research *Mobile Personal Belongings* (2017–ongoing). I investigate how personal possessions, especially in moments when people experience profound uprooting, and when homes are in transition, are a vital source of emotional continuity and stability in affirming a sense of selfhood and a sense of home. In the first volume, I worked with individuals who had experienced more than thirty transnational and national relocations. For the second volume, *a home is a home is a home* (2019),² I investigated the experience of home for vocational commuters who live between many cities and countries. The third series, *SURVIVABALL HOME SUITS* (2021),³ I explored ideas of 'home' with children and young adults who had been raised (or were being raised) in 50:50 shared child custody, living between two or more households.

I am particularly interested in these moments when home is shifting and the persons who live in such setups, since they embody skills to adapt to constant external changes. My hypothesis is when elements that have previously provided orientation point for individuals such as national identities by birth, culture, ethnic communities, gender roles, traditions, (home)land, and properties erode, things that remain with individuals as constants become prompts of anchors





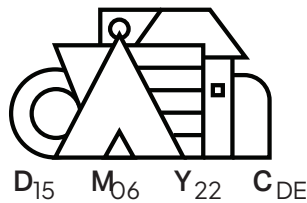
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1 Interview. Photo: Yuka Oyama (YO)

2 A recording device. Photo: YO



for them.

In 2017, I was invited by The Dowse Art Museum to create an artwork in Wellington, New Zealand, hosted by an artist-in-residence program at the *Te Whare Hera*. A few months before travelling to New Zealand, I was granted German citizenship. On the one hand, the new national identity would allow me to live in many countries in Europe. On the other hand, this also meant to give up the previous Japanese citizenship. It felt to me like it would be a good time to revisit the open question that I could not answer in my twenties: Where is my home and where do I belong? On paper, I am German; psychologically, I am probably (or used to be) Japanese. In fact, I am a global citizen, who is not tied to any citizenship nor nation. I have specific ambient, function, state that I want my home to provide. I then devise my constants to maintain similar immediate surroundings that respond to these conditions. Personal belongings that I carry everywhere (or I make sure to locate the double of identical items at all home places) are my smartphone, laptop, sketchbook, books, tea, cosmetics, perfume, spices, family pictures, running shoes, and jewellery. This clarity and implication of my personal possessions to connect various home places were garnered through undertaking *HCH*.

HELPERS CHANGING HOMES METHODOLOGY

The following methodology was applied to implement *HCH*: 1) conducting qualitative object-based interviews, 2) undertaking performances with the protagonists (interviewees), and 3) presenting the artistic results in exhibitions and holding discussions together with the actors (interviewees) and professionals from various fields.

I found and met my participants through networks of the *Te Whare Hera* and the Wellington City Council. We placed advertisements in newspapers, online posts, and printed posters. I was looking for at least thirty participants who had constantly experienced dislocations. I then found volunteers between 20 – 65 years old, of all genders, and multifarious nationalities: New Zealand (Kiwi), Australian, German, Taiwanese, Korean, Chinese, American, Indian, French, Canadian, and British.

Interviews were held in my studio, where people attended with their personal possessions that accompanied them to all home places. In approximately two hours, we discussed object biography, personal biographies, and what home meant to them after having to experience numerous relocations. I audio recorded conversations and photographed the interlocutors' personal items.

After conducting the interviews, I was convinced that I wanted to conduct a performance that resembles a collective ritual to commemorate the experiences that include pleasure and hardships of uprooting. I then selected seven narratives, transformed the interview contents into wearable sculptures, and planned a performance.





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1 Performance view. Procession along the water front. Photo: AE

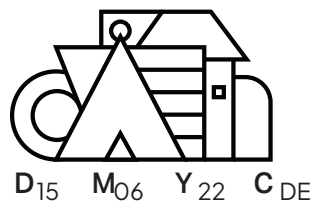
2 Performance view. Gathering around. Photo: AE

3 Performance view. Lining up. Photo: AE

4 Performance view. Swapping shells. Photo: AE

5 Performance view. Crawling into new shells. Photo: AE

6 Performance view. Leaving. Photo: AE



A FILMED PERFORMANCE IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

The performance of *HCH* took place at the Waterfront in Wellington, which is located close to the city centre. My participants (interviewees) wore the sculptures that I created for them. At first, they went onto a procession for about 500 meters wearing the sculptures. In the second scene, the performers swapped their sculptures with another person, and in the third scene, they left — went home.

The performance resembled how hermit crabs gather up once in a moonlight, measure up their bodies, create a line based on the size of their bodies (shells) — the largest in the front, and the smallest in the rear. After the crabs have formed a line next to an empty shell which is bigger than the largest hermit crab's shell, the swapping action starts all of a sudden. The largest crab slips into one empty shell, then the second largest one would slip into the house of the largest, which is followed by the third, the fourth, the fifth, until the last one slips into a new home-shell. In the end, one empty shell is left behind.

With this performance plot, I wanted to convey my interpretations of the whole interviews. Process of moving will never stop, and similarly, people's sense of self or home will continue to change. Personal belongings like transitional objects⁴ create imaginary continuous space or ambient around individuals' body. These objects neither replace nor become home, but they remind feelings of familiarity, care, security, protections, love, comfort, relaxation, continuation, and groundedness.

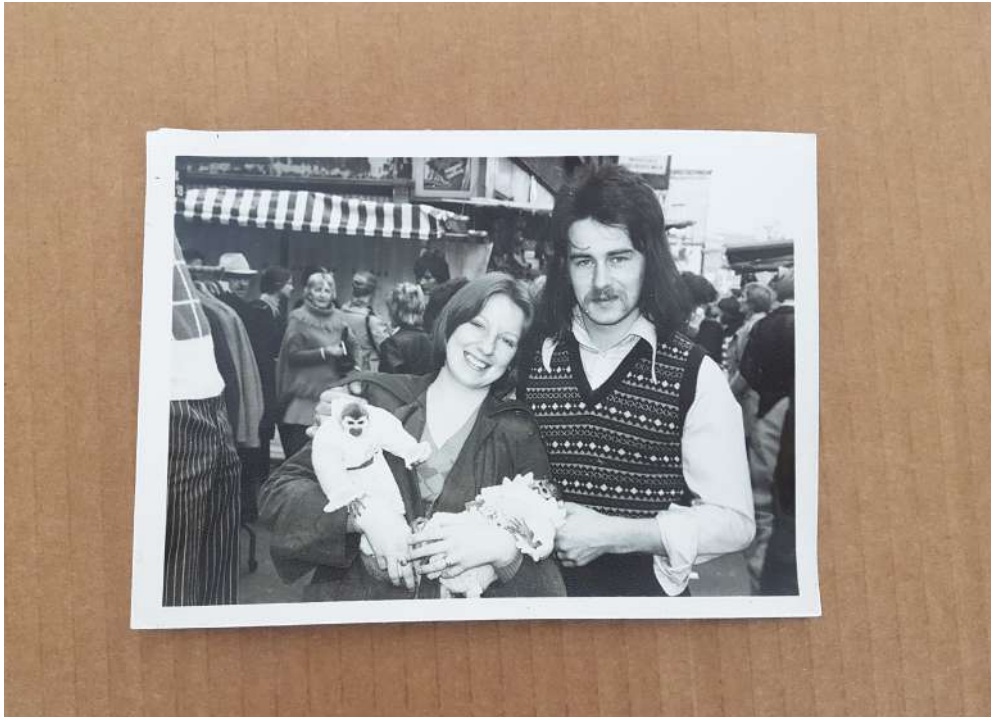
Ironically, my wearable sculptures made in cardboard that represented individuals' special mobile personal possessions were quite heavy. Through pierced breathing holes, one could partially see the outside world from being inside the body adornments. Moreover, the bamboo interior structures that supported the cardboard sheets enhanced the feeling of being an insect in a cage.

The experience of wearing and moving the sculptures was truly unpleasant, uncomfortable, and not at all relaxing. Therefore, once the performance was over after many hours, and the actors took off their sculptures, they said that it felt transcendental and free, released from the discomfort, weight, and darkness. This collective sensation was perhaps a symbolic and healing process for many of them to digest various experiences that are related to recurrent uprooting. For me, this artwork was also a process of healing and marked a new beginning.

PERSONAL POSSESSIONS THAT SURVIVED NUMEROUS DISLOCATIONS

Most of the objects that my respondents brought as essential objects that accompanied them to all home places during the interviews had higher emotional value than monetary and material value. Some of them were well-made and hand-made, whilst some objects were mass-pro-





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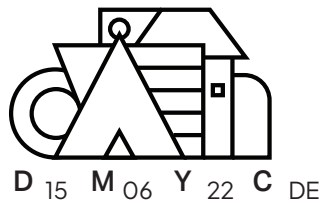


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- 1 A photograph of parents. Photo: sent by a participant
- 2 Photo: YO
- 3 Video: documents. <https://vimeo.com/720248048/9199aa9842>



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duced items, cast plastic pieces, or found natural materials.

The collated mobile personal possessions can be categorized broadly in three different types. The first group of objects are documentations of connections with special relationships to people, past events, and places. Many of these objects are not used on a daily basis. The second group of objects are tools or mediums that allow people to create a sense of constancy, the same-ness: an illusion that home has stayed the same despite geographical changes. They are frequently used to allow the owners to perform activities — home-experiences. The third group of objects are ones that belong to both the first and the second groups. They are both documentational and use-objects that prompt home-experiences.

GROUP ONE: DOCUMENTATIONAL OBJECTS

Some objects become memorabilia and souvenirs and are kept as long-term personal items, because they are material documentations of significant personal relationships, events, and places. These objects are, for example, wedding rings, grandmother's strawberry cookie jar, mother's purse, mother's blouse, ex-girlfriend's button, a farewell gift, a souvenir from a special trip, photographs of family members and friends, and personal letters.

Many interlocutors mentioned photographs frequently. Photographs are documentations that are printed or kept as digital data that allow people to keep and refresh memories precisely.

There are also literally documents. Especially people who are from non-Western countries brought documents that validate the owners' quality and proficiencies, for instance, educational transcripts, qualifications, certificates, and recommendation letters.

WHAT ARE THESE OBJECTS TRYING TO PRESERVE AND DOCUMENT?

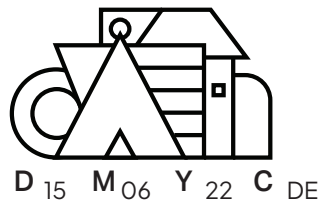
From the objects that are categorized in the group 'documentation', I sought to analyze what it is that people are trying to preserve through keeping these items; what kind of experiences and meanings are tied to and represented by them.

First, some of these objects represent strong ties to persons, events, places, and time that are connected to the individuals' origins: the original birth places where they come from, a time in their childhood, the place where original family (mother, father, siblings, forefathers) lived, culture(s) and tradition(s) of origin – even though the individuals lived there only for a couple of months.

Mother's Wallet

This object is mum's wallet. This represents my mum. A lot of love is inside it. It has an A-Ha concert ticket, a two-Dollar-banknote, and pictures of my family and friends. I carry this wallet everywhere. The place where I would say 'home' is the space and time where I lived with my mum, dad, and brother back in Korea. Home





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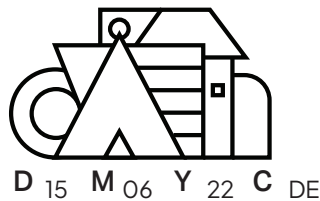
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- 1 A set of coloring pencils. Photo: YO
- 2 Game Pins. Photo: YO
- 3 A Japanese Hachimaki (headcover). Photo: YO





exists in combination of people in memory now.

Second, the persons, events, places, and time that the objects represent often relate to key persons, occurrences, and journeys that influenced largely in shaping the owners' selfhood. For example, the first airplane ticket to travel abroad, the first person who introduced queer gender identity, the first community who accepted the owner.

In one interview, my participant spoke about her colouring pencils, which were given by a person who influenced her in her youth to become aware of her own non-binary gender identity.

Colouring Pencils

This is a set of colouring pencils. I have used some of them, but I do not use most of them. If it ever finishes, I kind of lose something. So, they are almost new. Something about it that I like is that it is so contained. Everything has its place. The person who gave me the colouring pencils was a family friend who really understood me. She was a lesbian artist, who always wore colourful clothes. She was very different from any adult I knew. She told me to be independent, look after yourself, and keep yourself contained, which means to be self-sufficient.

Third, some items were selected as documentational memory objects, because they are material proof of achievements, self-affirmation, belonging to a community, membership to a specific group, appraisal of people's outstanding qualities.

Game Pins

I was working as a game maker, organizing Olympic Games and World Cups. These pins have a huge sentimental value to me. Two of these are from the Vancouver Games. The third is from the Rugby World Cup in New Zealand, and this one represents my country of New Zealand as well as the relationship I had with my home and my country's team. You can't really buy these badges. They are given by the athletes as a token of appreciation and friendship to people who 'meant a lot' to them during the games.

One of interlocutors who was born into a family of multicultural ethnical backgrounds and had often felt like he didn't belong to any particular group and community, brought a cotton headcover. This is a testimony and witness of a trip, where he felt that he was accepted for who he was.

A Headcover

I like keeping things that remind me why I am the way I am today. This is Hachima-ki, a Japanese helmet scarf. I brought it with me to the Kaho'olawe Island, the trip





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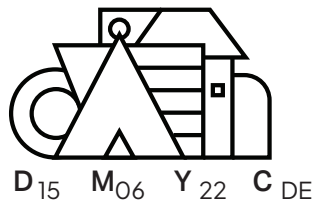


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- 1 A set of postcards. Photo: YO
- 2 A Mirror (2022), painting, 15 x 12,5 cm, acrylic paints.
- 3 A ticking clock. Photo: YO
- 4 A moving box. Photo: YO



that taught me that life can regrow. For the first time in my life, I felt accepted as a Hawaiian. I enjoyed my presence and felt strong.

GROUP TWO: OBJECTS THAT STAGE CONSTANCY

The second group of objects are personal belongings that are used to perform specific activities (home-experiences). These items mark quite different purposes compared to the first group, which have little practical use-function, but are conjured up with personal meanings.

Creating the same multi-sensual home ambient and aesthetic experiences using objects was frequently mentioned during interviews: the same postcards always hang exactly the same way next to a dining table, the same sound of a ticking clock, the same food, the same room decoration, the same ambient candle-light.

Postcards

This set of postcards are always put on the wall next to my dining table, exactly in this order.

A Mirror

I bought this mirror in Tunisia when I was 17. The mirror is small enough to carry everywhere. In New Zealand you cannot put things on walls unless you own the house. You can lean this mirror on the wall. So, it is easy to personalize any room with this mirror, and it contains memory of the modern side of Tunisia, where I grew up.

A Ticking Clock

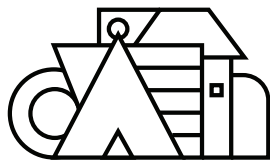
The sound of a clock ticking connects many fragmented homes that I have lived. I travel to many places for my work. Does not matter where I am, clocks tick at one constant speed. The sound calms me down. It grounds me. It is meditative. It gives me an illusion that I am always in the same space.

Moving Boxes and Ripping Tapes

The sound of packing tape, ripping, that's the sound of home. Every time when we settled down, a conversation between my husband and I started to happen: How is it going? Are we moving soon? Where do you think we move next?

There are items that serve individuals to 'function' — to think, to structure, to work, to communicate, despite shift in geographical locations. To name a few examples, they are a camera, smart phones, laptops, notebooks, diaries. Additionally, some objects enable owners to engage with physical activities like sports (skiing, riding a motorcycle, cycling), reading, making art, and sleeping, which create ongoingness devoid of changes in places. Interestingly, many





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- 1 A pair of skis. Photo: Sent by a participant
- 2 A participant with his motorbike. Photo: YO
- 3 A Pillow. Photo: YO
- 4 Video: the sound of motorbike. <https://vimeo.com/720246188/54752bb451>

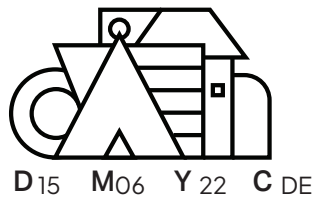


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of these activities are solitary activities that a person can perform alone. The person is alone, but she/he does not feel lonely. They are perfect activities to come to terms with loneliness that is typically caused by uprooting.

A Pair of Skis

My hobby of skiing has become my occupation. I attended ski competitions when I was younger. Later on, I became a maker of winter Olympic games, which made me travel and move constantly to many cities. Everywhere I moved, there was a lot of snow, and I could ski—in the Alps, Canada, Australia, North America.

Motorbike

For me, the 'Royal Enfield Bullet' I ride, is the sound, heart, heartbeat, and soul of India. I go into a Zen-like state when I ride it. It takes me home in a way no other ride possibly can. I do a lot of my thinking when I am on it. The helmet holds my thoughts inside my head, and I can think them through. When I arrived in Wellington, I wanted an Indian motorbike, 'Royal Enfield Bullet'! The sound of the bike is like a heartbeat.

Many people mentioned that it does not have to be 'this pillow', 'this particular book', 'this bicycle', 'this clock'. Instead, as long as there is a comfortable pillow, an interesting book, a sturdy bicycle, a clock that ticks that is fine.

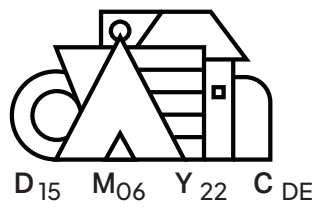
A Pillow

It does not matter how far I travel, I always bring my pillow with me when I know that I am spending a night. It does not have to be the same pillow that I keep over many decades. I buy new ones every now and then, but it has to be 'my pillow'. Many of my friends think that is funny that half of my suitcase is filled up with my pillow. The first object that I unpack when I move is my pillow. The first room I start decorating when I move into a new place is my bedroom.

GROUP THREE: OBJECTS THAT BELONG TO BOTH GROUPS ONE AND TWO

The third group is comprised of personal items that both represent and document significant connections to persons, events, time, and place (group one) that also allow individuals to create experiential identicalness and constancy (group two). For example, a Nikon camera of an interlocutor that she inherited from her mother — who had passed away — is loaded with memories of her mother, the interviewee's origin. She has now become a photographer and she photographs with it. Photographing for her has become a means of self-expressions, generating artworks, organizing her thoughts, memorizing, and undertaking the same activity as her mother did.





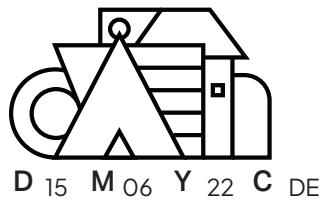
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- 1 A sewing machine. Photo: YO
- 2 One of two Nikon cameras. Photo: YO





Two Nikon Cameras

Objects that I have carried around with me mean more than the place. They are my Nikon cameras, two of them. One belonged to my mum, who had passed away; another one, I bought with my first paycheck. We 'work' together. I am a photographer.

A sewing machine in the following interview also belongs to the third group. It was given to her by her carrier-oriented mother, who also sews. According to her, it contradicts a general stereotype: carrier-driven businesswomen do not engage with handy craft. Moving around frequently with a sewing machine makes little sense, as it is heavy and massive, but because of these unconventionalities, the sewing machine can stage an illusion that the home is not on-the-move. The interviewee also sews with this machine, where she surely collects thoughts and generates ideas.

A Sewing Machine

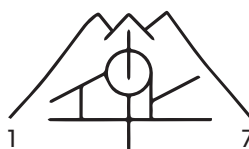
Having a sewing machine defines home. If I am only passing through a city, I cannot have a sewing machine. But when I stay in one place longer, I can have it. This stuffed animal was made by my mom. She was a power executive woman ahead of her time, who also taught me how to knit and sew.

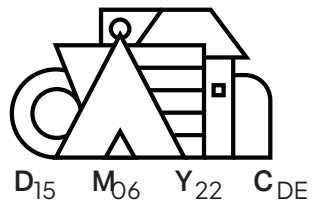
CONCLUSION

In *HCH* I sought to identify 1) the meanings and value that distinguish 'home' from any other spaces 2) implications of long-term mobile personal possessions to constitute a sense of home, when individuals have experienced frequent relocations.

After completing this artwork, I have collated the following recurring responses from respondents from my interviews on conceptions of home. 'Home' is a space and time that is experienced and shared with specific individuals. It can also be in the past. There are emotional and sensual ambient, atmosphere, and multisensorial experiences connected to this space that comprise specific smell, sound, taste, brightness, and temperature. 'Home' (ideally, but not always) offers qualities such as protection, security, familiarity, love, comfort, and relaxation. The 'home' space should be structured by the person's own individualistic way, where she/he has power to control and participate. In this 'home' space, she/he should be able to express and strengthen her/his individual agency. Finally, homes can be a site of oppression and violence.

Material objects such as personal possessions that are carried to all home locations act as material documentations of significant life events and personal relationships. At moments, when transitions in life take place, selfhood goes through agitations. Therefore, objects that symbolize special moments that have resonated to self-discovery, validate individuals' integrity, assure self-affirmation and origins become indispensable witness and reminders. They evoke





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1 Performance view. Photo: AE

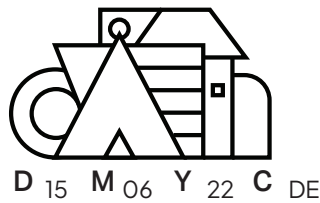
2 Video: HELPERS CHANGING HOMES (2018), 7 mins. <https://vimeo.com/257380106>

3 Video: Moving Talk. <https://vimeo.com/720254361/4f72c6cc2d>

4 Video: Practice. <https://vimeo.com/720251479/cdae14f751>

5 Video: Rehearsal. <https://vimeo.com/720253256/ff51f76240>





qualities like love, care, security, familiarity, ongoingness, comfort, relaxation, protectiveness — similar qualities to the conceptions of home mentioned by my interlocutors.

Additionally, some special personal possessions allow their owners to evoke illusions that places have never changed through 1) staging almost identical spatial set-ups, multi-sensual ambient, and atmosphere; 2) allowing to perform constant activities that emerge ongoing home-ness and aesthetic home experiences. I have become especially interested in implications of objects that set individuals to actively generate a sense of home and individual agencies.

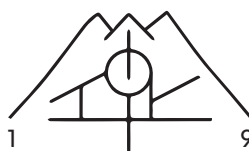
The more I engage with this research, the more I understand the similarities and interrelatedness between a sense of home and a sense of self. Many of the interviewees in their mid-20s seemed to be struggling and were unsure of where they belonged, where home could be. They felt there was no place for them that they could call home. Like how I felt a few decades ago. Whilst speaking to older participants (older than 50-years-old) they appeared to be more comfortable with the idea that material objects do not represent their ideas of home, and their home is carried in their body.

This finding has led me to propose a future research project, which should investigate how people who experience end of life uprooting feel about home and embodiment of home. Which personal possessions are important at end-of-life? When a person is no longer sure of her/his own selfhood, as in case of dementia, can mobile personal belongings provide a reminder of who they are (were)? I hope to elicit these questions together with a group of elderly people living with dementia who are moving or have moved into long-term care residencies.

Lastly, I worked with a group of people who have constantly experienced uprooting due to education, vocations, family arrangements, personal interests, and relationships in *HCH*. I must revisit this project and conduct interviews with individuals who have experienced forced migrations firsthand to broaden the implications of long-term personal belongings at times of constant relocations.

ENDNOTE

1. <https://yukaoyama.com/project/helpers-changing-homes/>
2. <https://yukaoyama.com/project/a-home-is-a-home-is-a-home/>
3. <https://yukaoyama.com/project/survibaball-home-suits/>
4. Many children own a special stuffed animal that they hold onto everywhere they go. These objects mark an orientation point that provides a sense of security and continuity. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott describes these items as 'transitional objects'. These transitional objects comfort the infant when the mother is away, if – which is a basic condition – there is a 'good enough mother', who assures sufficient sense of





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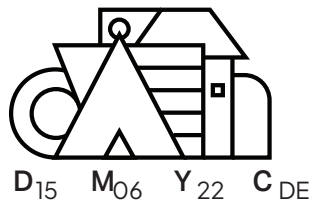


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- 1 *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES - MOTORBIKE* (2018), sculpture, cardboard, bamboo, 320 x 150 x 150 cm.
Photo: AE
- 2 *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES - HEADCOVER* (2018), sculpture, cardboard, bamboo, 210 x 130 x 140 cm.
Photo: AE
- 3 *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES - TURTLES* (2018), sculpture, cardboard, bamboo, 210 x 210 x 200 cm.
Photo: AE



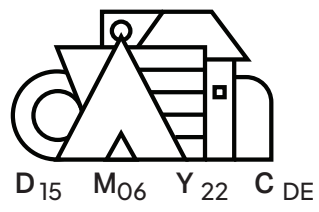
protection to them. Winnicott emphasizes that how the object is used holds greater significance than what it is (Winnicott, 1971[1953]). Winnicott's theorization of transitional objects provides the basis and the prompt of my investigation – to consider an expanded lifespan of transitional objects into adult life and their use in alleviating distress and enabling stability (van Leeuwen & Westwood, 2010).

APPENDIX

Questions that I asked:

- Please tell me your personal history of relocations (place, country, age, duration of stay).
- What are the object biographies of special personal belongings you have brought?
- How and why have these objects become special to you?
- How do you make a new place your home?
- How do these objects help make any place your home?
- Are there any rituals that help make any place your home?
- What does home mean to you today?
- What qualities should home have?
- How do you describe a sense of home?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of experiencing so many cross national and cultural relocations?

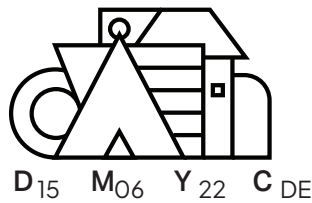




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1 FORUM WISSEN. Photo: FORUM WISSEN





PART II:

MOVING THINGS // HELPERS CHANGING HOMES (HCH) – A CONVERSATION BETWEEN YUKA OYAMA, ELZA CZARNOWSKI, AND FRIEDEMANN YI-NEUMANN

Which roles do things play in the context of forced migration? Which promises and emotions do they bear within them, which hopes or expectations? What do things have to say about human existence? How do people change things, how do things change people?

The exhibition *MOVING THINGS. On the Materiality of (Forced) Migration* (shown at FORUM-WISSEN, Göttingen from October 25th, 2022 until January 15th, 2023) is an attempt to ask questions like these instead of solely providing answers. Developed from an anthropological research project, *Materialities of Migration*,¹ the exhibit uses new means to engage with the questions raised. Seven rooms, viewable in any order, are devoted to materially and emotionally moving things and meant to spark open debates on complexes such as bodies, borders, communality, home, solidarity, representation, and transformation. The project has been collaborative work between the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Göttingen, Museum Friedland, and the Berlin-based exhibition agency, Die Exponauten.

The artwork *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES* (2018), which is exhibited in *MOVING THINGS* is based on a very personal exploration by Berlin-based artist Yuka Oyama of the subject of personal possessions in moments of radical uprooting. *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES* is the first volume of her practice-based artistic research, *Mobile Personal Belongings* (2017 – present), which explores the connections between personal possessions and a sense of home for nomadic individuals. The artist's basic assumption is that instead of national identities, culture, ethnic communities, gender roles, tradition(s), etc., it is mainly material things that can provide orientation in self-location and selfhood, after many moves.





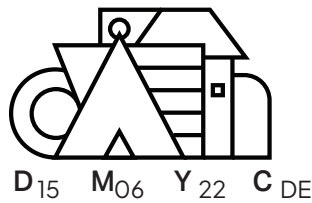
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1 *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES - HEADCOVER* (2018), pendant, plastic, 3,5x 7,5x 9,5 cm,
Photo: Becky Yee (BY)

2 *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES - PILLOW* (2018), pendant, plastic, 6 x 7x2 cm. Photog: BY



The following text is a conversation between two of the five curators of the *MOVING THINGS* exhibition, Elza Czarnowski (E), Friedemann Yi-Neumann (F) and the artist Yuka Oyama (Y).

E: Yuka, let's start from the very beginning. You stated that due to your original training as a jeweller you have developed close observation into intimate proximity of adorned objects such as clothing and jewellery, and their agency to affect the wearer's body and mind (see page 2). Would you mind going into detail here — how can adornments be imperative in creating one's social identity? I am thrilled to know more about the reciprocal physical and psychological affection of adornments and (their) wearers?

Y: As you mentioned earlier, 'How do people change things, how do things change people?', people make things, and things make people, too. Adornments and things that individuals carry with them are helpful props to (re)construct various presentations of self that are coherent with individuals' wishes.

I am fascinated with physical and psychological proximity between adornments/mobile personal possessions, body, and personhood. As psychologist Neisser describes, there are five aspects of 'self': the 'ecological self', 'interpersonal self', 'extended self', 'private self', 'conceptual self' (self-concept). The 'ecological self' he explains is perception of the self to be-in-the-physical-world with one's body. Interestingly, everything that is worn on the body and moves together with it such as clothing, jewellery, glasses, prosthetics is felt by a person (wearer) as a part of her/his corporeal self.² So, adornments and things that people carry with them on body are synthesis of the persons' internal.

Especially when people go through frequent uprooting, the previous contexts such as who they used to be seem to become irrelevant in the new context. Then, clothing and things that they carry can help reiterate the previous selfhood. As these items have use functions — they were/are worn and used, they can directly connect individuals to their personal histories that are strongly embedded in everyday life experiences.³ For example, scenes of daily transactions, social identity, social role, as well as negotiation of self in the social life.

E: As we've learned, the experience of wearing and moving the sculptures was unpleasant, uncomfortable, and not at all relaxing. Therefore, once the performance was over, and the actors took off their sculptures, they said that it felt transcendental and free, released from the discomfort, weight, and darkness. This collective sensation was perhaps a symbolic and healing process for many of them to digest various experiences that are related to recurrent uprooting (see page 7).





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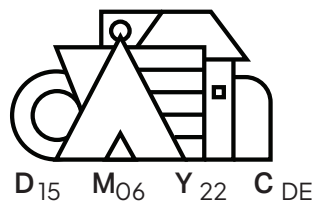


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- 1 Skeleton of MOTORBIKE. Photo: YO
- 2 Production process. Photo: Louie Neale
- 3 View from inside of the sculpture, *MOTORBIKE*. Photo: Sent from a participant
- 4 Core production team members. Photo: AE
- 5 Actors. Photo: AE



Did you speak to the participants afterwards about this or is it your conclusion? If yes, did their participation in the research investigation for them feel like a transition, too? Do you agree one could call this a healing process?

Y: Yes. This kind of artwork resembles theater, film, and dance productions. People who are involved work very intensively over many days and nights together. Consequently, many participants and my production team members build up a family-like community, which sadly always comes to an end, when the work is completed. After the filming was done, I left New Zealand. I continued to be attached to the people who were involved and missed them, and I think they were, too. Many people contacted me through emails and expressed how this project provided them time to reflect upon uprooting experiences in depth, and how much they were surprised by discovering extended meanings and associations that their personal possessions carried and revealed.

F: One aspect that made me think was that you described that people felt like being 'caged' during the *HCH* parade due to the heaviness and design of the sculptures. My thoughts relate to the term cage here. What is the relation between 'capture' and 'captivity' in representing, elaborating or displaying homes?

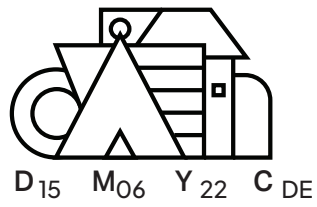
Y: In *HCH* worn sculptures are temporary protections that are eventually home places, which separate the private sphere from the public. What I wanted to emphasize was shelters like hermit crab's shells that provide space to hide, observe others, and make persons inside anonymous. They also 'capture' the wearers. The aspect of 'captivity' was unplanned.

F: I think my question aims more at the different ways that we as artists, scientists etc. can represent homes or home issues and such lived experiences and sensations without 'fixation' avoiding 'absolute' differences and providing relative and gradual ones.

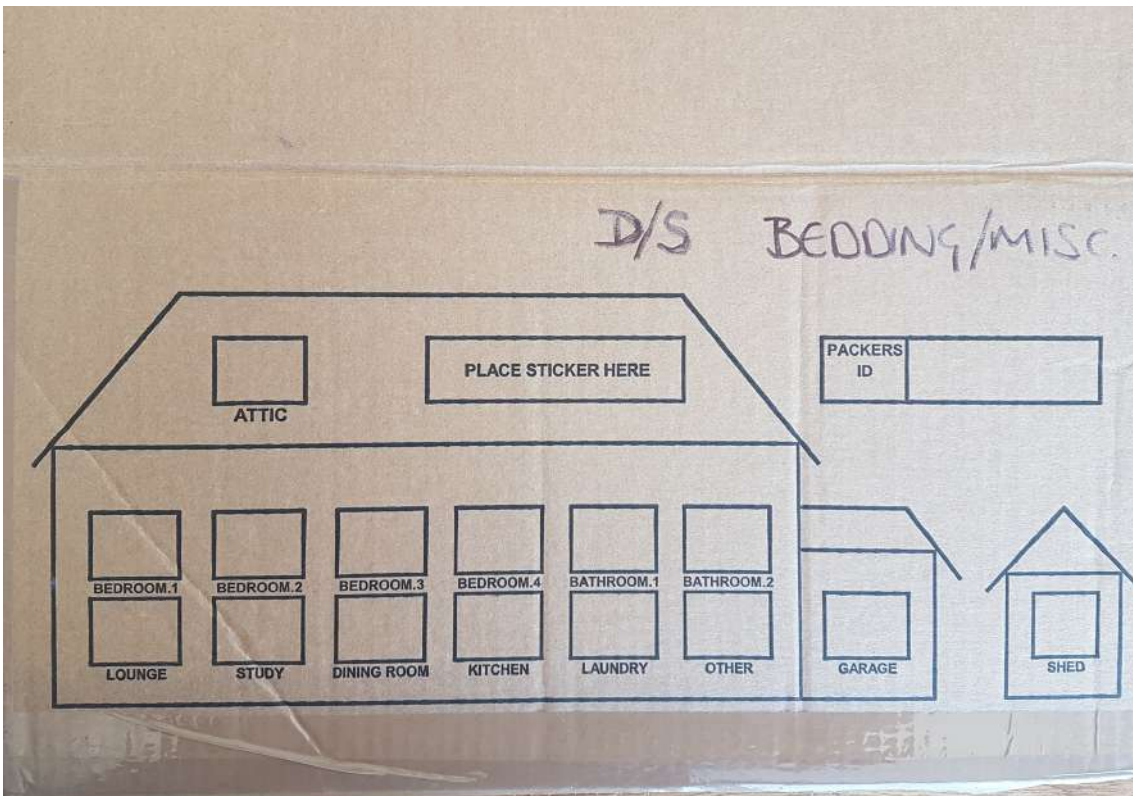
When you describe people's experiences performing their homes in the *HCH* performance by slipping in the wearable sculptures, this opened up very important topics in terms of how we, be it anthropologists, artists or curators, stage homes. Many layers are worth reflecting here.

Isn't what curators do in museums partly comparable to making homes? While home-making people seek to establish a 'place in the world' often by moving and rearranging things, curators too move and rearrange things in order to 'show the world'. Homes and museums are places of care; the term curation itself includes the term care. While in homes, people care for loved ones, themselves and their belongings, museums classically care about their collections and how to protect and display them.⁴ What I found remarkable is your distinction between objects of connective documentation or memory and the ones allowing for consistency in mobile





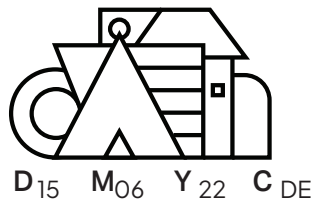
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- 1 Many households packed in containers at a moving company. Photo: YO
- 2 A home diagram printed on a moving cardboard. Photo: YO





homes. Is it not that museums turn memory and documentation into more or less consistent (national) narrations, while home consistencies emerge from habitualization?

Y: I am happy to be able to present what happened in this work, *HCH*, to a greater public through this exhibition. It was important to restage and narrate the the past event.

I believe the most direct and effective way of conveying the idea of home transformations and commensual act of home-making is to participate in the project. The second most direct way of understanding the work is through wearing the sculptures. Unfortunately, this cannot be experienced, because I got rid of my sculptures. In terms of the home consistencies, I assume the pendants provide the continuing habitualization.

I have affinity to artists, who turn museum spaces into temporal houses. For example, Carsten Höller, who turned Guggenheim Museum into a hotel in *Revolving Hotel Room* (2008);⁵ Maria Abramovic also creates a Ryokan house, *Dream House* (2000),⁶ where visitors are invited to sleep over and leave records of their dreams; Andrea Zittel provides residential units in *A-Z West* (2022),⁷ where remporal residents investigate 'How to live?' and 'What gives life meaning?'

For this exhibition, what was your strategy to communicate the background information? Did you have references like role model and dream shows? If so, what kind of exhibitions were they?

E: The exhibition itself can be a momentum of looking back onto what has been produced, done or experienced. By doing this, it does — in my eyes — not only turn memories into narrations but it also offers the possibility to get involved on various levels: (works in) exhibitions can (and should) make people think or feel. They can open up space for comparison, contemplation, inspiration regarding the individual's view on things. I do hope to make people talk about what they've just seen, engage with each other, and share their views (also) outside of the museum space.

One important and interesting aspect to me is the notion of home. It can offer qualities such as protection, security, familiarity, love, comfort, and relaxation. This raises the question: is (the feeling of) home really what everyone is looking for? Isn't there another, maybe contrary notion: freeing oneself from spatial and social confinement, newly inventing 'the self' by applying chosen or invented practices vs. 'traditional' or remembered ones?

Y: This work deals with non-geographically-bound-home, where a home-base is frequently changing. The artwork investigates how to make home that is constant. Whether the new environment provides more freedom or confinement depends on the direction of moving/





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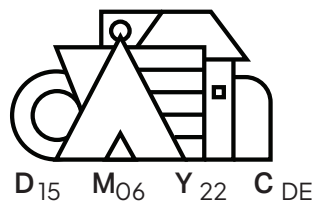


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1 Looking into the sculpture, *MOTORBIKE*. Photo: AE

2 Rehearsal view. Photo: AE

3 Rehearsal view. Photo: AE



travel, and where you come from. There is privilege to have certain ethnical backgrounds in all directions of transnational relocations. As you say, ‘freeing oneself from spatial and social confinement’ can be relevant, which is resulted in having little practice to stay long enough at one place. My interlocutors mentioned longing for moving again once they settle down.

E: I’m not sure if it’s a problematic question, but I’m trying to figure this out and be as clear as I can: you’re talking about self-perception and self-affirmation, and the distinction between “geographically monogamous/polygamous persons.”⁸ Do you think that the self-awareness aspect is one that all people who are, in a sense uprooted, experience?

Y: Any experience of otherness, unbelonging, and feeling different from other people can potentially lead to pay attention to self(-perception). So, to experience uprooting is not necessarily. However, uprooting can suddenly create dramatically different surroundings that transforms a person into a stranger.

E: Is privilege also an issue, reflected primarily in the voluntary nature of (also financial/work) mobility? I wonder — and this is a question you will also be exploring in the future — to what extent the findings from the project *HCH* (to this point) are transferable to other reasons for migration (e.g. flight, displacement).

Y: I am planning to work on interviews with individuals who experienced forced migrations in the future. Privilege is certainly an issue, but disorientation and reorientation are commonly experienced in the diaspora. I have been examining different causes of nomadism such as numerous transnational/national relocations, long-distance vocational commutes, and children who are raised in shared-parenting parallel homes. What I have been learning is inventions of individual methods to prompt ongoingness. I think these methods are transferable to various reasons for migrations, especially flight and displacement.

F: The things in your work, Yuka, are ongoing, as you say. They undergo creative and transformative processes and develop from an actual personal belonging to wearable sculptures that are staged and documented to cameos in the form of the sculptures you see in the *MOVING THINGS* show. Each move in this transformation requires resources, capabilities of you, the artist, to bring people together and craft different materialities in different stages of the process. I found the example of the sewing machine (see page 16) insightful, as it raises the question under which conditions can the owner have a sewing machine, why does it become disposable and when and how is it substitutable by buying a new one? Isn’t your current display, Yuka, a result of similar processes of bringing things over? So, I think it’s vital to not only to understand what homes are for people but also the means they possess to bring them over.

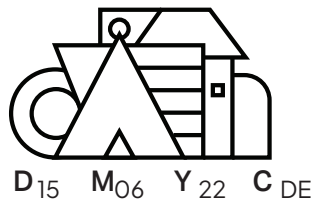




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1 Production view. Photo: AE





Y: Do you mean bringing people over through objects that are props and prompts to stage home?

F: By 'bringing over' I mean I am talking about bringing over what makes a home. As you have shown, in your work, for some this might be more attached to domestic or biographical items, for others it might be more related to living with people close to them, for others having space to develop themselves. In any case, the capabilities to mobilize or bring homes over is personal and intimate but also a political issue, as the possibilities to do so are conditioned. Issues like legal status, race, gender and class-related discrimination play a significant part in terms of widening or narrowing possibilities to creating homes; of after all having a home or staying homeless.

Y: That is true. These items that I exhibit help individuals 'bring over' home to many locations.

F: I think there is a distinction between the transformative objects of your work and the sewing machine beside the artistic material transformation of 'the object'. While the actual sewing machine remains in the sphere of a mobile home, your transformed objects cross private and public lines. You negotiated intimate home issues in public; so, people's home things were presented across different spheres who entail different boundaries: in homes, it might be intimacies, in public spaces attention to be recognized and in museums, the glass of showcase protecting things; each aspect might reflect a specific boundary. Speaking as a home researcher, we might have different ways of working on and presenting homes and the related things, but we might negotiate similar issues of in-/visibility, disclosure and anonymization to avoid harm. What do you think?

Y: Showing something very private in public space through custom-made worn sculptures is what I try to do with my artwork. You raise a very remarkable observation and comparison — glass vitrines, homes (buildings), and museums; in/visibility, dis/closure, and anonymity. Private homes resemble museums and galleries, especially when you walk down Auguststrasse⁹ in Berlin — they look very similar...

Where I studied Jewellery Art in Munich,¹⁰ use of glass vitrines was always heavily discussed. Vitrines tend to create distance between artworks and viewers and amplify artificiality (not raw). There were profound ideas that vitrines should be avoided. I was trying to open up my artistic practice to invite inclusion of other people in my work instead of working in solitude in the studio. So, I sought to work outside of glass cases — vitrines, homes, and whitecubes. That's why my artworks often take place in public spaces. But in recent years, I have started to use glass cases to enhance documentational characteristics. Did you also treat vitrines like home spaces in your exhibition?





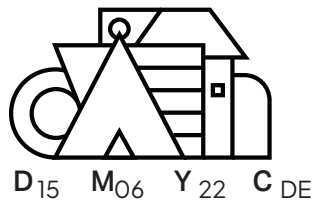
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1 *HELPERS CHANGING HOMES – COLOURING PENCILS* (2018), sculpture, cardboard, bamboo, 122 x 140 x 168 cm. Photo: AE

2 Marquette of *COLOURING PENCILS*. Photograph: Harry Cully



F: With few exceptions we did not use showcases, and except yours not in relation to home. I used furniture to present the home issues around food. The approach is twofold here, on the one hand we wanted to make these issues tangible in a spatial sense, on the other hand we wanted to keep the character of the museum space. So the 'boundary' here is more a certain abstractness, even though one can touch almost everything in the canteen.

E: I can only add the security issue that a glass case and a home might equally provide — while there are many levels on which they differ from each other. The vitrine can be seen as a safe space. Still, one could discuss this matter of safety: from what, for whom?

Y: Yes. From what and for whom? In order to present artworks outside of vitrines, artists do brutal things to their artworks to secure them — drill holes, mount security devices into the pieces, and fix sockets. Sometimes museum walls are cut open to load in sculptures. By the way, the norm size of doors in New Zealand dictated the size of my *HCH* sculptures.

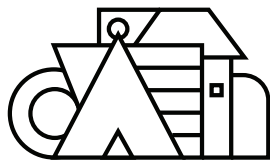
F: There are social and cultural differences as regards visibilities and invisibilities and the boundaries of home. As Pauline Garvey¹¹ has shown in her work on different communities and home boundaries in Norway, that different homes have different forms of keeping and maintaining intimacy and secrecy. Just because some homes are more transparent than others it doesn't mean that there is no privacy, rather that privacy is practiced in different ways. I think that it is also necessary to reflect on the boundaries and constraints of museums in similar ways. The showcase might be considered a safe space for the exhibit, an unnecessary boundary preventing interaction and engagement, depending on the point of view.

Y: As you mention, the critical difference between the two spaces, a private home (that is neither a temporary shelter nor institutionally created space) and a museum as a white cube, is the role of people who inhabit the space. In the museum space there might be no sense of ownership unless one is the owner of a private museum. Similar parallels can be drawn to IKEA showrooms, model showrooms of real-estate, and Baumesse (construction trade shows), where mess and personal traces that come from habituating the space are hidden and controlled.

F: This is an interesting point. I object that there is no ownership when it comes to IKEA or Museums. Especially in the second case of museums ownership is currently heavily contested in the face of colonial violence and dispossession;¹² while the first might be considered a more general debate on how harmful are billionaires for societies.¹³ However, what you refer to, I think, is the differentiation between ownership and property, between formal ownership and inhabitation. In this sense I agree with you, as there is no inhabitation here.

Concerning home and asylum accommodations, your comparison brings to mind two relat-





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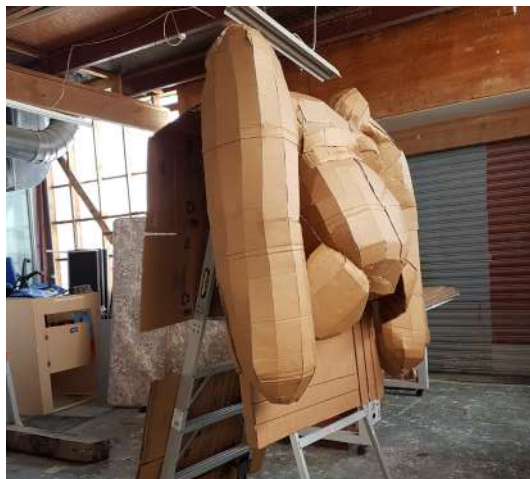
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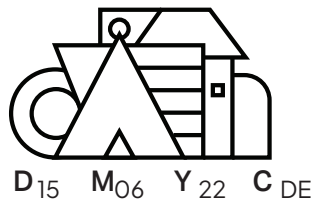
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- 1 Studio production view. Photo: YO
- 2 Studio production view. Photo: YO
- 3 Handles of *MOTORBIKE*. Photo: YO
- 4 *CAT MIRROR* in production. Photo: YO
- 5 Pattern-making. Photo: YO
- 6 Studio production view. Photo: YO



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ed aspects. On the one hand, repeated criticism of ‘warehousing’ displaced populations¹⁴ in different humanitarian reception contexts has been raised. Here the makeshift abodes follow the rules of warehouses not homes, depriving inhabitants of basic rights. On the other hand, humanitarian actors started to imitate homes in some reception facilities¹⁵ without overcoming the structural inequalities of such spaces and pluralities of homes, though.

Even though spaces might be asymmetric, it can be changed by appropriation. While reception dwellers use and transform structures or negotiate home-making in them, as our exhibition shows, one can observe comparable things as to IKEA. In Hamburg Altona I observed visitors using showcase ‘homes’ to hang out with friends, to have a chat or relax without buying anything. So, there is room for repurposing even staged fair homes and public displays to some degree.

Y: Do you anticipate visitors to stay long and return — making themselves at home? Have you also discussed how to make sure that no discriminations shall be made to regard who is ‘welcome’ and ‘unwelcome’ to enter the museum?

E: We would very much like to expand the space to include more than the classic museum functions. One step into this direction is the entry free policy, another one the willingness of our partner, the Museum Friedland, to cooperate in the education programme — together with local Kunstverein Göttingen — and offer dialogic tours through the exhibition in several languages. Visitors are encouraged to have a seat at a canteen table to listen to different stories around the topic of food. In the end though, there is still a long way to go for museums to be really accessible for all.

Y: I would spontaneously say serving free food also changes the function of the museum into a more home-like space.

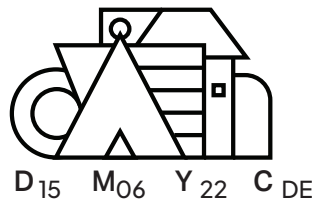
F: We have a snack machine!

E: Which might be democratic but is not free of charge ;)

F: The visitor’s view is a good point and the last thing I would like to ask you about, Yuka. As participants turned their intimate home inside out in the course of the *HCH* project and performance. Do you know anything about how the audience understood and interpreted the wearable sculptures without knowing too much about the background of the project?

Y: At the site of performance, where no information was provided, as you see in the video, people did not take any notice of the performance. They just walked by as if there was nothing





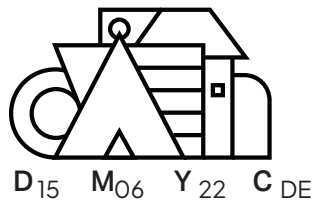
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- 1 Passports. Photo: YO
- 2 A moving truck transporting sculptures. Photo: YO





going on. I assume that many people thought that a parade was happening. To provide no information means to invite all interpretations and reactions. I prefer providing just right amount of guiding information to spark discussions about a specific topic through art.

ENDNOTE

1. For more information on the research project "On the Materiality of (Forced) Migration" visit <https://materialtaet-migration.de/en/>.
2. Neisser, U. (1988). "Five kinds of self-knowledge." In *Philosophical Psychology*, 1:1 (1988): 35–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515088808572924>.
3. Personal possessions can trigger strong memory recollection since 1) they materialize qualities that are ephemeral and fluid in nature such as emotional intensity, inter-personal relationships and seofhood; 2) things can facilitate performance of everyday activities through the ways objects are arranged. Therefore, engagement with meaningful objects can strengthen connection to personal history, ehnnance cognitive abilities, evoke other senses to spark memory and assist an older person with dementia to feel secure in self and palce. Twigg, J and Buse, CE (2013). "Dress, dementia and the embodiment of identity." In *Dementia*, 12 (3). 326 – 336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1471301213476504>.
4. Morse, N. (2021). *The Museum as a Space of Social Care*. London & New York, Routledge.
5. Jerry Salz, "Night at the Museum," *New York Magazine*, November 6, 2008, <https://nymag.com/arts/art/features/51998/>.
6. "Dream House," accessed May 10, 2022, <http://www.tsumari-artfield.com/dreamhouse/en/facility/>.
7. "AZ-West 2000," Andrea Zittel website, accessed May 10, 2022, <https://www.zittel.org/az-west/>.
8. Philosopher Agnes Heller describes the term 'a geographically promiscuous person' as someone who is at home at multiple locations, who 'constantly migrates, and among many places, and always to and fro.' (Heller 199:2) Heller, A. (1995). "WHERE ARE WE AT HOME?", *Thesis Eleven*, Number 41, 1–18. Massachu-
settes Institute of Technology. DOI 10.1177/072551369504100102.
9. Auguststrasse is a popular street for contemporary art in Berlin, where galleries stand one after another.
10. Yuka Oyama studied at Munich Art Academy (1998–2003), Germany, under Prof. Otto Künzli (Jewellery Art) and double-majored in Sculpture under Prof. Asta Gröting (2000 – 2003). The Künzli class was known as the educational institution to study experimental and conceptual jewellery.
11. Garvey, P. (2005). "Domestic Boundaries. Privacy, Visibility and the Norwegian Window." *Journal of Material Culture* 10 (2): 157–176.
12. Hicks, D. (2020). *The Brutish Museums. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London, Pluto Press.
13. <https://jacobinmag.com/2022/02/billionaires-pandemic-wealth-democracy-economic-control-bezos>
14. See, e. g., Smith, M. (2004.). "Warehousing Refugees: A Denial of Rights, a Waste of Humanity." *World Refugee Survey* 2004. Washington, DC, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.
15. Parsloe, T. (2020). *From Emergency Shelter to Community Shelter Berlin's Tempelhof Refugee Camp. Structures of Protection? Rethinking Refugee Shelter*. T. Scott-Smith and M. E. Breeze. Oxford & New York, Berghahn: 275–286.

