

Hometown to Come, or to Perform Waste

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/revi.106161>

ENG Abstract: In *Hometown to Come* (2025), Mire Lee transforms the stage into a visceral ruin of Seoul—an urban corpse composed of torn tarpaulins, copper wires, and displaced organs of failed buildings. Commissioned by MMCA Performing Arts 2024: *Space Elevator*, the work marks the artist's return to her hometown, reframing it as a site of exhaustion and cyclical decay. Through collaboration with performer Sunhee Bae, Lee stages waste not as residue but as a living infrastructure, animated by acts of cleaning, rearranging, and delirious monologue. The performance suspends linear progress, foregrounding the intimacy between human and waste—bodies that modernity renders replaceable. Refusing repair or redemption, *Hometown to Come* dwells in contamination, exposing Seoul's compulsive redevelopment as both ritual and illness. In this homecoming, waste performs back, reminding us that to inhabit the city today is to live perpetually amid what has been discarded.

Keywords: Mire Lee, waste, urban metabolism, Seoul, performance art, redevelopment, post-industrial ruins, infrastructure, body and material, homecoming.

ES El hogar por venir, o devenir desecho

Resumen: En *Hometown to Come* (2025), Mire Lee transforma el escenario en una ruina visceral de Seúl -un cadáver urbano compuesto por lonas rasgadas, cables de cobre y órganos desplazados de edificios fallidos. Encargada por MMCA Performing Arts 2024: *Space Elevator*, la obra marca el regreso de la artista a su ciudad natal, reconfigurándola como un lugar de agotamiento y decadencia cíclica. A través de la colaboración con la intérprete Sunhee Bae, Lee presenta los desechos no como residuos, sino como una infraestructura viva, animada por actos de limpieza, reorganización y monólogos delirantes. La performance suspende el progreso lineal, destacando la intimidad entre el ser humano y el desecho: cuerpos que la modernidad vuelve reemplazables. Rechazando la reparación o la redención, *Hometown to Come* habita la contaminación, exponiendo la compulsiva reurbanización de Seúl como ritual y enfermedad. En este regreso a casa, el desecho actúa de vuelta, recordándonos que habitar la ciudad hoy es vivir perpetuamente entre lo que ha sido descartado.

Palabras clave: Mire Lee, desechos, metabolismo urbano, Seúl, arte de performance, reurbanización, ruinas postindustriales, infraestructura, cuerpo y material, regreso a casa.

Como citar: Yu, J. (2025). Hometown to Come, or to Perform Waste. *Re-visiones* 15(2), e106161.

Upon entering the theatre, you are met with heaps of construction waste scattered on the floor and hanging from the ceiling as if plunged into the aftermath of a catastrophe. Every step is interrupted by clumps of torn tarpaulins, pipes that lead nowhere, and haphazard skeins of shimmering copper wires, while overwhelming doom metal saturates the air, vibrating across the bodies, including yours. You are thrown off by the disorienting scene, grappling with an instinct to flee and yet ultimately succumb to the enchantment of the ruins. This is a stage set by Korean artist Mire Lee, as a three-day installation and performance commissioned as part of MMCA Performing Arts 2024: *Space Elevator*. The work titled *Hometown to come*¹ (2025) signals her return to the city of Seoul, her place of origin, while estranging it through a temporal suspension, after years of working nomadically across Europe. While this project continues Lee's entropic, visceral sprawl—exemplified by

¹ The English title is a direct translation of the Korean title “미래의 고향 (Mirae-eui Gohyang).” The word “미래” signifies the future, yet is the exact same word as the artist's first name “Mire.” Hence, in the title is embedded a pun, as it could be translated either as “Hometown to come,” or literally, “Mire's Hometown.”

her 2024 Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, *Open Wound*, in which the factory past was reanimated as a mechanized heart that stained ghost-like skins to be suspended mid-air—it also signals a new foray into time-based performance. How would you perform your *hometown*, especially when it is often thrown back at you as an imperative axis of your artistic practice, inevitably alongside the convoluted projections of a futuristic city? And what are the stakes?

Better yet—let's come back to the theatre—the urgent question is: what to make of the waste? This scene can be best described as a butchering site of a city that seems to know no fatigue, composed of veins, skin, and organs torn from hastily erected buildings with short expiration dates. The precarious assembly acts as an undulating screen onto which are projected: the innocent curiosity of a Japanese tourist wondering why Korea has no century-old authentic restaurants; the refined disdain of a cosmopolitan critic, unimpressed by the glossy veneer of K-pop; urban refugees displaced by brutal redevelopment; the trophies of pop-up stores endlessly cycling through a trendy neighborhood; and the vomit and sweat of workers, young and old, overworked to the brim. In other words, this is an excretion, a glitch, from a lucrative affair between accelerated modernization, cannibalistic capitalism, and the haunting traces of the colonial era.

From infrastructure laid under Japanese rule, often at the cost of historical and cultural continuity, to condensed modernization of military dictatorships and the rebranding followed by the recent K-culture boom, the city has evolved by uprooting its own. Now, in a time of economic deceleration, redevelopment returns not as a necessity but as a ritual, a repeated gesture to keep capital in motion. The resulting urbanscape is in near-constant churn, producing layer upon layer of debris, not only of buildings, but of bodies and lives deemed replaceable. Waste is also a driving force of a line of digestive infrastructure that absorbs and obscures: processing companies hackling for a better deal, street wanderers diving into heaps of trash on treasure hunts, microbial decomposition labors that last for centuries, and transportation system that pushes hopeless scraps to the outskirts, to the suburbs, overseas, and into space. The system is by no means seamless. Due to dissonance surrounding redevelopment, failed financing, and unintended delays, we are always living alongside waste, walking atop a crime scene, contaminating potential evidence, and willfully forgetting that our own lives teeter on the verge of disposal.

In this project, Lee admittedly takes a step back from the authorial position by situating herself as a scenographer and inviting performers to activate it: "The live acts are entirely the work of the performers. My priority was to provide a stage for them."² For the live event, the audience is ushered to the mezzanine, allowing an aerial gaze into the wasteland they once occupied. Installer-performers begin clearing out about a quarter of the space: unhooking wires tethered to the ceiling, pushing metal scaffoldings into corners, carrying off plastic lumps in their arms, and sweeping the dust with mops. These acts are in keeping with the material reality of waste rather than that of a work of art, mobilizing at once the vulnerability of these materials and their agency of shifting the mood.

A performing body—the actor Sunhee Bae—enters the scene and nonchalantly takes a seat as if to play the role of the sole survivor of the apocalypse. After a moment of striking silence, she traverses the stage, skipping lightly over the heaps, perilously swinging from the battens, cradling the debris like an infant, then finally collapsing face down in a fetal position. A series of disjointed monologues ensue, ranging from ferocious hurls of insult, childish belting of a Disney-themed songs, to talking to imaginary beings. As random acts and schizophrenic monologues unfold, the trash heaps are reimagined as glowing clouds in the night, secret treasures underwater, or a baby about to fall asleep. The disjointed acts stay oblivious to the human presence, but rather address the waste materials, waving at a mode of becoming- or becoming-one-with-waste. By abandoning rational dialogue and cohesive narrative in favor of babbling and erratic trajectories, the performance gives rise to the undead, at once incapable and unwilling to hop on the conveyor belt of progress, while building affinity with the lesser-than material.

So, what are we to do with waste, pulled from the peripheries and dragged back into the heart of Seoul? *Hometown to come* layers two kinds of bodies that are systemically separated in urbanized megacities: the human-trash as traces of the city's cannibalistic metabolism, and trash-human as bodies reduced to resources to be extracted. By delaying the function and exposing the failures of the urban organs that scaffold upward mobility, Lee's *Hometown to come* refuses a reparative approach, and instead, chooses to dwell in the mess. Disillusioned with a patch over a glitch to neutralize the land's toxicity,³ yet spellbound by the seduction of the inverted world, the homecoming celebrates visceral nightmares that keeps your eyes open overnight, resisting to recharge for the day to come.

² Somi Lee, "An Interview with Mire on the Performance: The Collapse and the Signs of the Cut," *Yellow Pen Club Blog*, 2025. Originally published in Korean. <https://yellowpenclub.com/blog/004>

³ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2022, 21.































Mire Lee, Hometown to Come, 2025

The MMCA Performing Arts 2024: Space Elevator, MMCA Seoul, Multi-Project Hall.
Industrial trash and mixed media, dimensions variable.
Image courtesy of the artist and MMCA Seoul. Photo: Seunghyuk Park.

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