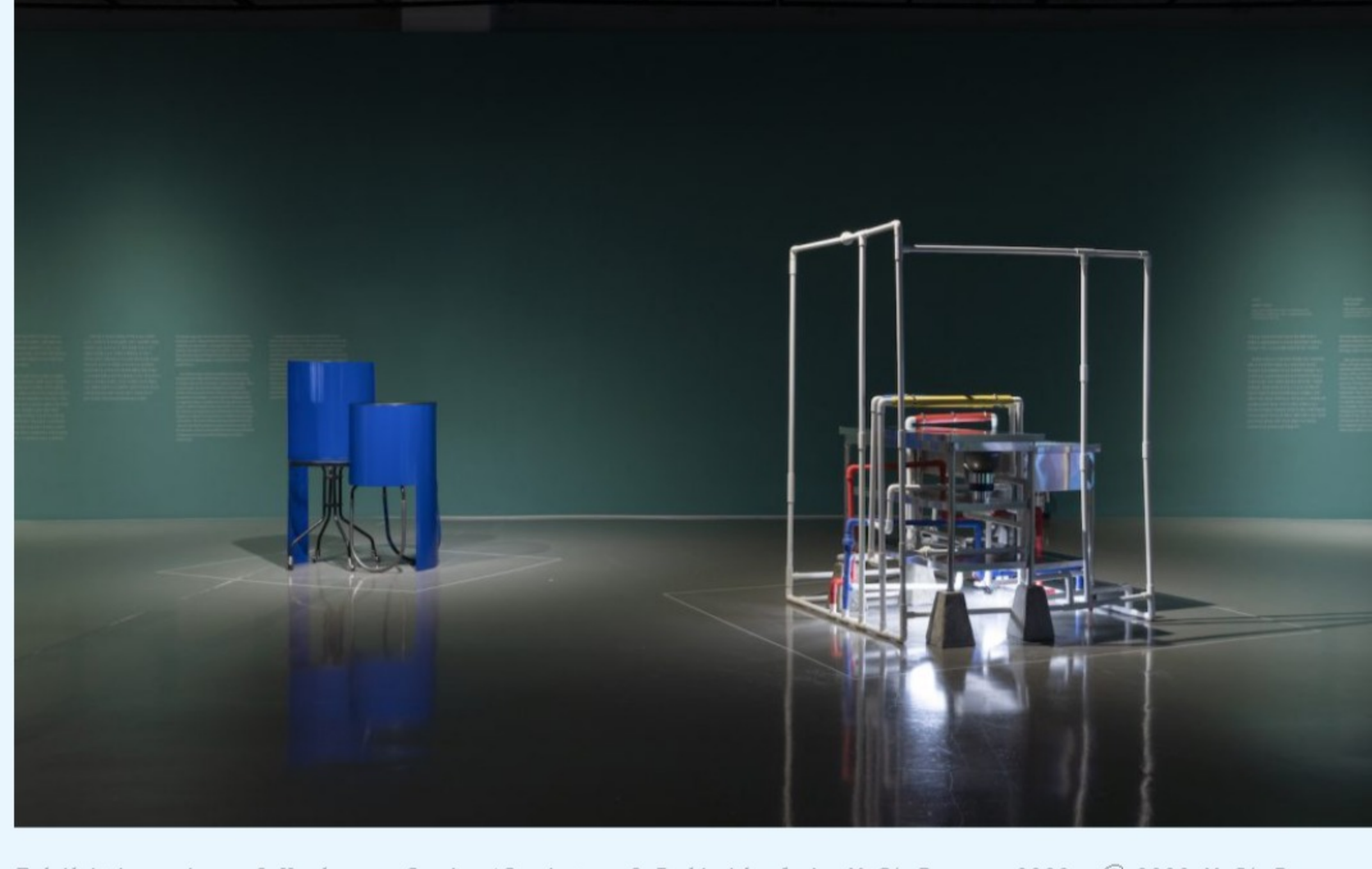


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## STUDIO VISIT: HYEKYUNG SON

Sculptural Marxism



Exhibition view of Hyekyung Son's 'Society of Individuals'. MoCA Busan, 2020. © 2020 MoCA Busan. Photo by Lee Dongmoon - 2

6 June 2024  
By [Adeena Mey](#)

*Marxism [...] remains [...] the philosophy of our time. We cannot go beyond it because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it.*  
- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 1963

Doing a residency in London seems only fitting for [Hyekyung Son](#), a Seoul-based artist, who, as her profile page on the Delfina Foundation website describes, focuses on 'the contradiction of the capitalist system' and on researching Marxist theory. If returning to Marx from the English capital seems something of a pertinent move (it being the birth city of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867)), the spectre of Marx in the Slade graduate's home country of South Korea can be a somewhat more contentious issue. In his introduction to *The Idea of Communism 3: The Seoul Conference* (2016), a volume bringing together responses from this gathering, Alain Badiou reminds us that organising such an event was 'not easy in general, and specifically not easy in Korea, for evident historical reasons', given that Korea is 'a country that was destroyed and divided since World War II by the effects of the Cold War between the socialist states and the capitalist Western world.'



Hyekyung Son, *Suo-Suho*, 2019. Leather sofa, stainless steel, natural leather, mirror and mixed media, 130(h)×120×120cm.

Like the prominent thinkers who contributed to this conference and book, Hyekyung Son is not so much interested in the historical failures and the party politics outmoded readings of Marx inspired; rather, similarly to Badiou's formulation, she seeks a 'a new strategic vision for the collective destiny of humanity as such'. Bearing names such as *Human Nature is Formed by the Totality of Social Relations* (2019), *Material and Being Material* (2021), *Abstract Human Labor - Shadow of the Contradiction* (2021), *Rate of Surplus Value - Expansion through Exploitation* (2021), or *General Form of Value - Difference without Identity* (2021), Hyekyung's projects are attempts to translate Marxist theoretical articulations into material form. At first sight, these works seem akin to combined ready-mades and could easily be read in line with what Arthur Danto has described as the 'transfiguration of the commonplace'. Moreover, nominalist games on the nature of art - for their own sake - are undoubtedly an exhausted approach. However, in Hyekyung's practice, the act of bringing together various objects - most often industrially manufactured - into a different context is a way to shed light on the networks of associations between these objects and create new ones, becoming, through their dialogue with the Marxist notion of commodity, a field for aesthetic and analytic investigation into issues of labour, value, sociality, and class.



Hyekyung Son, *General Form of Value - Difference without Identity*, 2021. Abs plastic, 25×50×35cm

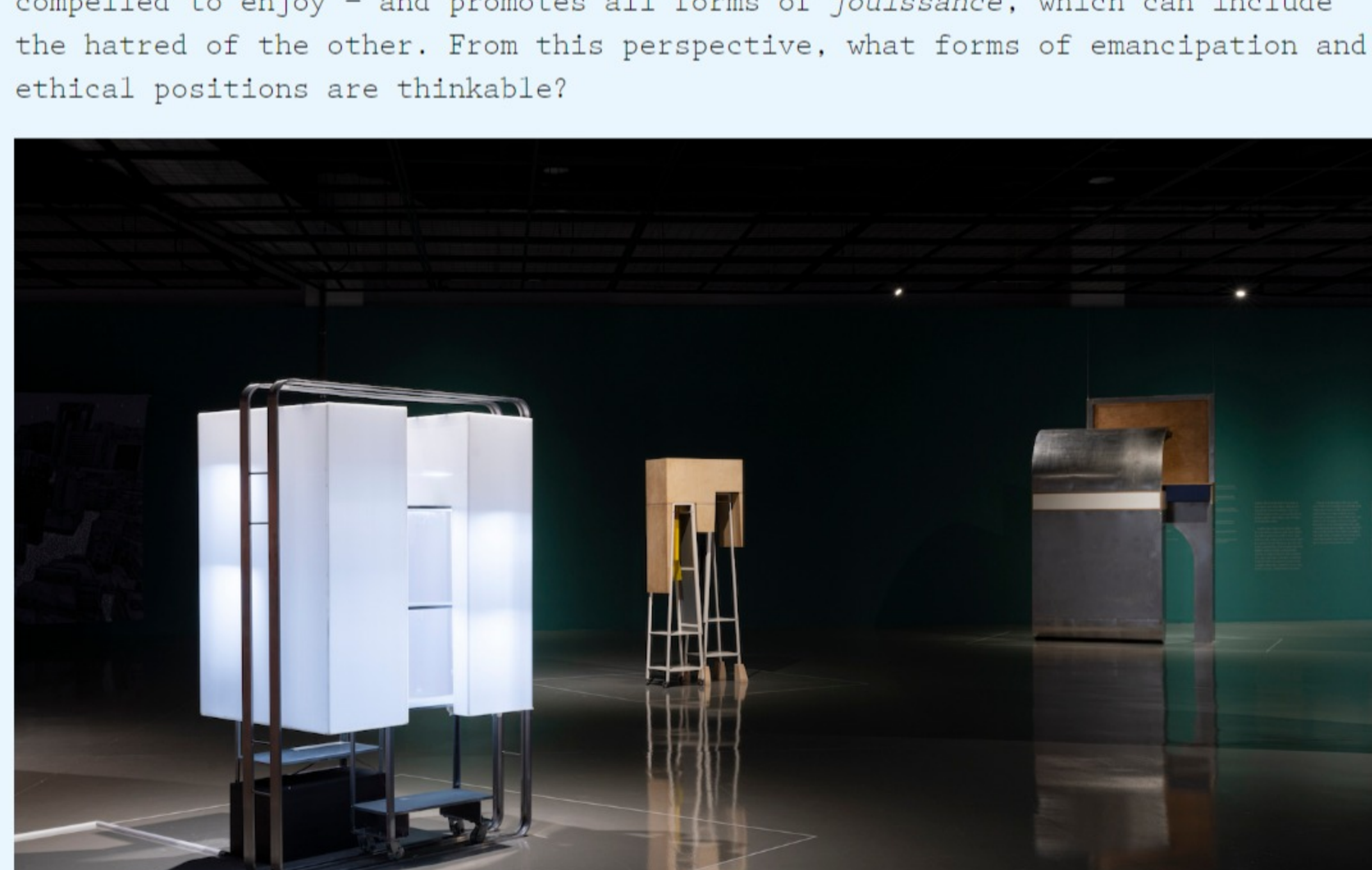
One of Marx's main contributions to the analytics of capital was to unveil or deconstruct the notion that the commodity, he wrote, 'appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood' when, in reality, it is 'a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.'<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, commodities are exchanged among themselves, within a monetary system that establishes their relations. But this also gives workers a perception of their labour relations as relations between things. Commodities thus objectify the social character of labour relations, and what Marx calls 'commodity fetishism' is that which fails to acknowledge this sociality, erroneously seeing intrinsic value in commodities. The capitalist system is thus structured and develops from these inherent contradictions, the latter being Hyekyung's terrain of investigation.



Hyekyung Son, *Land-Jeonshin*, 2019. 2019. Full length mirrors storage hangers, birch plywood, wheels, rubber balls, PVC vinyl, lumber, 210×100×40cm

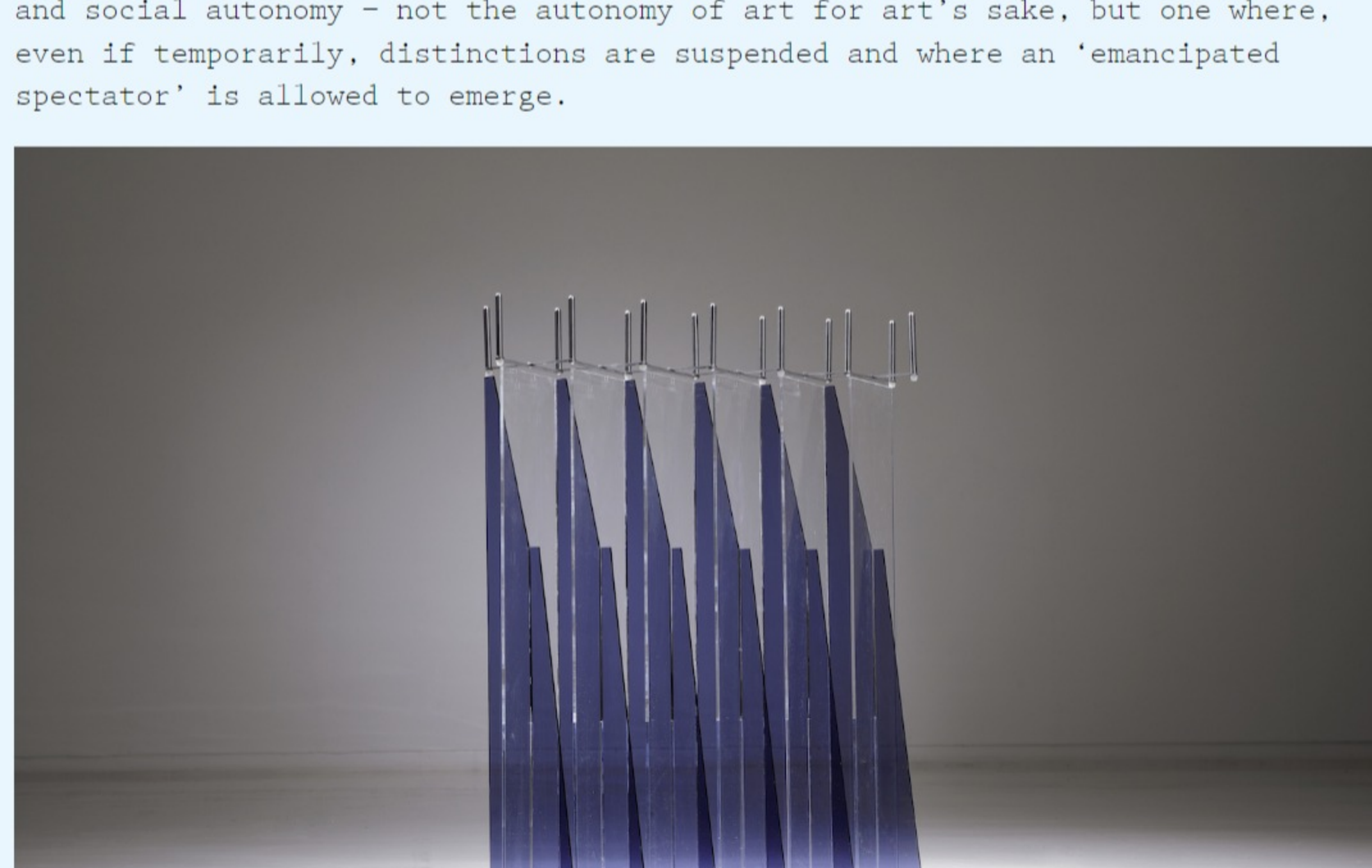
A compelling example of Hyekyung's approach is *Land Jeonshin* (2019), a sculpture composed of two full-length mirrors each placed in similar all-white metallic hangers. One of them sits on its original set of wheels, while the other stands on irregular quadrilateral woodblocks, suggesting a tension between mobility and fixity. Similar in size, material, and colour, the piece also plays with the hangers' dissymmetry. The sculpture's base is composed of these two separate, autonomous metallic parts - both of which include shelves at alternating heights. The structure, as a whole, seems to hold thanks to its upper part made of plywood. Overall, it is a work whose appearance is that of a piece of industrial furniture, a look that is deceiving by its non-functionality. This contextual shift from the circuit of capitalist exchange into the sphere of art allows for an emphasis on the transformation of the materials used and, on the labour involved behind it. Moreover, while playing with some of the conventions of sculpture, *Land Jeonshin* is also the material embodiment of the discourse it aims carry. The sculptural base materialising the Marxian base of society - the means and forces of production - co-dependent and co-constitutive with the superstructure, social and political form becoming legible through artistic form.

Another form of contradiction Hyekyung is interested in is the relation to political conservatism. If, historically, the left is seen as the natural political wing of the working class, as can be observed in both South Korea and the UK, conservative populisms promote a discourse of exclusion of the other based on fear. Refugees, asylum seekers, non-nationals - *foreigners everywhere* - supposedly represent a threat which right-wing parties promise to fight. But this fear of the foreigner which has displaced the working class to the right of the political spectrum is also a fear of not being able to participate in the capitalist system: not being able to work, not being able to consume. Indeed, capitalism is also an apparatus for the modulation of desires - as in buying commodities being one thing we phantasmatically feel compelled to enjoy - and promotes all forms of *jouissance*, which can include the hatred of the other. From this perspective, what forms of emancipation and ethical positions are thinkable?



Exhibition view of Hyekyung Son's 'Society of Individuals'. MoCA Busan, 2020. © 2020 MoCA Busan. Photo by Lee Dongmoon

Finally, a further aspect of Hyekyung's practice is her collaborations with various workers' communities: the welders she feels close to or the various Marxist study groups she's involved in, such as the Ahrae research group ([연구 모임 아래](#)). While in London, similar engagements were found with UK-based study groups and as a result of the artist's research around William Morris and the politics of the Arts and Crafts Movement. In other words, it is about forms of sociality and time that are not those necessary to the production of commodities and their value. In the late capitalist era, contemporary art is seen as replicating neoliberal logics, and political art, as aestheticising politics. However, be it through her sculptural work or her various collaborations, Hyekyung seems to make a case for the emancipatory and non-elitist potential of the 'exhibition value' of a work and in forms of artistic and social autonomy - not the autonomy of art for art's sake, but one where, even if temporarily, distinctions are suspended and where an 'emancipated spectator' is allowed to emerge.



Hyekyung Son, *Rate of Surplus Value - Expansion through Exploitation*, 2021. Ld hager, acrylic, 85×60×10cm

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<sup>[1]</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof', *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, 1867, available [here](#).

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