

**Incidents (of Travel)**  
**Yesomi Umolu and Harold Mendez**  
**Chicago, U.S.**  
**Saturday, April 9 2016**

*Itinerary by Harold Mendez*

**Ando Gallery, The Art Institute of Chicago**

Upon entering the Ando Gallery at the Art Institute of Chicago you recognize an internal silencing slowly taking place. Whenever I visit the Art Institute, I either begin or end my trip here. It's a sparse room that includes sixteen freestanding dark-stained oak columns that give you the sense that you're in a forest at dusk. Tadao Ando, the architect, designed the gallery for the display of Japanese screens. It can feel as if it isn't part of any one place. It's also strangely it's own environment and you can easily forget you're in a museum. Passing through the columns always reminds me of when I was a child hunting for flying bats in a pine forest near La Estrella, Medellín, Colombia (where I spent many summers visiting family). Beyond the columns you walk across a dark-floored space and see a set of seamless glass panels. In the back corner of the gallery are two long backless benches where you can sit and view the screens or the columns at a distance. It's a space that allows me to be in several places at once—where you can let time slip away here. I'm into that.

**Lower Wacker Drive (in search of a door that lead into the subway tunnels, which I passed through between 1992–1999)**

We didn't find the door but maybe it's for the best. Lower Wacker Drive was once a tent city for the homeless and a stretch of Chicago where vandals, graffiti artists, criminals and those that did dirt at night found a space (one of many in the city) to be without being seen. Now, it seems like an industrialized and highly guarded subterranean zone where no such activity is evident. The figure you see in the photograph descending a spiral staircase (beyond Lower Wacker Drive) is me carrying a bag full of spray paint in the mid to late nineties. At the time, I entered through a

door with several friends who were part of a graffiti collective with a key we obtained—it now escapes my memory of how we came to possess it. There's a different atmosphere in subway tunnels compared to subway stations and there's a cinematic drama present down there that I had a desire and ability to explore. What was once between the thresholds of that door no longer fully applies but at least I went through it. For me, that door somehow mirrors Andrei Tarkovski's 1979 film, *Stalker* in which a guide leads two men through an area known as the Zone to find a room that grants wishes.

**Cho Sun Ok Restaurant (Korean BBQ)**  
**4200 North Lincoln Avenue**

Cho Sun Ok is one of the oldest Korean restaurants in Chicago and I have been coming here for years with my son or with friends to feast. Throughout the restaurant you'll notice large quartz crystals, perhaps for prosperity. It's a small place where the food is made grill-top style, which includes banchan (side dishes) with rice. Banchan is generally served in odd numbers for good luck. These small accompaniments (kimchi; stir-fried-dried anchovies; lotus root; seaweed; bean sprouts; fish cakes; and tofu amongst others) are served in tiny bowls and range in flavor and presentation. It's ethnic comfort food I often seek out and I am particularly interested in supporting restaurants like this.

For our visit we ordered the following dishes.

<i>Appetizer:</i> Haemul Pajeon Korean pancake with seafood and scallions
<i>Appetizer Soup:</i> Duk Guk Korean rice cakes in mild beef broth soup (contains egg)
Yukgaejang Beef broth soup with shredded beef and vegetables (hot and spicy)
<i>Tabletop Cooking:</i> Bulgogi Sliced tender beef marinated in house specialty sauce (served with banchan)

**Margie's Candies**  
**(formally Fannie Mae Chocolates)**  
**1813 Montrose Avenue**

An impromptu, surprise stop for Somi.

**An 'X' near the Wilson Train Yards, Red Line**

Another impromptu stop near the Wilson Train Yards (which burned down in 1996). I pointed out how structural steel beams that make an 'X' shape along the 'L' (elevated train line) were used as a ladder to access the train tracks and rooftops in order to paint trains and walls, or evade the police. I know of several entry points like this throughout Chicago along the 'L' or subway lines. The police once chased me in this yard for painting graffiti on the trains. To escape, I had to hang underneath the elevated train tracks as a train passed above and then make my way towards an 'X' to get away. Accessing these impassable spaces provided me with a fundamental understanding of taking risks.

**Montrose Beach (Los Blobs)**  
**4400 N. Lake Shore Drive**

Between 2004–2008 I spent a portion of my summers walking along the lakefront photographing the unregulated economies of immigrants selling inflatable beach toys, flowers, and foodstuffs such as cotton candy, popcorn, *elotes* (corn on the cob) or fruit. It's a place where material vestiges and their potential meanings became an important thing to pay attention to. Many of these ephemeral materials can be found in several of my sculptures or installations and they are things I return to often. In a photograph of mine from 2006, you can see what appears to be a figure selling inflatable beach toys in a leisurely setting. You don't see that it's a woman or that she's an immigrant. You don't see a body, only her feet sporting blue-and-white Nike shoes. What you see is more like a blob of capitalism represented by colour, shape and form. There's something inherently poetic in this image, but I'm more interested in what it points to—a state of being that is both visible and invisible.

**The Dead Yards (in search of a graveyard for decommissioned subway trains or "Whatever lurks ahead of grievous abominations and disorder, you and me walk into it together")**

Although we didn't make it to the Dead Yards (not its official name) during our visit, I do know where it exists but I am choosing to keep my memory of this site to myself and for those that know where it is. The Dead Yard is a graveyard for decommissioned subway trains and it was a location I frequented in my youth as a graffiti artist. When I think about it, it's a site where I learned to experiment creatively and work collaboratively while being undetected in the night. It was an important place (although dangerous to access) that led me to become an artist. Now that I have distance from these memories, the Yards aren't about the aimless vandalism I engaged in; they're closer to articulating a voice beyond the trappings of a place.

**The Franklin, East Garfield Park**  
**3522 W Franklin Blvd**

Chicago has a decades long history of alternative gallery spaces and many artists, including me, began their careers here. It's an important non-commercial component of the artistic community. Edra Soto and Dan Sullivan started The Franklin in 2012, an artist-run project space located in the backyard of their home in East Garfield Park. It was initiated by an installation that Soto and Sullivan developed titled *LIVING by Example*, (Living as in *Martha Stewart Living* magazine), alluding to DIY approaches and their relationship with the artist-run culture in Chicago. For the installation they designed and fabricated a gazebo-like structure to display their personal art collection, which was acquired through non-profit spaces and trading with other artists. It's a vibrant and dynamic space with yearlong activity, promising visibility, free space and support to professional artists that would like to create projects in response to the structure or to engage with the East Garfield Park community. The Franklin reflects a perennial questioning of what home is as well as demonstrating ways that it can change and expand.