



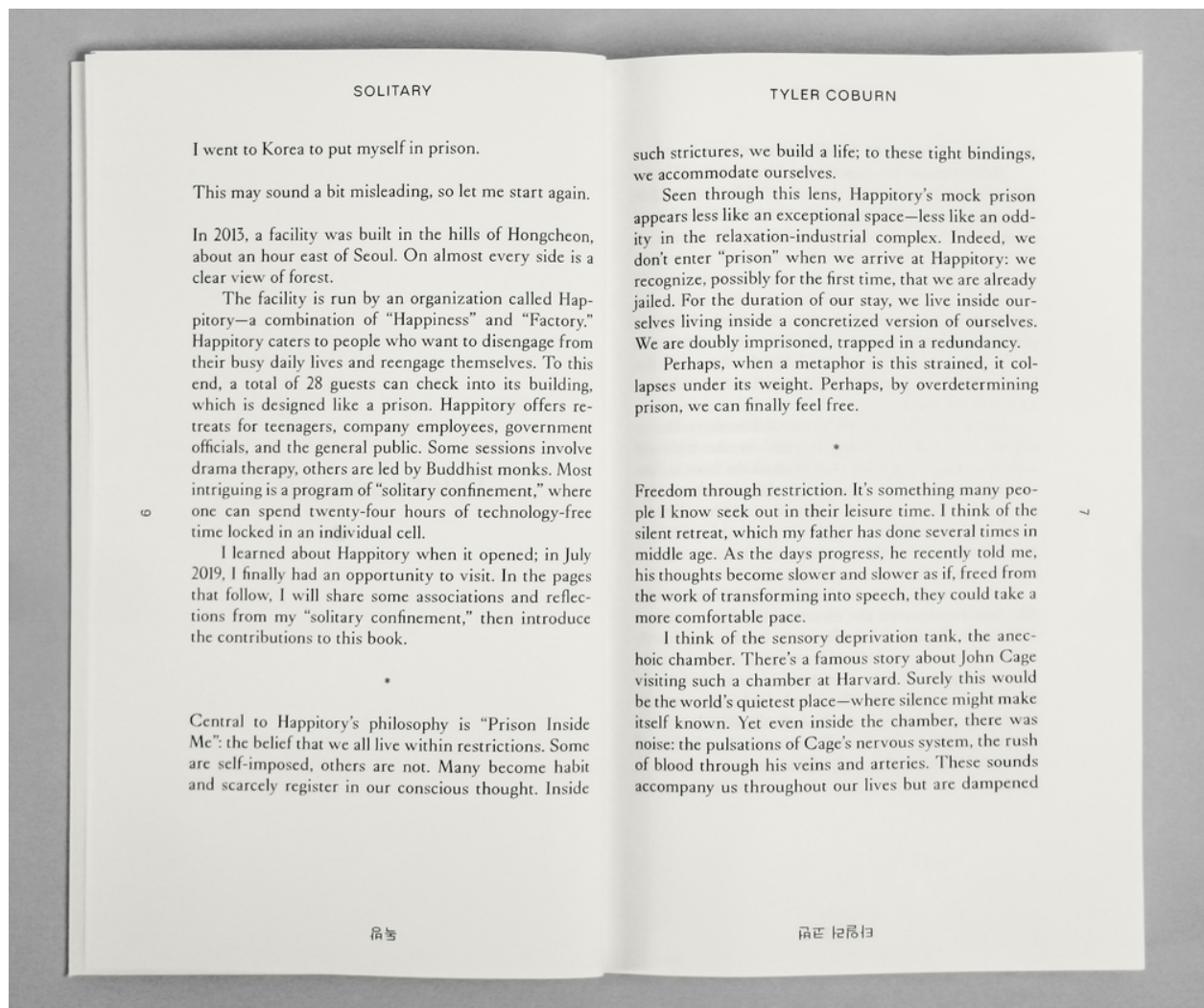
Conversation with Tyler Coburn, on *Solitary*

Sanghee Kim
Nov 30, 2022

Solitary, a new book conceived and edited by Tyler Coburn, is a collection of site-specific writing done at a wellness facility called Happitory in Hongcheon, Korea - about a 100km drive east of Seoul. The facility offers some programs that are designed to help guests better understand themselves, and others with the goal of making a happier society. Its original Korean name literally means “Happiness Factory,” while the English translation is the mashup of these two words. Perhaps Happitory’s best-known program is “solitary confinement,” in which Tyler and the nine other contributors to the publication spent twenty-four hours of technology-free time in their own cell-like rooms. These contributors include Jaeyeon Chung, Sunjin Kim, Hyunjeung Kim, Kyungmook Kim, Min Kyoung Lee, Woochang Lee, Russell Mason, InYoung Yeo, and Jiwon Yu.

Solitary as a concept often connotes isolation or solitude. Although both imply the condition of being alone, the causes and consequences of each differ significantly. Isolation often occurs by external influences, such as lost connections during the recent pandemic, or systematic incarceration that institutionally removes one from their social network. Solitude, on the other hand, is the choice to be alone, and people take moments of solitude for many reasons including self-reflection and religious attachments. In some ways, solitude can also be a luxury and privilege, especially in this hyper-digital age when our lives and livelihoods are intensely networked.

In anticipation of this conversation with Tyler about the book and his experience at Happitory, I began to think about what it really means to take a break in a facility that uses prison as a metaphor in the pursuit of happiness. Across the pages of *Solitary*, each contributor delves into their own relationship with the time spent at Happitory, offering different perspectives on this voluntary, simulated experience of incarceration.



Solitary (writing by Tyler Coburn), 2022

Courtesy of Tyler Coburn, Sternberg Press, and Art Sonje Center

Sanghee Kim (SK): You had connections to Korea before you embarked on the *Solitary* project. Since 2014, you have been undertaking research trips and projects around the country. Could you tell us a bit about your previous trips to Korea?

Tyler Coburn (TC): My first trip in 2014 was to do fieldwork in Songdo, a “smart city” in the Incheon Free Economic Zone. I had been writing about Silicon Valley technolibertarians trying to build similar hubs in countries like Honduras. (See “Charter Citizen,” an essay published in *e-flux* journal.) Songdo was an important template for these endeavors, so I felt I had to see it firsthand and interview people involved in its development and management.

Several of my subsequent trips were to make *Ergonomic Futures*: speculative furniture commissioned by the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016) and now held by Art Sonje Center and the Seodaemun Museum of Natural History - both in Seoul. Along the way, I made a number of friends in the Korean art world, some of whom are now contributors to *Solitary*.

SK: I have seen many instances when artists and curators fly in to produce exhibitions and projects then fly straight back out, not really taking in any cultural history that surrounds them. In your case with *Solitary*, you already had some knowledge and experience of Korea due to your previous visits and projects. Maybe for this reason *Solitary* developed organically over the years. Do you think it is important to take time and know a culture if organizers are not so familiar with it?

TC: I'm also sensitive to the fly-by model you're describing. From what I've observed, it partly owes to the demand that artists always be in motion, to the proliferation of biennials, and to the relatively short time-frame to make new commissions. It's a problem the art world should be talking more about. And it's one that I'm trying to not perpetuate.

There are nuances to a place like Happitory that I'll never understand, no matter how often I visit Korea. It felt important to make space for them in the book, and to do this, I needed to bring other voices into the conversation.

This is why I developed *Solitary* during a summer residency at MMCA Changdong in 2019. I knew it would take time to do the social work this project required, such as meeting potential contributors and getting referrals to others - imagining how to assemble a group of people who could bring unique perspectives to the site. It's a project that would be difficult to replicate in another context, as my social network in Korea was built slowly over the past nine years.

SK: I have done some research about Happitory, so I have a general understanding of the facility. Could you describe your take on its aim and ethos?

TC: Happitory was founded in 2013 by Kwon Yong-seok and Noh Jihyang, but its real origin dates back to the late 1990s when Kwon served as a public prosecutor. His job was extraordinarily demanding, and rather than take a vacation, he asked a prison governor to let him spend a week behind bars. (As you might expect, his request wasn't granted.)

In effect, the founders are now providing this service to paying customers, many of whom seek time away from their busy lives and devices. At the same time, Happitory tries to make their stay about more than escapism. An orientation video and workbook encourage residents to focus on the happiness in their lives. Happitory is a portmanteau of "happiness" and "factory," so one should not be surprised by this fact.

SK: One of the programs Happitory offers is a twenty-four-hour stay in solitary confinement, which you and the other contributors took part in. Could you explain more about this particular program at the facility?

TC: Happitory's solitary confinement program may seem unusual, as people are paying to be locked up, but in some ways, it's just another example of the sensory-deprivation wellness tourism that brings people to temple stays and silent-meditation retreats. (This is something that Min Kyoung Lee discusses in her contribution to the book.) Indeed, many of its programs - and the vegetarian food it serves through the slots in the cell doors - reflect Buddhist leanings. And its building, made to resemble a prison, functions like a metaphor. As the founders have remarked, one is supposed to leave Happitory with an awareness that the true prison lies outside the cell: its walls are the personal and societal strictures that limit our lives. With this awareness, perhaps those strictures won't keep binding us so tightly.

SK: As you write in your contribution to the book, actual solitary confinement is completely different from the experience at Happitory, where people can choose to book a cell and leave whenever they want. You mention the privilege of having a choice in this kind of situation. In a way, it's the ultimate freedom. Could you talk in greater detail about this?

TC: The key thing that distinguishes Happitory from an actual prison is choice. A person voluntarily pays for the experience, and though they're locked in a cell, there's a panic button they can press at any moment. There are times when groups visit - a school class or an office retreat - and in these cases, the dynamics are more complex, as one must split time between a solitary cell and collective "bonding" activities. Even then, as Mrs. Noh told me, the only people who complain are the smokers. I guess there's something worse than being deprived of one's smartphone...

One of the book's contributors, Kyungmook Kim, spent two years in a detention center as a conscientious objector to military service - including fifteen months in solitary confinement. He concludes his text by remarking that "[n]o one who participates in this program should feel like they're in a real prison." Kyungmook articulates something I've felt since I began this project. The cells at Happitory may have the superficial look of a prison, but the distance between a voluntary introspective experience and a compulsory punitive one is great, and the former risks abstracting the latter. Prison should not be a metaphor.

SK: Regarding the relationship between restriction and creativity, more often than not, absolute freedom tends to drive professions that require creative/critical thinking (artists, designers, writers, etc.) into an infinite loop where nothing gets decided. Projects like *Solitary* establish boundaries that force one to think both inside and outside the box. Perhaps contributors write about things they normally wouldn't. Could you tell us a bit about your creative process in the facility?

TC: During my twenty-four hours in the cell, I came to some realizations about how I normally structure my creative process. Often, after an hour or two of work, I reward myself by procrastinating on my phone or laptop. Lacking these devices at Happitory, I found that I couldn't escape my train of thought, and it was frightening at first. I felt like I was being chased around the room by my shadow. There was nowhere to hide. Gradually, I recognized how vital it was to have the time to let my thoughts go where they wanted. I tried to preserve this associative mode in my contribution to the book, most of which I wrote during my stay.

The other contributors had their own reckonings in the cells. Sunjin Kim was worried about how he'd spend all of that unstructured time so brought coins and did I Ching divination. Jiwon Yu fell asleep for almost her entire stay. The moment her devices were taken away, her entire body seemed to relax - or collapse. It makes me think that, if technology disappears from the world, we'd all take a long, deep sleep.

SK: Do you remember contributors' reactions when you invited them to stay at the facility? From Jiwon Yu's text, it is quite clear that she was anxious about leaving her day-to-day life and being a hindrance to her work and family.

TC: When I began the project in 2019, I expected that people would react to the unusual nature of the experience: spending a day alone in a cell-like room. But by the time I sent out invitations in early 2020, the world had changed, and every nonessential worker I knew spent their days alone in a cell-like room! Happitory remains an exceptional space due to its technology prohibition, but in other ways, it has come to feel strangely familiar to many contributors.

Jiwon had just moved into a new home and was the first contributor to visit the center (in February 2020), so she had many reasons to be anxious. Some potential contributors didn't feel comfortable leaving their neighborhoods during the early pandemic, and two were turned off by the happiness rhetoric of the facility. As I'm not sponsored by Happitory, my hope was to bring critical perspectives into the book, and while some are present, I would have loved even more.

SK: The book does not include a separate introduction that offers general information about the project as a whole. Instead, your text combines writing from your stay at Happitory and a summary of the other contributions to the book. Did you always plan to introduce the publication this way? Or was this decided in the process of designing the book?

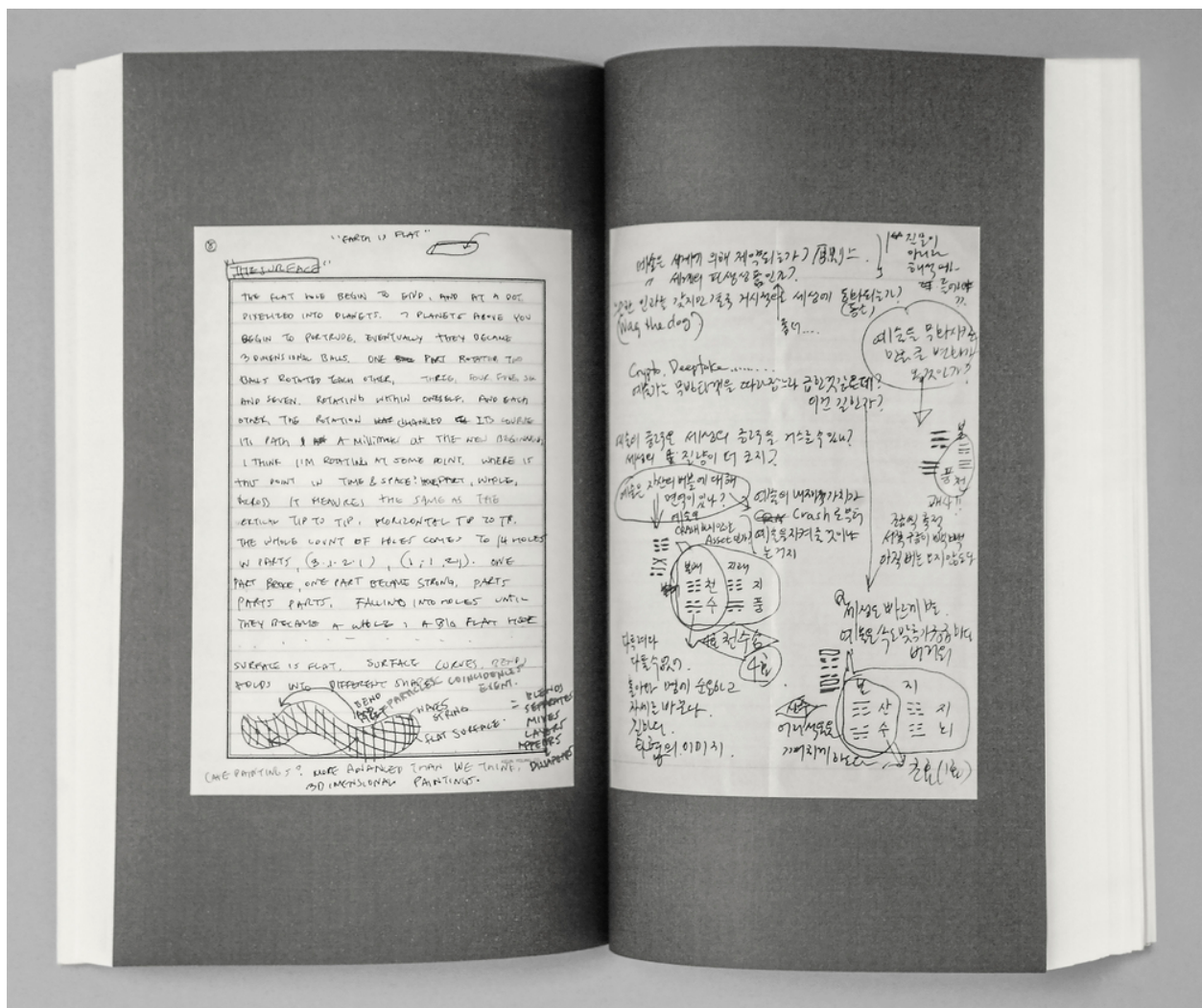
TC: I think of *Solitary* as a collective artwork, so from the outset, I didn't want to conform to the conventions of a book of collected essays. This is why I chose to summarize each contribution to the book at the end of my text, adding to the

language I generated on site. And it informed the choice to put the table of contents on the cover. The designer Luke Gould typeset the contributors' names to read like a roll call.

SK: When each contributor is in their own solitary room, they are faced with silence, though this is misleading in the sense that when everything is silent, you can hear so much more. You also talk about this with reference to John Cage. On the other hand, the book is full of “noise”: the internal monologues of contributors, the song Jaeyeon Chung sings to herself, and the binary-digit dialogue of InYoung Yeo. It almost seems like once there was silence, thoughts became more chaotic. Could you comment on the relationship between silence and thought?

TC: In my contribution, I summarize a famous story about Cage in an anechoic chamber at Harvard. He came in search of silence, and in its place, he heard sounds barely audible in our everyday lives, like the rush of blood through his veins and arteries.

I like how your question suggests that thought can have its own sonority, even at moments when we're seeking silence. This dynamic is at play in the text of Russell Mason, one of the contributors with a committed meditation practice. All Russell wanted was to cease mental activity - to approach “bare existence and pacific relief” - but he was constantly being distracted by the need to write something for the book. It's difficult to quiet the mind in any context, and my commission only added more noise...



Solitary (writing by InYoung Yeo and Sunjin Kim), 2022
 Courtesy of Tyler Coburn, Sternberg Press, and Art Sonje Center

SK: One of the most significant aspects of the design of the publication is that you have separate English and Korean covers and sides. Being bilingual, I find that the act of switching between two languages (and cultures) is not always an easy task. What was the rationale behind your choice to have separate sections for Korean and English?

TC: I find that bilingual publications tend to privilege one language over the other, even through subtle design choices. Because English plays such an outsize role in global communication, it often takes center stage.

Solitary is intimately linked to a particular site in Korea and to contributors based in the country. I thus wanted to give equal standing to both languages, and it

seemed that the best way to do this was to make a Korean and an English cover, a Korean and an English side. Even then, Luke and I tried to put these sides in conversation, which is why both Korean and English language occupy the frames of most spreads.

Beyond these design considerations was the matter of translation. Some contributors wrote their texts in English and others in Korean; over an extensive editing process, drafts were translated back and forth. Even then, the two sides of the book don't match. Translation is always imprecise. The very title *Solitary* has a range of connotations in English that can't be replicated by a single word in Korean. Minji Chun and Yeni Ma, the main translator and copy editor, suggested 독방 for the Korean title, thus placing focus on the experience of being alone in a cell at Happitory.

There was also the question of how the book would translate to readers of different cultures, who would likely make associations with local conditions of incarceration. As an artist working in the United States, which has more than 20% of the global prison population, I'm particularly sensitive to this - and aware of the many scholars, activists, and artists taking on our prison-industrial complex. (To give one example, I recently saw the incredible Ruth Wilson Gilmore speak about her latest publication, *Abolition Geography* (2022), at Cooper Union in New York.) It would be irresponsible to claim that *Solitary* has anything to offer these efforts, so I've tried to keep its focus on Happitory and the Korean carceral landscape. This is what makes certain of the book's contributions so crucial, like Kyungmook's writing about his time in actual solitary confinement.

SK: It only occurred to me, after going through the publication several times, that it does not include any images apart from a few in the middle where the English and Korean sides meet. Even then, there are no photographs of Happitory at all. For what it's worth, I've never felt the need for them, as each text allows me to imagine the solitary environment of its author. Maybe this question can be answered in two parts: one for the purpose of the middle section, and the second for the lack of images of the facility.

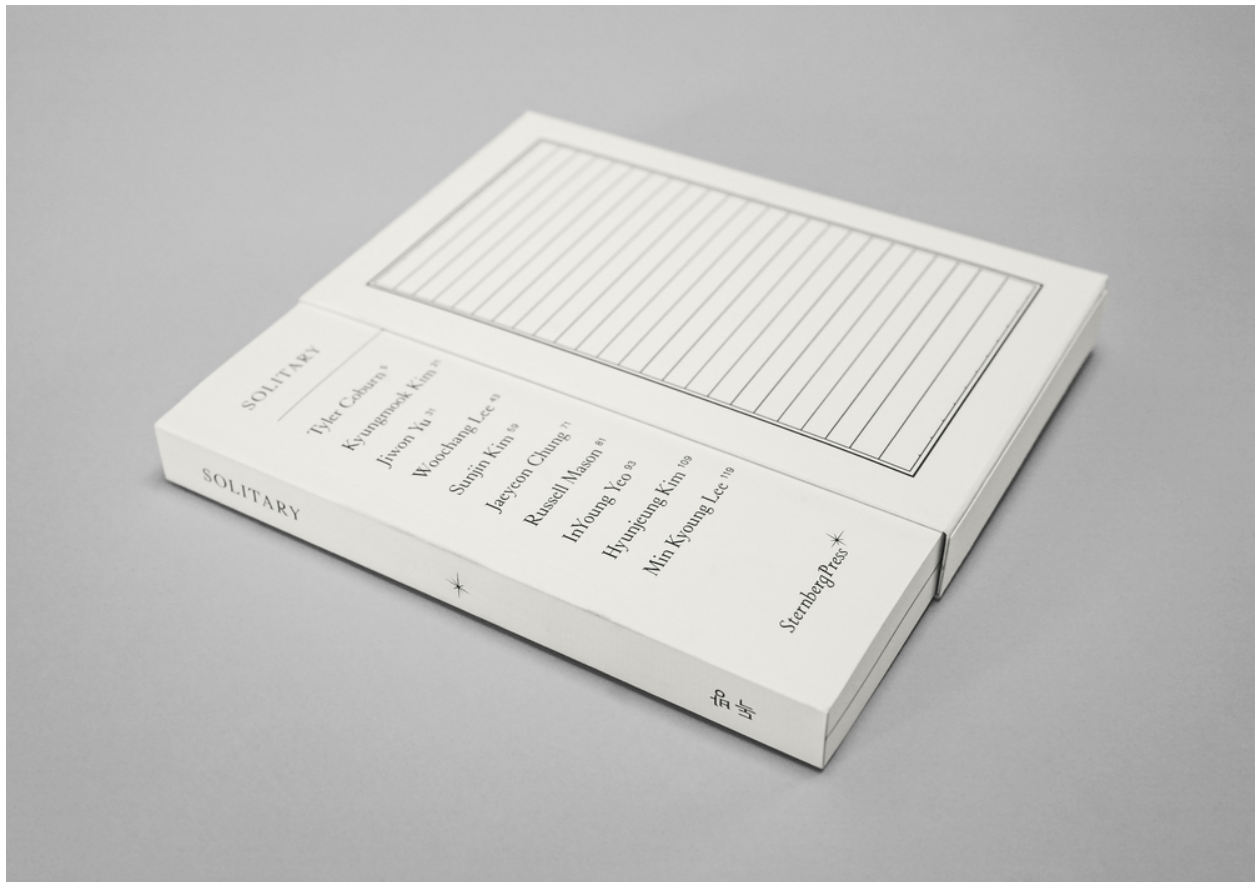
TC: In preparing this project, I read a number of articles about Happitory in Western press, and in many cases, I neither liked the writing nor the photographs

of the facility, which often showed individuals alone in their cells. Contributor Jiwon Yu, for instance, was startled by a foreign camera crew recording her through the glass in the cell door! Suffice it to say that this was nonconsensual.

The implication of foreign coverage often seemed to be: *look at this weird thing that East Asian people are doing*. Withholding images was my attempt to spare Happitory from yet again being seen through an orientalist lens. Sure, it's a curious place. And yes, it must be understood within its national and cultural context. But it's also part of the global wellness industry. It will inevitably make readers think about carceral conditions in their own countries. Its themes resonate across borders.

Another reason for not including images is because the writing is already highly descriptive. The first thing many contributors do in their texts is detail the facets of their cells - and often, it's these descriptions that give rise to their associations and insights. My hope is that this phenomenological approach to writing can help readers see Happitory in their mind's eye.

The few images I did include are scans of the texts that contributors drafted at Happitory. These are positioned in the middle of the book, as you observed, where they operate like a hinge between the Korean and English sides. They're the origin of everything else in the book - and a direct link to the site. Some of them are messy, some contain notes in both Korean and English. One includes a drawing and quote from Shin Young-bok's *Reflections from Prison* (1988). What one sees are ideas in motion.



Solitary (book and slipcase), 2022
 Courtesy of Tyler Coburn, Sternberg Press, and Art Sonje Center

SK: Was the slipcase for the book a conscious decision to “enclose” the experience? If this was not the reason, what was the design process behind it?

TC: Happitory, as previously mentioned, is a wellness center dressed up as a prison. With the design of this book, Luke and I wanted to split the difference: between the introspective experience one has in a cell, and the metaphoric architecture that surrounds. The slipcase operates like this architecture - enclosing, as you aptly put it. The graphic on the slipcase is a type of paper provided in the cell, which may also remind of prison bars.

We chose to make the slipcase in the same cream stock as the book. It's rather flimsy, somewhat like Happitory's prison metaphor. And it's just as vulnerable to scuffs and scratches as the book it contains.

SK: For people who are actually imprisoned, the process of writing provides comfort at the very least, and further allows them to use the experience as a foundation for meaningful work. You mention many historical figures who turned prison into a social, cultural, or political platform, including Kim Dae-jung (a politician, activist, and the eighth president of South Korea between 1998 - 2003). Woochang Lee also writes extensively about this in his contribution to the book. Could you say a bit about the relationship between actual prison and one's political practice?

TC: Kim Dae-jung once said, "I wish I could go back to prison," as that period from 1980-1982 gave him considerable time to read and write. He positions prison as a world apart from busy life - an idea that proved important in Happitory's origin story, as I mentioned earlier.

However one interprets Kim's statement, there's no denying that prison has been the context for some of the most important writing in history. I'm thus grateful that Woochang dedicated part of his text to the role prison letters played in Korea's democratization movement. Included in his discussion are Kim's book *Prison Letters* (1984), which filters his experience through a Christian worldview; Moon Ik-hwan's writing about his multiple incarcerations between 1976 and 1993 (and how Christianity and yoga helped him endure); and Shin Young Bok's *Reflections from Prison* (1988), published at the end of his twenty-year sentence. While Kim wrote in solitary confinement, Shin lived with other inmates; he described the process of learning from them as infinitely more rewarding than anything that could be gained from college. As Woochang writes, Shin's time in jail was crucial for his growing embrace of national populism (*Mingjung-ism*).

SK: The whole point of Happitory is to step back from society, where everything is moving forward so fast, and consider what we need to be happier. What did you take away from the experience in regards to the concept of happiness?

TC: Woochang Lee says it best in his contribution to the book: the aim of Happitory is to foster a self "that is only directed toward happiness." On a personal level, this ambition doesn't ring true. I've always been drawn to writers like Jack Halberstam and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who recognize that depression, melancholy, and pessimism are meaningful parts of the human experience -

particularly for those who have developed a sense of culture and identity in the margins. This is not to say that an experience at Happitory can't be important, just that one should look beyond the prescribed philosophy of the place and decide for oneself how to spend that time.

SK: I want to point out the connections between meditation, solitary confinement, and happiness that have come up in many of the subjects we've discussed, and ask you if you have any further thoughts? Maybe in relation to religion and cultural capitalism?

TC: I feel best equipped to speak about the American context, though my response should resonate beyond it. Somewhere in the history of American capitalism, the Protestant ethic, with its unshowy exercise of wealth accumulation, gave way to what Slavoj Žižek calls the injunction to "Enjoy!". This demand takes form through cultures of consumption and pleasure and professional gain - and in the oppressive positivity we're expected to perform. Happitory, like Marie Kondo, is a combination of the two: its rejection of overconsumption and embrace of a tidy, spare life are phrased in terms of happiness and love.

It's important to underscore the link Max Weber made between Protestantism and early American capitalism. Even in our secular age, religion and spirituality continue to inform our identities as economic subjects. There are obvious places to look—the syncretic brew of Eastern and mystical practices, of fitness and dietary philosophies, which take the place of traditional religious affiliation. Happitory, particularly in its sessions led by Buddhist monks, seems intent to provide a similar type of fulfillment. What interests me more than any of these particular examples is what they collectively reveal about us: The desire to submit, even temporarily, to an external authority. The hope that, by giving away our freedom, we might feel a bit more free.

SK: Now that the book is complete, the public has the opportunity to read about Happitory's unique solitary confinement experience. How do you think the publication represents that experience as a whole?

TC: I don't think *Solitary* could encapsulate a place like Happitory, as each person's experience will be different, but its ten texts have some common themes. So many of us have the desire for care, surrender, capture, and escape. Sometimes they come all at once, as when we accustom ourselves to a routine and also fantasize about flight. The contributors to *Solitary* grapple with these very human things. I hope their stories will resonate with the reader.

Tyler Coburn is an artist, writer, and teacher based in New York. He received a BA in Literature from Yale University and an MFA in Studio Art from the University of Southern California (Roski School of Fine Arts). His recent exhibitions include *Vogliamo tutto* at OGR, Turin; *Hello, Robot.* at Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein; and *1833: une jeune fille, une machine et leur amitié* at image/imatge, Orthez. His writing has appeared in *e-flux journal*, *ArtReview*, and *frieze*. Information on Tyler's other work, such as *The Petrified* (2022 – ongoing), *Counterfactuals* (2020 – ongoing), and *Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools)* (2019), can be found [here](#).