

ALL THAT NOISE



Tony Elleh



Above: "Uninhibited island in New Year Saekdong" (2016) from Yang's *The Intermediate* series at Art People restaurant, Aishti Foundation. Opposite: Haegue Yang with her installation at Aishti by the Sea

Korean-born artist Haegue Yang is known for her multi-faceted sensorial installations and sculptures occupying the in-between spaces where public and private meet. *A Mag* discovers her weird and wonderful world

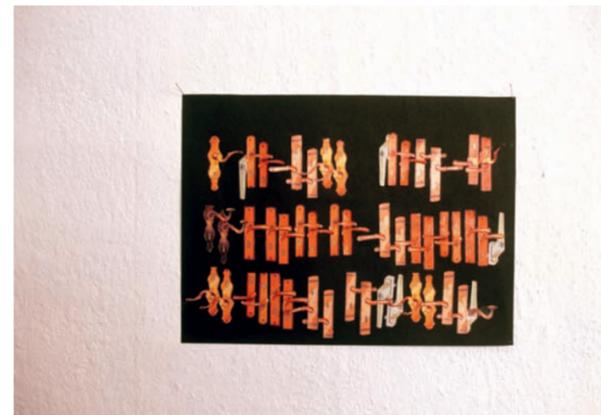


When Igor Stravinsky's 20th century masterpiece, *The Rite of Spring*, was first performed in Paris in 1913, it was a disaster. Erratic and jarring, the music rising and falling in layers of drama and dissonance with abrupt twists, the audience jeered and booed it, even throwing vegetables at the stage.

This disjunction is precisely why Berlin and Seoul-based artist Haegue Yang – who gained international attention after her installation in the Korean pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale, a structure of coloured, hanging Venetian blinds fluttering to wind-propellers – chose it to accompany the latest display of her artworks entitled *Quasi-pagan Seasonal Shift*, currently on show until mid-February at Aishti by the Sea in Beirut.

"The history of Russian avant-garde art has helped me gain an understanding of what I am doing, developing my consciousness as an artist. And *The Rite of Spring* was part of the Ballets Russes, and wasn't received well at all at first – it's eclectic and not harmonious. These days, we may all know it as legendary but it took over a hundred years for the work to become celebrated," Yang says, as we listen to its staccato rhythms while walking through the ten anthropomorphic sculptures made of artificial straw that make up the installation.

First shown at Galeries Lafayette in Paris



in 2016, albeit in slightly different guises and under the title *Quasi-Pagan Modern*, the works came to Aishti by the Sea after a joint effort between Yang's gallerist Chantal Crousel and Aishti CEO Tony Salamé, who both felt the sculptures could be staged in the David Adjaye-designed building.

"Haegue is very interested in crafts from all parts of the world," Crousel said, "and bringing her sculptures, and the music related to shamanic ritual dances that accompanies them to Beirut, in dialogue with contemporary dresses and mannequins, is a continuation of her exploration about how East can meet West."

Some of her sculptures have horn-like heads, others are more cylindrical and bulbous in form and many of them have fake plants emerging from them. With playful titles such as *Long Neck Woman Upside Down* or *Narrating Solid Cloud*, Yang's works look organic, yet are largely artificial; they have a traditional, decorative aesthetic but are also anti-classicist and modernist in their geometries. The choice to use *The Rite of Spring* she says, points to her continued obsession with this kind of hybridity, in the juxtaposition of diverging motifs: "It's a cultural detour of sorts, in atonal music about a Native American pagan sacrifice spring ritual. I wanted to integrate it in my work."

It isn't hard to see why since the sculptures have a tribal, surrealist feel to them. The music adds a hint of motion where there actually is none. On the ground floor of the mall stands the three-legged *Tilted Bushy-head Junior*, positioned between two mannequins. It looks like a furry animal on rollers about to break into a dance. Nearby is another furry blob, *Running Squeezed Two-tone Fan Dance* (without rollers), its form punctuated by a swirly ethnic weave, in a nod to traditional Korean folk craftsmanship. Part of *The Intermediate* series, these works are matched with half a dozen more pieces on a central rotating platform, also in artificial straw.

"*The Intermediate* refers to medium, in shamanic terms, or the mediation between

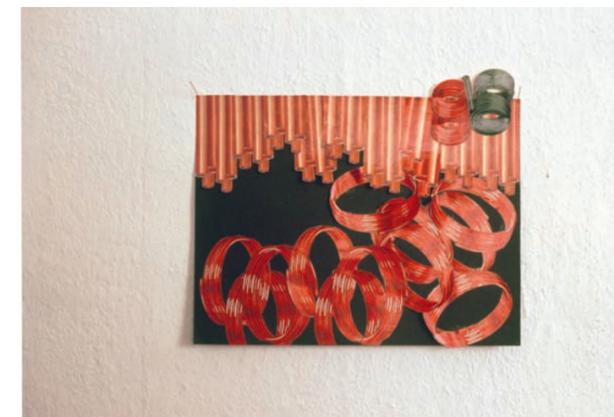
different dimensions. In my sculptures, it's about taking something ancient and bringing it to the present," Yang says.

Before she began experimenting with straw, Yang was making light sculptures out of IV stands and clothing racks. Her *Warrior, Believer, Lover* series in 2011 featured 33 such works draped with cables, bulbs, Venetian blinds, netting, artificial plants, dried herb bundles, mushrooms, charcoal, metal strainers, baskets, bells, fly swatters, whistles, knitting yarn, plastic funnels and other miscellaneous items. These sculptures in turn grew out of a *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* (2007-9). "I imagined a group dance of pagan figures, such as Native women and medicine men in duets and trios and I was envisioning a choreography with *Rite of Spring* as my reference. At the time, I thought it was exploitative to use another author's music but it became a necessity to lend movement to the piece."

Yang began using frames like IV stands on wheels, or drying racks wrapped in fabric and elements like bulbs and cables, in what seemed like ad hoc sculptures, after she visited her late grandmother's house. "I went there and the drying rack, IV drip, fans, strobes and origami – they were all there – and it all just came together in my work." So she created an installation on-site, *Sadong 30*. "As I moved from IV stands – which were too frail to carry more objects – to clothing racks, it started to become an autonomous sculptural language: the bodies or frames got chunkier, which enabled me to tailor the sculptures in a richer way," Yang adds.

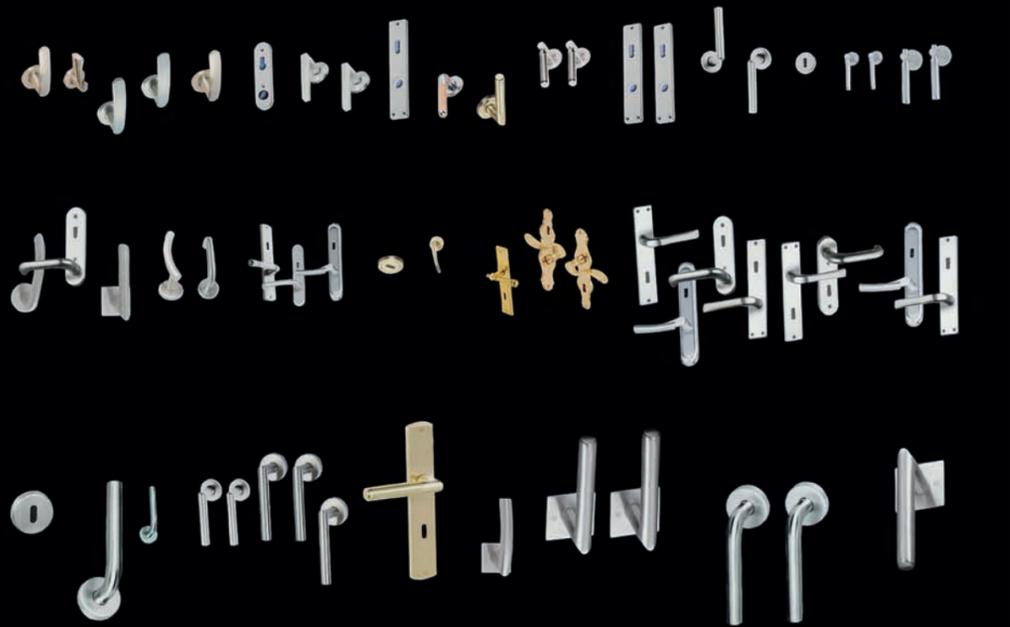
But building art pieces out of unusual materials such as bicycle bells and Venetian blinds, which she calls "banal discoveries," can be traced to the very beginnings of her art practice. Leaving Seoul, where she trained as an artist, for Germany in 1994, she found herself in a place that was completely foreign.

"I don't know if you can imagine the confusion I went through... I couldn't interpret the social



This page from top: "What I'd Love to Have at Home" (2001), with metal shelving by Otto Kind AG and a 1968 Egon Eiermann sofa; "Shooting the Elephant Thinking the Elephant," Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, taken from the original "Boxing Ballet" (2015). Opposite: Hornbachbild #2 & #3 (1994), made from hardware store catalogues and chromolux paper

Courtesy of Studio Haegue Yang, Galerie Barbara Wien and Wolfgang Günzel



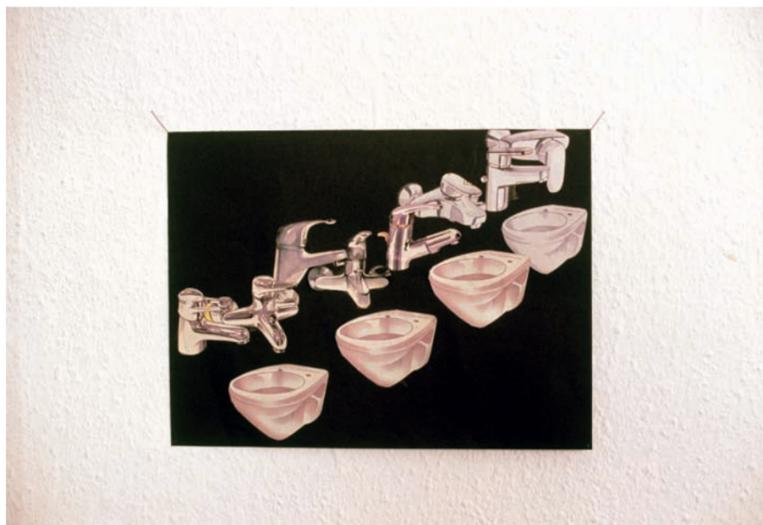
Left: Hardware Store Collage – Bauhaus Door Handles #3 (2013) from a private collection in Stuttgart. Below: Hornbachbild #1 (1994)

codes. I had never been to Europe before, I decided to leave home because I didn't know what to do next – after I failed to get into grad school in Korea," she recounts unabashedly. "I had studied sculpture in university and I had lost the sense of what art means."

So the art student, disillusioned with the academic system in her country, which she describes as a "Japanese import mixed with American influences," found refuge in the most unlikely of places: the Bauhaus, or your typical German hardware store. "I was fascinated, we don't have these kinds of stores back home... The thick store catalogue became my Bible, and where I learned German words."

Yang made her first paper collages out of these catalogues, in her *Hornbachbild* or *Hardware Store Collages* series, featuring various tools such as faucets, door handles and tubes – which may not be the coolest thing for artistry today but at the time with little money, Yang used the materials she had at hand. "This is *Warenwelt*, German for the 'world of things/commodities.' I didn't see it then but I had begun to develop my vocabulary out of lacquer and varnish, casts and plaster."

"The decision to include this early work as the beginning of my career in this monograph," she says, as she shows me the latest published catalogue of her artworks by Kunsthau Bregenz, "was a crucial yet difficult one. For a long time, I didn't understand these formative works on my own. I considered them mere studies, and was embarrassed by them. I even often threw everything away, since I had no means to store them. So there are only some 35 mm



slides remaining of the actual works."

She moved further in her fascination with the everyday with *Social Conditions of the Sitting Table* in 2001, a pseudo-social study of the ubiquitous low-lying tables in Korea: "The ownership of this nameless table, with the height of a chair and the surface area of a table, isn't questioned; it's used in spaces that blur the private with the public. I'm interested in these urban objects that are on the verge of disappearing," Yang says, referencing Marcel DuChamp's ready-mades, or mundane objects that are found and repositioned to become art (such as his notorious 1917 porcelain urinal, *Fountain*). In the same year, Yang created *What I'd Love to Have at Home*, by placing a vintage sofa near empty metal shelves in a minimalist expression of modular living, a desire

Right: Arrivals (2011) at the Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria. Below: The 2009 exhibition "Assume Nothing: New Social Practice" at the Art Gallery of Victoria, Canada



for private space, and also a paradoxical yet desperate statement on both art and lifestyle by a young artist.

"It's not that I didn't have the desire to make things during that period," Yang says, "I just didn't see how working with the discovery of objects, such as in a shopping mall, on the one hand, and making labour-intensive works on the other, were contradictory. They exist as parallel desires in me, in a hybrid approach of found and made. In a similar way, many other seemingly opposing parts, such as anthropomorphic and geometric, organic and artificial, indeed build a contrast, yet aren't conflicting."

Perhaps the best examples of this inclination are her recent mobile sonic sculptures (2012-2013), metallic, spherical forms made out of bells. "I began these

around the same time as my so-called light sculptures began to fade away. And the series of *The Intermediates*, the straw sculptures, which began in 2014-2015, followed... their materiality is so different." The former may look cold but they vibrate with sound as they move.

While her straw sculptures communicate by evoking some kind of esoteric dance ritual, her sonic pieces communicate through movement and resonance. Both are bizarre and move through sound; both are profoundly uncanny and perhaps a little tatty and uncool. Both work with oppositions that re-imagine the ordinary as extraordinary, the primitive as contemporary, and the organic as artificial.



Wolfgang Gänzel & Mathieu Bertola, Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg, Markus Tretter, Bob Matheson and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria