

Haegue Yang for Art in Asia
By Clara Kim

Since 2006, Haegue Yang's installations have taken the form of temporary and ephemeral fields of sensory experiences in which individual associations and connotations unfold limitlessly. In *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* (a series of different but related installations created for specific sites and contexts—Version Utrecht, Blind Room, Blind Table, Version Cologne, Seven Basel Lights), Yang employs various sensory devices including Venetian blinds, lights, industrial fans, infrared heaters, humidifiers and scent emitters to create an atmosphere in which qualities of luminosity, heat, wind and smell shift as the human body comes into contact. These sentient landscapes describe a kind of alternate consciousness in which memory, sentiment, intellect, and political ideology are inextricably linked to the social body, however collective or personal. Vulnerability allows for an exploration of unheroic acts, irrational behavior, emotional release—the states of mind between contemplation and action.

In more recent work beginning with *Mountains of Encounter* at Kunstverein Hamburg (2008), *Lethal Love* for Cubitt in London (2008), *Siblings and Twins* for Portikus in Frankfurt, *Asymmetric Equality* for REDCAT in Los Angeles and *Symmetric Inequality* for Sala Rekalde in Bilbao (2008-9), Yang's abstract, sensorial vocabulary becomes more pronounced as Venetian blinds take a more structural, though asymmetrical, presence and forces of energy play off in unproductive, inefficient pairings. These related installations operate as abstract portraits, narratives so to speak, about the relationships between certain literary and political characters: the French novelist and filmmaker Marguerite Duras, whose work explored the ambiguous conditions of colonialism in French Indochina and her husband and fellow Résistance fighter Robert Antelme; the encounter between the underground communist revolutionary Kim San who fought against the Japanese occupation of Korea and the American journalist Nym Wales who met Kim secretly under life-threatening circumstances that led to her writing of his biography *Song of Ariran* (1941); and the life and death of German activist and founder of the German Green Party (Die Grünen) Petra Kelly and Gert Bastien, the former NATO general who became Kelly's lover and is believed to have shot and killed Kelly in a murder-suicide.

Whether within the backdrop of a tropical landscape of colonial Indochina or the clandestine meetings in the mountainous terrain of Yan'an during its height as the center of Chinese communist revolution, these relationships to Yang represent the precarious conditions in which communities are formed, conditions in which political freedom comes with great personal risk and where passion drives subjectivity, fate and history. Yang's work is an exploration of community (that of lovers, political dissidents, revolutionaries, individuals) that contemplates the possibility of arriving at subjectivity through absence, exile or destruction rather than through traditional notions of cultural identity or geographic boundaries. Her work unfolds slowly attempting to describe a notion of equality or justice through physical and sensorial displacement. Space is not fixed, rather it morphs, changes and shifts. It is porous and contaminated. Light, which figures prominently in her installations, becomes a beckoning call, that illuminates, dims, detracts and destabilizes until its effect settles deeply and unforgettable under your skin like cigar smoke lingering in the middle of a darkened room.

The interview that follows took place during the preparations for Yang's solo exhibition *Asymmetric Equality* at REDCAT in the summer of 2008. Though the interview cites the REDCAT project specifically, Yang's responses speak more broadly to a body of related work during an active two-year period (2008-9). The text provides an insightful context about the artist's thinking during this time and gives us a rare glimpse into the motivations of her practice through her own words.

Clara Kim: Can you talk about the development of the work you have created for REDCAT and your interest in abstraction?

Haegue Yang: I had works in mind, which came to the world one by one, during a period of time I gave to myself to experiment and experience. While I was in the midst of it, the artistic desire to be more frank with myself in my own work brought me to a certain consciousness about abstraction. I still do not have enough distance to really speak about this desire, and maybe I will never be able to, or I will not even think

about it again. Abstraction is the language I choose to give true value to the presence of narrative inside of me as well as the narratives I have encountered and realized as “relatives,” which exist outside of me. For me, they appear pre-conditionary, as if they’ve always existed around us. These narratives are not unfamiliar to me or to others. I think what fundamentally lies beneath these narratives can be shared without being told as a story. For me, abstraction is not anti-narrative, it is not a language that attempts to negate narration but rather allows a narrative to be achieved without constituting its own limits. The form of language I choose to experiment with is abstract even if the motivation is always concrete.

CK: To this end, you often employ sensory devices in your work. In *Asymmetric Equality*, you use light, infrared heaters, fans and sound in order to create an environment that demands sensorial engagement. Can you talk about your interest in the sensorial as an almost proto- or post-linguistic form as it relates to narrative and subjectivity?

HY: Light, movement and sound are the dynamics of space, which illuminate abstraction and silences a conventional narrative that is capable of illustrating only one image. Recently, I have been using moving lights as they take over diverse functions. Like touching hands, light moves slowly across the space, gently touching different surfaces. I see it as relative to air, transparent but present. Light also serves as a functioning device that creates shadow. The shower of moving lights in constant motion gives different length and focus to the shadows and demonstrates the idea of an engagement of the observer through their own individual perspective. Light is an autonomous form, because it has no physical boundaries. In the installation, there is a mixture of various types of lights—the moving shower of lights from high-tech theatrical instruments and the red glow from stationary infrared heaters. Both are light sources, yet create different effects and feelings. In the installation, each of the infrared heaters is accompanied by a fan—pairing two opposing forces across from each other. There is a dialogue between the paired devices—a kind of yearning for each other, an intensive negation of heat and wind facing paradoxical disaster. They act as if they would at best destroy one another, which to me, demonstrates a principle of love and revolution. Their existence is derived from this possible destruction, squandering enormous energy of emotion. I see this as a subversive act, because it’s desperate and fundamentally inefficient.

CK: Another recurring element in your recent work is the use of customized Venetian blinds. In your installation, the blinds do not necessarily demarcate an outside and inside or an exterior and interior as much as they create a shifting landscape where transparency, opacity and positionality are in constant flux. Can you talk about your use of these domestically specific objects and the geometric configurations which you subject them to in your installations?

HY: I normally use blinds to create boundaries, which give me the comfort of breathing inside, but looking half hidden outside. When I look out into a space from the inside, I feel a deep sense of nostalgia and a desire to get to the other side, while cowardly breathing the air within. The half transparency is visual. With *Asymmetric Equality*, I didn’t draw boundaries, instead I created an open structure with branch-like arms. I wanted them to be, as in Heidegger’s notion of existence or *dasein*, timid but finally with facial expression. The blinds grow out of a series of mirrors anchored to the column, creating branch like forms from its “trunk.” The varying elevations and angles of the blinds create a kind of landscape. On the one hand, the configuration of the blinds is geometrical, yet it contains organic growth. Each unit has a crystalline-like flowery structure made up of three, four, five or six arms, implying infinite development. To me, they are like characters that address micro-communities, connected to each other, yet containing their own complexity and completeness. I am very excited about combining two different colors in the blinds—shiny white and faux wood. I sometimes feel awkward describing structures like this, even if this is actually how I engage with abstraction as bearing certain imagery of thoughts—in this case, around a micro-community. The projects I have worked on this year dealt with narratives driven by certain historical, political and literary figures from various times and places, including the underground Korean revolutionary Kim San, the German politician and activist Petra Kelly, and the French novelist and filmmaker Marguerite Duras. With this work for REDCAT, I am, in a way, returning to my own narrative.

CK: *Asymmetric Equality* continues your thinking about Marguerite Duras and your interest in ideas about community and home. You mentioned that with this installation you want to create an atmosphere of “tropical melancholy,” which to me conveys a kind of displacement that is palpable sensorially while

demanding a cognitive suspension—a temporary submission to external forces that disengage thought for feeling, mind for body, place for non-place. Can you talk about this “atmosphere” as it relates to Duras and your own personal experience of growing up and living in two different countries, cultures, contexts?

HY: The atmosphere I would like to describe is one of my childhood growing up in Seoul in the 70s and 80s when Korea was still regarded as socially, politically and economically underdeveloped and therefore was full of construction. I only vaguely remember how often huge trucks ran through unpaved roads without a division between cars and pedestrians and all of us were in dust and dirt, yet this didn’t stop eager children from running after them in the streets and releasing their energy. I remember loud sounds and large dust showers surrounding me all the time and the dull yet massive sounds of heavy industrialization all over. There was not a single moment without the smell of fear—the fear of a severely repressive military regime mixed with a sweetly traditional environment, an old-fashioned life style, which remains highly nostalgic and innocent in my mind. I was born into this kind of “colonial” environment, which I think characterizes my pathetic stubbornness and a struggle not to be modern, flexible or convenient in the world. I acknowledge the comfort of these memories as something primitive, a feeling we create unconsciously for sustenance in circumstances of difficulty or suppression, that is therefore different from convenience, which is a product of an efficient, industrialized society. When I’m absorbed in a “colonial” structure, I see many empowering moments, because it is weak, meek and deceiving by nature. The structure provides the belief of growth and change, but what we get from living in the face of it is a fundamental subversiveness. This fascination with the experience of living with comfort and discomfort, living in an environment with dust, pollution, political suppression, violence and exhaustion, left me with no words. For me, the noise from the past is wrapped with the silence of the present.

CK: The continuum of history is often espoused as a linear trajectory that describe a series of events, a set of characters, with causal relations that play out in the theater of grand narratives. As cultural producers, we work in the realm of senses or sensory, in which individual experiences are as much remembered and felt as they are recorded and factualized. I find this very interesting in your work, that in your referencing of “historical” characters such as Duras, you are collapsing the time-space continuum, making Duras present now and allowing our senses to dictate experience (rather than positions of power, privilege, knowledge) which seems radically democratic to me.

HY: I have recently begun to explore parallels between my life and those of other social and political figures. For example, I’ve been thinking about like experiences with Marguerite Duras—especially her eventual move from Indochina to Paris—in search of a home that made her homeless as a result of a metaphorical experience of learning and unlearning in a colonial structure. In 1932, she moved to Paris from Indochina (then under French rule), where she was born and raised but would never return. At that time, she didn’t know her “home country” (France) and the place where she actually grew up was never objectively regarded as her “home,” because she was of French descent. In her old home, politics was only a governing language, but in her new home, language was political. Early on, I believe she felt the need to completely erase her knowledge and memory of Indochina in order to make France her new home. During this period, she engaged in dubious political affiliations with the ministry that oversaw affairs in the French colonies as well as with the Nazi puppet government in Vichy. Despite her initial participation in these controversial histories, she later found her own artistic and political language, which I understand to be a process of unlearning the rules of outside power structures. I would describe this process as a kind of homecoming and would dare to insist that, in time, she somehow kept her old “home,” in a way that sympathetically recognized Indochina as something more than a geographic location but certainly had much to do with the time and events connected with it. In novels such as *The Sea Wall* (1950) as well as *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), I feel like her writing attempts to revisit her home only to discover her homelessness—a truth that eventually led to her silence in literature and in death. The place I am addressing in *Asymmetric Equality* is not an imaginary place. It’s a place where things exist and do not need to be proved as real in order to gain its dignity.