

'Lethal Love'

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For two weeks in June 2003 a large-scale sculpture appeared without ceremony in Paris's Quartier de l'Horloge, in Beaubourg. While its generic modernist style aspired to that of a public monument, its lack of any visible dedication rendered it, over the course of its short-lived occupancy, into a temporary extension of the area's anonymous architecture. Its blank surfaces encouraged the creation of an inadvertent public, who recorded moments of engagement with the sculpture through random mark-making and graffiti. Haegue Yang's Accidental Monument, which was fabricated according to purposely basic instructions issued by the artist and by technicians unknown to her, functioned in the way that many of Yang's works do, delicately coalescing fleeting communities through eclectic arrangements of everyday objects and almost imperceptible adjustments to the familiar.

While the monument, or any notion of monumentality, is seemingly at odds with Yang's practice, her salvaging of transitory moments, places and traces from the clamour of urban life pays tribute to the significance of personal gesture. The articulation of private values within the heavily mediated public sphere demonstrates the potential political import of a personal act, and casts light on contemporary characterisations of community that are distinguished by mutual otherness.

Yang's installation at London's Cubitt1 is just one of a group to be hosted by a number of international institutions over the coming year. This body of work offers a mode of counter-monumentality, established in a series of abstract portraits of radically minded individuals whose public personas are closely interwoven with the remarkable narratives of their personal lives. Lethal Love (2008) elaborates upon the life of Petra Kelly, an influential German activist and one of the founders of Germany's Green Party who was shot in her sleep by her long-term lover Gert Bastian, an ex-army general and fellow party member. The irreconcilability of her public image as an advocate of pacifism with her strained and violent private existence suggests a state of unknowability that distinguishes each and every member of a community of individuals; accordingly, Yang's enigmatic installations invite an indefinite number of viewpoints, shifting between transparency and opacity, object and architecture. Formally, Lethal Love develops an aesthetic vocabulary established in earlier works such as Series of Vulnerable Arrangements (2006) and takes the form of a deftly balanced assemblage of domestic objects, including metallic blinds, mirrors and spotlights, interspersed with movement-activated scent dispensers which here fill the air with invisible clouds of gunpowder and flowers. Cutting across the space, the suspended blinds form both a barrier and a viewing mechanism, the searching spotlights which traverse the space at regular intervals momentarily illuminate visitors' faces, pausing conversations and heightening the sense of others' presence.

Lethal Love, like the earlier work *Mountains of Encounter* (2007) – another portrait piece inspired by the professional relationship between Korean communist Kim San and his biographer, the American journalist Nym Wales – presents us with an abstracted space of encounter, one that is structured in terms of difference and absence. The absent protagonist is a familiar feature in Yang’s work; objects often come to evoke a presence or narrative, or trace alternative modes of exchange and communication. In *Illiterate Leftovers* (2004) projected slides show nearly empty sheets of fax paper bearing only the transmission information and the occasional visual mechanical trace. Here an ‘act of speech’ is rendered silent, exploring the possibility of communication that remains unregistered in visible records. In *Traces of anonymous pupil authors* (2001) Yang presents the marks and notations made by students in their schoolbooks in isolation from the text on which they were made, singling out and suggesting the importance of alternative and subjective readings of given structures. In other projects objects suggest a space for potential engagement: for example, in *Social Conditions of Sitting Tables* (2001), hundreds of photographs document the crude handmade tables or benches that often mark the entrance to Korean shops or restaurants. These slipshod structures become abstract portraits of their makers; in their functionality they also provide a notional structure for the chance meetings of strangers in the public sphere.

In his writings on the subject of community, Jean-Luc Nancy asks, ‘How can the community without essence (the community that is neither “people” nor “nation”, neither “destiny” nor “generic humanity”, etc.) be presented as such? ... How can we be receptive to the meaning of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common?’² Nancy argues that the decentred nature of community is what binds it together – through each member’s cognisance of their lack of identity – and that the anxiety this engenders can only be quelled through an experience of mortality, an understanding that ‘draws us beyond ourselves’ into a social space of others and of strangers. The spectre of death hangs heavy in the air in *Lethal Love*, a portrait of irreconcilable individuals cast in the form of lovers – a universal image characterised by proximity yet one riven with the insistent possibility of the other’s immanent absence.

Lethal Love thus conjures a fractured space in which intangibles – light, scent and vision – come together to form a portrait of the unstable notion of community that emerges in Yang’s work, creating ‘an uncanny but ‘(in)common’ setting where the somewhat fragile and vulnerable idea of the “community of absence” can be performed’.³ Permeated with the tragic circumstances of a private encounter, *Lethal Love* is not so much a monument to individual existences as to the uncertain space between them.