







Haegue Yang,
*Accommodating
the Epic Dispersion —
On Non-cathartic
Volume of Dispersion*,
2012, aluminium
venetian blinds
and hanging
structure, powder-
coating, steel wire,
dimensions variable.
Installation view,
'Der Öffentlichkeit
— von den Freunden
Haus der Kunst'
(‘To the Public:
From the Friends
of Haus der Kunst’),
Haus der Kunst,
Munich. Photograph:
Nozomi Tomoeda.
Courtesy the artist
and Haus der Kunst

Previous spread:
*The Malady of Death
— Monodrama
with Jeanne Balibar*,
2012. View of
the performance,
Staatstheater
Kassel, 7 June 2012.
Photograph:
Krzysztof Zieliński.
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the artist

Haegue Yang: Untimely Histories

— Leire Vergara

Something untimely (an event, an action or a set of arrangements) happens at an unsuitable time; it occurs too late or too early, and causes an interruption in the flow of time, a dissonance with the present. The Latin root of the word is *intempestivus*, a composite of the negative particle *in* and the root *tempestās* (‘time’ or ‘season’), thus referring to something that is literally ‘out of time’.¹ Contemporary authors interpret untimeliness as a form of anachronism, albeit one that ‘does not simply take place in chronological time; but that, working within it, urges, presses and transforms it’.² Whereas anachronism has often been considered one of the greatest sins a historian can commit — a mistake in the chronology — for a number of modern conceptions of history such as temporal linearity became a useful tool with which to understand the present

Untimely Meditations (1873–76) to shape a genealogy outside of conventional historical continuity. For Foucault, untimely events such as ‘the errors, the false appraisals and the faulty calculations’ help us to search in the most ‘unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history — in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts’.⁴

Haegue Yang’s practice can be understood to approach history in an untimely manner. *Accommodating the Epic Dispersion — On Non-cathartic Volume of Dispersion* (2012), an installation commissioned by Haus der Kunst in Munich, exemplifies her methodological approach to history through abstract sculpture, a process often grounded in extensive research of historical events, which she arrives at through literature rather than conventional history writing. *Accommodating the Epic Dispersion* is inspired by the writings of Korean-Japanese author Suh Kyungsik on the life of Italian Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, which trace parallels between the Holocaust and the history of Korea since its annexation by Japan in 1910.⁵ Yang has explained that she became interested in the writings, thoughts and biographies of Levi and Suh because they both knew the experience of incarceration intimately — Levi in having himself been imprisoned; Suh through the arrest of two of his brothers for having joined the struggle against the military dictatorship that ruled

Leire Vergara writes on Haegue Yang’s approach to history, reading the tension between literature and abstraction in her work *vis-à-vis* Roland Barthes’s concept of the pleasure of the text.

through the past and the past through the present. In his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940), for example, Walter Benjamin argued that historical materialists had to be aware of ‘a secret agreement between past generations and the present one’.³ More recently, Michel Foucault took inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche’s

1 See <http://www.wordsense.eu/intempestivus> (last accessed on 15 July 2013).

2 Giorgio Agamben, ‘What Is The Contemporary?’, *What is Apparatus? And Other Essays* (2008, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, p.47.

3 Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, *Illuminations* (1955, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn), London: Pimlico, 1999, pp.245–46.

4 Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ (1971), in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon), New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, pp.146 and 140.

5 See Suh Kyungsik, *Primo Levi e no tabi*, Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun Sha, 1999. Haegue Yang often states the source of inspiration of her works in the literature surrounding her exhibitions; see, for example, the artist’s description of *Accommodating the Epic Dispersion — On Non-cathartic Volume of Dispersion* on the artist’s website: <http://www.heikejung.de/AccommodatingEpicDispersion.html> (last accessed on 15 July 2013). Yang also invited Suh Kyungsik to give a lecture at Haus der Kunst, Munich, on 13 September 2013, to accompany the presentation of her work.

South Korea in the 1960s and 70s.⁶ In *Accommodating the Epic Dispersion*, the politics of displacement that ensue from bringing their stories together are distilled into Yang's own abstract grammar.

The installation was composed of a three-part hanging structure made of coloured aluminium venetian blinds — a recurrent material in Yang's practice that points to her interest in searching for variations within recurrent formal patterns. Occupying the centre of the 800-square-metre entrance hall of the museum, the kaleidoscopic structure crucially estranged the site of intervention, the landmark Nazi architecture of the Haus der Kunst, by partially veiling the view onto the space. Appearing to hang from the ceiling without touching the floor, the three distinct compositions were bathed by two different sources of light (one direct, the other indirect) that strengthened the contrast between the diversely coloured industrial blinds, altering their opacity. *Accommodating the Epic Dispersion* was sited in a space of passage on multiple levels: physically, it lived in a transitional space of the museum, used for welcoming visitors and distributing them into different rooms; perceptually, the optical effect of visual fragmentation that impeded any single standpoint encouraged viewers to constantly move around the piece; conceptually, it connected such physical displacement to untimely analogies between historically and geographically distant narratives.

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Mountains of Encounter (2008), produced for the group show 'Wessen Geschichte'

('Whose (His)Story') at Kunstverein Hamburg in 2008, was Yang's first sculptural installation based on the association of entities belonging to different time regimes.⁷ An assemblage of red venetian blinds was suspended from the ceiling, hanging at different angles so that the blinds would resemble the outline of a mountainous landscape. Its contour appeared however distorted by a choreography of lights: one set of lights illuminated the piece from inside, while another panned through the space, imitating the effect of searchlights, and thus generating a split projection of shadows.

Conceived as an abstract portrait, this work stems from the story of an encounter between two historical figures: the Korean communist revolutionary fighter Kim San and US journalist Nym Wales, who wrote Kim's biography after meeting him in China in 1937.⁸ In particular, Yang was interested in how the book presents Kim as a nationalist, rather than as an anti-imperialist revolutionary, simplifying the complex ideological influences that surrounded this historical figure.⁹ In this sense, his story stands for other fortuitous meetings and alliances between Chinese nationalism and communism, as well as political betrayals.¹⁰ Perhaps another of the many encounters the title alludes to lies in the unresolved relation between aesthetics and history,¹¹ a question that Yang has addressed through a series of installations similarly structured around a dialogue between literature and abstraction.

Lethal Love (2008), for example, revolved around the figure of Petra Kelly, an activist, politician and founding member of the German Green Party, presumably assassinated in 1992 by her lover and fellow party member Gert

Haegue Yang, *Lethal Love*, 2008, aluminium venetian blinds (gunmetal grey, perforated) and hanging structure, powder-coating, steel wire, free-standing mirror wall, moving spotlights and scent emitters (wildflower, gunpowder), dimensions variable. Installation view, 'Lethal Love', Cubitt, London. Photograph: Andy Keate. Courtesy the artist and Artist Pension Trust, Berlin

6 The military rule that General Park Chung Hee instated in South Korea in 1961 became increasingly dictatorial in the early 1970s, following the implementation of Martial Law in October 1972 and the passing of a new authoritarian constitution in November of that year. The country was in a state of social and political turmoil until Park was assassinated in the midst of massive anti-government demonstrations in 1979.

7 'Wessen Geschichte' ('Whose (His)Story'), Kunstverein Hamburg, 12 January—23 March 2008, curated by Yilmaz Dziewior and including work by, among others, Mircea Cantor, Diango Hernández and Gabriel Kuri.

8 See Nym Wales (Helen Foster Snow) and Kim San, *Song of Ariran: A Korean Communist in the Chinese Revolution* (1941), San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1973.

9 Conversation with the artist, 16 July 2013.

10 In spite of having fought on the side of the Chinese Communists for the liberation of Korea from the Japanese occupiers, Kim San is thought to have been executed in 1938, accused of being a Trotskyist and a Japanese spy. Nym Wales didn't publish her book until she returned to the US in 1941, respecting San's request to wait two years before publishing his story. See Doryun Chong, 'A Small Dictionary for Haegue Yang', in Karen Jacobson (ed.), *Asymmetric Equality* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles and Bilbao: Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (REDCAT) and sala rekalde, 2008, pp.149—50.

11 Yang refers to the relationship between aesthetics and history in terms of an aporia of form and content, material and subject, abstraction and history — an aporia that she believes should be maintained rather than resolved. See T.J. Demos and Haegue Yang, 'Accommodating the Epic Dispersion: Haegue Yang in Conversation with T.J. Demos', in Julienne Lorz (ed.), *Haegue Yang*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2013, pp.56—84.

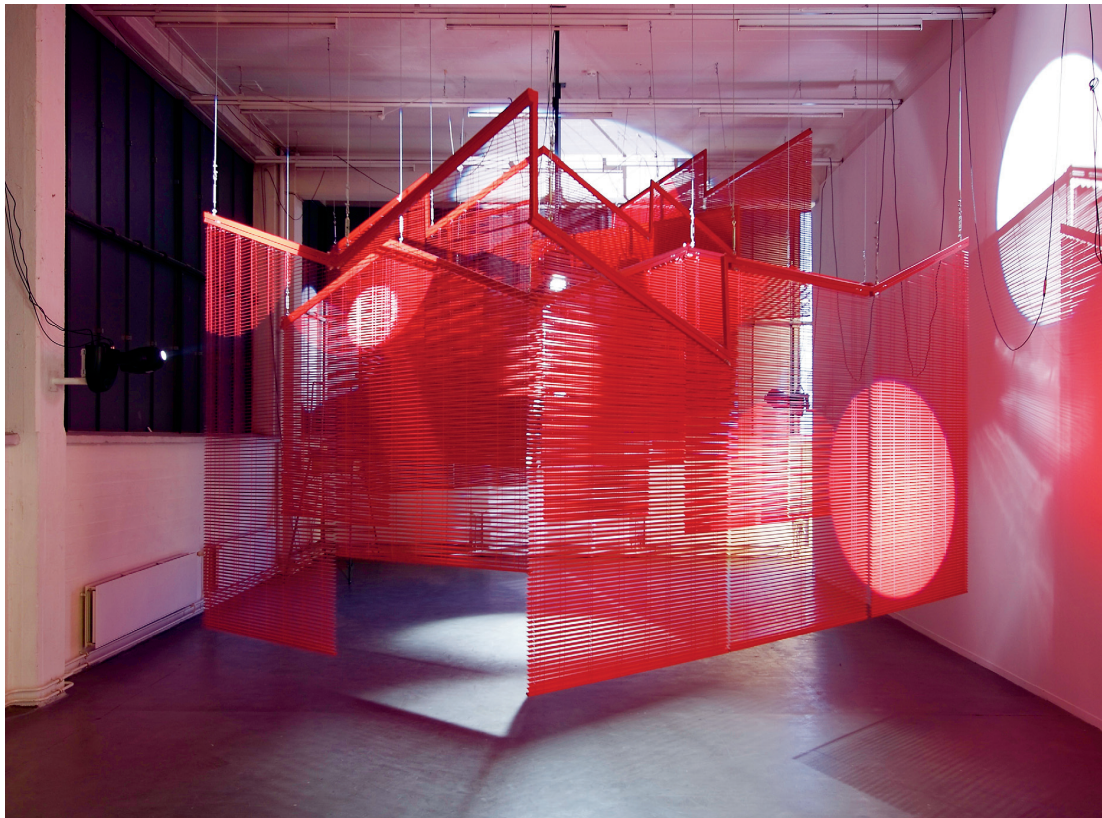


Bastian, who killed himself immediately after.¹² It was composed of three inter-linked formations of blinds, theatrically lit by a moving spotlight, a large mirror that seemed to double both the sculpture and exhibition space and two scent dispensers emitting the scents of wild flowers and gunpowder. Through these elements' interplay, the composition destabilised any static relationship between inside and outside, between what is exposed on the surface and what remains hidden beneath it. Love — 'lethal love' — functioned as

the narrative trigger, articulating the installation conceptually and hinting at Yang's interest in looking at history through the prism of feelings; or, using Foucault's expression, in searching for its complexity in 'unpromising places'. Yang's focus on the intersection between historical events and personal narratives can be seen to emphasise the intertextuality of vital experience by highlighting the links between public and private life.

As Doryun Chong has written, Yang approaches histories and biographies with

12 'Lethal Love', Cubitt, London, 22 February—5 April 2008.



the ‘courage of an amateur’¹³ — that is to say, she reads the lives of others through her own desire and curiosity, driven by the pleasure that these narratives produce in her. Perhaps we can then interpret her practice through Roland Barthes’s notion of the ‘pleasure of the text’.¹⁴ In an attempt to break down stereotypical definitions of the political, Barthes evoked a form of reading whose attention to language would depoliticise what apparently is political and, conversely, politicise what apparently is not. This was a crucial concept for a generation of 1970s French writers and theorists who found in literature an opportunity to question the construction of history; to analyse the conditions of the production of discourse that uphold the conceptual categories through which historical facts are organised and structured. For Barthes, the pleasure of the text functions as a *dérive*, something

that is at the same time revolutionary and asocial, and which cannot be taken over by a collective mentality. It is not a ‘precarious ... but [a] precocious’ experience, he writes, one that ‘does not come in its own good time’ and ‘does not depend on any ripening’.¹⁵ In other words, untimely.

Such a capricious course of time also characterised Yang’s exhibition ‘Siblings and Twins’ (2008) at Portikus, Frankfurt, which similarly translated lived circumstances into abstract forms.¹⁶ Here she confronted two distinct formal compositions inspired by accounts of two equally disparate lived experiences. One of them, *Red Broken Mountainous Labyrinth* (2008), continued the formal and conceptual concerns of *Mountains of Encounter*, using an assemblage of red blinds and lights to reflect on Wales’s writings on the revolutionary

Haegue Yang,
Mountains of Encounter, 2008,
aluminium venetian
blinds and hanging
structure, powder-
coating, steel wire,
moving spotlight,
floodlight, platform
ladder and cable,
dimensions variable.
Installation view,
‘Wessen Geschichte’
(‘Whose History’),
Kunstverein
Hamburg, 2008.
Photograph:
Fred Dott. Courtesy
the artist and Galerie
Wien Lukatsch,
Berlin

¹³ D. Chong, ‘Movement Studies’, *Parkett*, no.89, 2011, p.72.

¹⁴ See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973, trans. Richard Millar), New York: Hill & Wang, 1975.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.52.

¹⁶ ‘Siblings and Twins’, Portikus, Frankfurt, 17 May—29 June 2008. This exhibition was part of a travelling project that Yang realised in 2008 across a series of venues, including the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (‘Life on Mars: the 2008 Carnegie International’, 3 May 2008—11 January 2009); REDCAT, Los Angeles (‘Asymmetric Equality’, 28 June—24 August 2008); sala rekalde, Bilbao (19 December 2008—15 April 2009); and Hamburger Kunstverein and Cubitt, mentioned above.

insurgencies of Korean fighter San. The other, *5, Rue Saint-Benoît* (2008), was based on Marguerite Duras's semi-autobiographical novel *La Douleur* (*The War: A Memoir*, 1985), in which she reminisces about her experience of World War II, and the period when she waited for her husband Robert Anthelme to return from Dachau, and, upon his return, took care of him.¹⁷ A series of relatively abstract sculptures that reproduce the dimensions and shapes of domestic appliances (kitchen table, water heater, stove) offer a projection of the domestic space that the couple shared with like-minded intellectuals and members of the French Resistance. Rather than establishing a factual correspondence between the original setting and a representation of it, the work aims for other forms of resemblance. The sculptures are based on the dimensions of Yang's own domestic environment and covered in the artist's signature coloured blinds, cables, balls of thread and lights – in this instance, domestic bulbs. Her distancing strategy enables the work to move towards

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the formal and political concerns that permeate Duras's oeuvre as well as contemporaneous writers', such as the aspiration to set up a new contract between writing and reading.

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A similar attempt to create a community through literature can be found in the writings of Maurice Blanchot, whose

book *The Unavowable Community* (1983) reflects on the relationship between the idea of community and the practice of writing.¹⁸ Blanchot distances himself from a dialectical reading of history, trying instead to focus on constructions that fell outside the traditional conceptions of history; in other words, searching once more within untimely instances.¹⁹ His interest in avoiding any given structures of thought leads him to exercise negation as a method to expel the author from a secure position, to displace the body and the voice outside of discourse, away from a realm of 'truth'. He refers, for instance, to a then-recent novel by Duras, *La Maladie de la mort* (*The Malady of Death*, 1982), based on an impossible love between a man and a young woman who come together through a paid agreement. The fact that the man is unable to either love or desire the woman makes him approach her conditionally, so to speak, through an arrangement based on interest. The woman, similarly, abandons herself through the agreed contract, although Blanchot sees in her behaviour signs belying a preserved liberty.

The Malady of Death and Blanchot's reflections on it – what he calls 'the negative community' formed by the impossible couple – pertain to the body of references that have fuelled Yang's sustained interest in the notion of community, its historical failures and betrayals over recent years.²⁰ In a final note to *The Malady of Death*, Duras suggests that if it was to be performed, it should be read aloud rather than interpreted, by two characters in separate rooms, except that only the man would read it, while the woman would recite it from memory. Yang took this note as an inspiration to push the 'pleasure of the text' to the foreground of her practice in a cycle of works dedicated to Duras's book, which began with the publication of *The Malady of Death* in Korean in 2008 and its subsequent staging first in English and later in Korean between

17 See Marguerite Duras, *The War: A Memoir* (1985, trans. Barbara Bray), New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.

18 See Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (1983, trans. Pierre Joris), Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 2009.

19 See François Dosse, 'From Explosive Literary Mourning to the Pleasure of the Text', in *History of Structuralism. Volume 2: The Sign Sets, 1967–Present* (1992, trans. Deborah Glassman), Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, pp.206–07.

20 The book *Community of Absence* (2007), for example, which accompanied Yang's presentation of *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements — Version Utrecht* (2006) at Basis voor actuele kunst (BAK) in Utrecht, brings together texts by a number of authors that refer to philosophical discussions around the notion of community, its role within contemporary art and, more concretely, within Yang's practice. See Binna Choi (ed.), *Community of Absence: Haegue Yang* (exh. cat.), Utrecht and Frankfurt a.M.: Basis voor actuele kunst and Revolver, 2006.



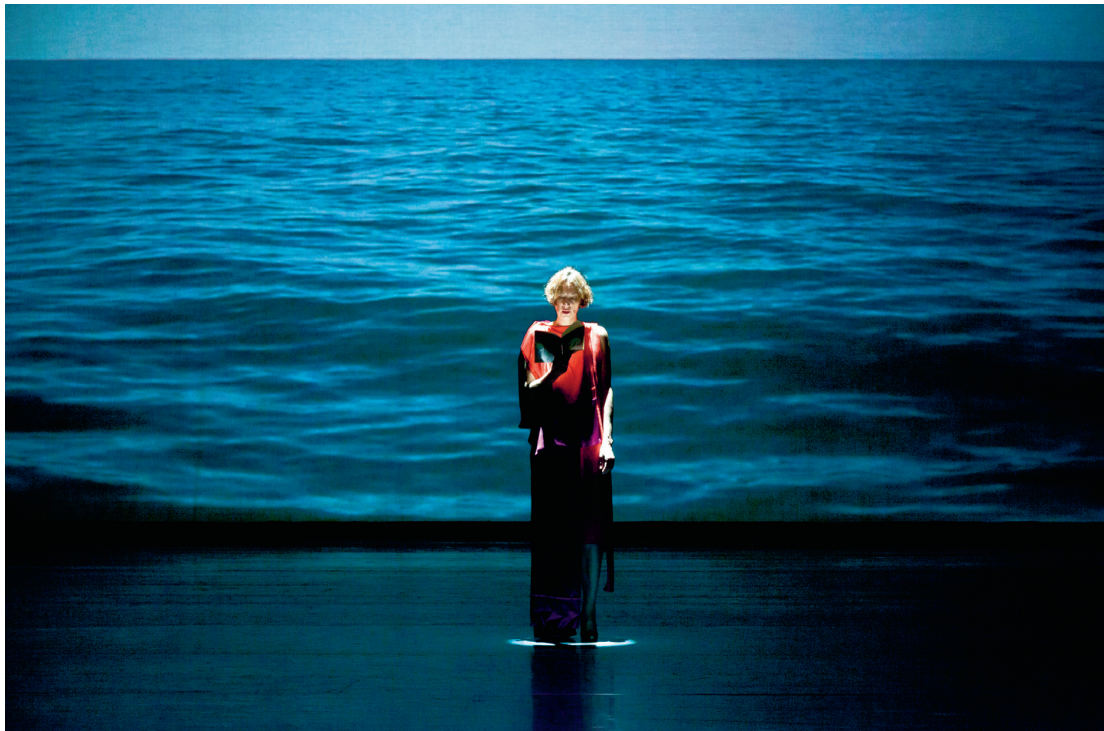
Installation view, 'Siblings and Twins', Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 2008. Pictured in the background: Haegue Yang, *Red Broken Mountainous Labyrinth*, 2008, installation with aluminium venetian blinds and hanging structure, powder-coating, steel wire, moving spotlight and floodlight, dimensions variable; in the foreground: Haegue Yang, *5, Rue Saint-Benoît*, 2008, installation comprising eight sculptures made of household appliances, aluminium venetian blinds and frame, powder-coating, perforated metal plates, casters, light bulbs, cable cord, dance-floor objects, metal eyelets, paint grid, metal chain, knitting yarn and paper, dimensions variable. Photograph: Katrin Schilling. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Wien Lukatsch, Berlin

2009 and 2012.²¹ In keeping with Duras's note, Yang replaces acting with reading, but takes it one step further by having the entire text read by a single voice – the voice of Jeanne Balibar at dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel in 2012. In this staging, Balibar's lone voice was only accompanied by a screen that functioned as a backdrop to her performance, and showed a sequence of close-ups of a young woman lying on a bed and then, upon her disappearance,

of the remaining wrinkled white bed sheets, moving lights and an air ventilator, some of the objects Yang employed in earlier installations such as *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements — Version Utrecht* (2006).

The dimly illuminated, barren stage and spare voice call attention to the passage from writing into reading: a return to the pleasure of the text, which Barthes characterises as a process of 'writing aloud [...] carried by the grain of the voice',

21 See M. Duras and H. Yang, *The Malady of Death* (trans. Heekyoung Chung and Doryung Chung), Seoul: Insa Art Space of the Arts Council Korea, 2008. The project unfolded progressively: first as a seminar at the New Museum, New York (4–5 December 2009); later as a dress rehearsal at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2 February 2010); and finally as staged readings in Seoul (2010) and Kassel (2012). In the last staging, as part of dOCUMENTA (13), the text was read by French actress and singer Jeanne Balibar.



Haegue Yang,
The Malady of Death
 — Monodrama with
 Jeanne Balibar,
 2012. View of
 the performance,
 Staatstheater
 Kassel, 7 June 2012.
 Photograph:
 Krzysztof Zieliński.
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 and Museum
 Fridericianum
 Veranstaltungs-
 GmbH. Courtesy
 the artist

searching for ‘the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of the meaning of language’.²² In Yang’s *The Malady of Death*, the body of the actress is the surface where the story of the negative community develops — a body ‘imprinted by history’, to invoke Foucault once again.²³ Her body acts as a bridge between the voices of the male and female characters, of acting and reading, of literature and performance, of Duras’s instructions and Yang’s interpretation. In this way it brings together, perhaps at an unsuitable time, the writing and reading of Marguerite Duras’s text.

The Malady of Death alters then the relationship between image and text, abstraction and history, that characterises Yang’s sculptural practice. As noted above, her installations function autonomously from the texts that nourish them. Such stories, in fact, only arrive to the viewer through the literature that accompanies the work in the exhibition space. This unresolved tension between aesthetics and history — that Yang defines as an aporetic relation — can be interpreted as a means to avoid restricting the process of translation and thus prevent form from

being subordinated to meaning.²⁴ However the temporality of the performance reverses the terms of the equation, insofar as here it is Duras’s novel that gives entry to Yang’s abstract grammar. Her formal language develops progressively through the duration of the event, introducing unexpected crossings between abstraction and literature that reinforce the untimely condition of Yang’s practice.

22 R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, *op. cit.*, pp.66—67.

23 M. Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, *op. cit.*, p.148.

24 See T.J. Demos and Haegue Yang, ‘Accommodating the Epic Dispersion: Haegue Yang in Conversation with T.J. Demos’, *op. cit.*