

TERRITORY OF A POET-ACTIVIST: HAEGUE YANG



Born South Korea, 1971. Lives and works in Seoul and Berlin.

In 2004, Haegue Yang completed a work titled *Storage Piece*, a sculpture that consists of plastic crates for beer bottles, cardboard boxes sealed with green duct tape, and many flat objects soft-packed in bubble wrap, all held in place by rope and situated atop a big wooden pallet. The materials—or contents, to be more precise—of this sculpture were components in many of Yang’s earlier works. The crates, for instance, had been stacked vertically in two columns on a gently ascending ramp in *Tilting on a Plane* (2002), a work about “everyday tension” inspired by the artist’s memory of seeing a precarious method of transportation in Korea.¹ Yang, who studied at the Städelschule in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany, often works with commercially available objects. She rearranges and resituates the items she finds or purchases in subtle ways that reconfigure her location and her viewers’ notions of the social organization of things and the economy of artistic valuation. *Storage Piece* grew partly out of necessity when many of the artist’s previous works were returned to her at the close of various shows and she had nowhere to store them. At the same time, she was being offered a space to exhibit, so the natural (or artful) solution for her was to make a new work out of these earlier pieces. This collision of the vagaries of life and the almost compulsive production required of an artist (especially one who is increasingly in demand) also highlighted for Yang the challenge of her more conceptually inclined methodology and her diasporic, continuously mobile life.

Around the same time, Yang embarked on her video trilogy. The first two parts, *Unfolding Places* and *Restrained Courage* (both 2004) were made in places such as Frankfurt, Amsterdam, London, and Seoul. For the third installment, *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006), Yang made a conscious decision to go to Brazil in search of what she calls, per Georges Bataille, a “community of absence.” Shot with a handheld camera in a casual manner and with

melancholy languor, the videos each comprise a sequence of images of mostly insignificant moments—the sort that occupy, in actuality, most of our physical and perceptual space but fall out of our visual or mental perusal. Yang’s camera is focused on stray objects and various examples of light reflection—puddles, raindrops, street lamps. They are things and spaces that are an irrelevant and “unintentional” surplus to the logic of urbanism, modernization, and the structural forces of capital and labor. Inspired, in particular, by the cinematic methodology of French filmmaker Chris Marker, whose *Sans Soleil* (1983) is a mosaic of parallel contemplative visuals and narratives, Yang features different voices in her videos reading texts seemingly unrelated to the composite images. The speakers ruminate on the pathos of living in this world: being alone, lost, and vulnerable; constantly losing oneself; negating distinctive territories; and lacking courage. While these are clearly and at times painfully private sentiments, the voices allude to the failure to relate to and connect with others also as a willful political act of evading the strictures and requirements of social relations. “I keep a kind of territory where my position could not be fully definable or cultivated, therefore instrumentalized by anyone else,” she says. “It is a ‘territory’ where one can become a ‘poet-activist’ whose potential is to act radically.”²

Since the completion of the trilogy, which Yang considers an important turning point in her practice, she has developed a series of installations in which the videos are shown. First realized as *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements (Version Utrecht)* in 2006, the installation may be described as both rudimentary and complex ecology of objects—commercially available electrical devices, such as scent machines, lamps, heaters, and air conditioners, all connected with industrial electrical cords in a space demarcated and punctuated with industrial blinds. The installation has been realized in São Paulo, Seoul, Cologne, and now Minneapolis, with certain elements exiting and new ones

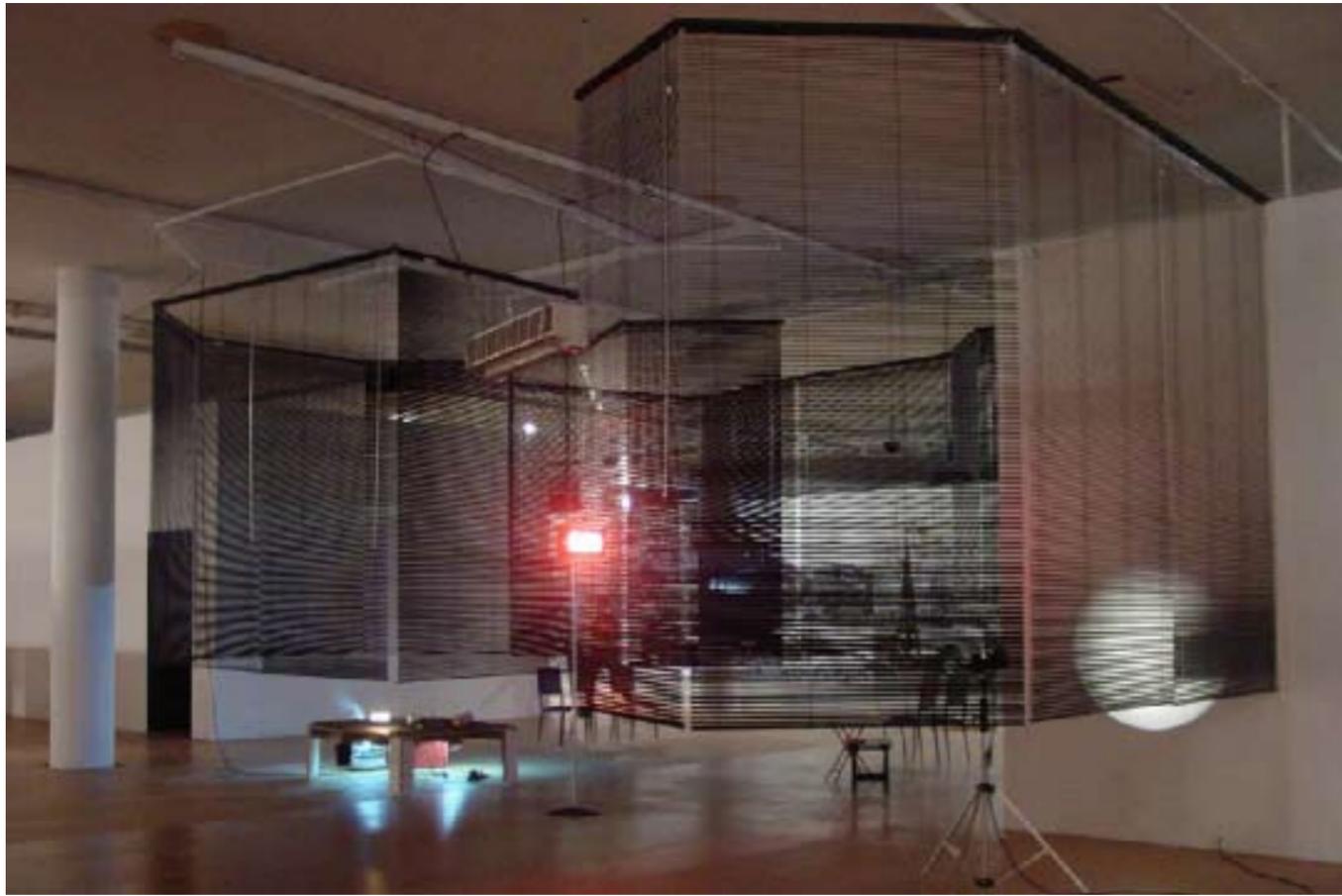
entering the stage. The materials in the piece may be seen as surrogates for human beings and their subjectivities, and the mechanically motored operations as allusions to emotional or psychological states. At the same time, the sum of these objects may very well be no more or no less than their constituents—what counts here is the system of their relations, which constantly shifts and is recalibrated with each evolutionary iteration. Whether we would view the components as singular beings or a collective, these two oppositional readings can be thought of in a non-paradoxical way. Yang interprets a “community of absence” as a “community of the plural that shares nothing but ongoing self-examination and a strange kind of optimism.” Indeed, Yang’s installation invites and integrates the viewer into an ecology, if only temporarily, in which the viewing subject can become one of the work’s many objects, and these may transform into equal subjects in a community of pregnant solitude.

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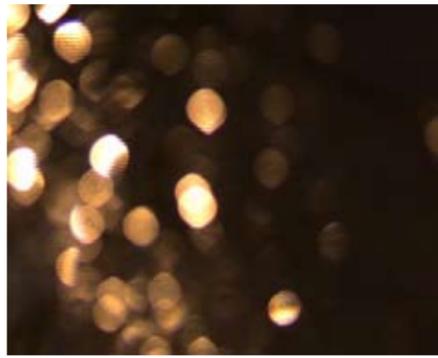
1. *Industrie und Technik: Haegue Yang 20.02* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Axel Dielmann-Verlag, 2002), 45.

2. All citations in this paragraph and following are from Binna Choi and Haegue Yang, “Community of Absence: Conversation with Haegue Yang” in *Unevenly*, Newsletter 2006 #2 (Utrecht: BAK basis voor actuele kunst, 2006.)

3. Cited in Lars Bang Larson, “Community Work: Space and Event in the Art of Haegue Yang” in Binna Choi, ed., *Community of Absence—Haegue Yang* (Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2007), 30–31.



Series of Vulnerable Arrangements 2006 [various devices of senses?] Installation view at BAK, Utrecht, [TK year]



Unfolding Places 2004 video (color, sound); 18:11 minutes Voice-over: Helen Cho; *Restrained Courage* 2004 video (color, sound); 18:37 minutes Voice-over: Camille Hesketh; *Squandering Negative Spaces* [TK]



REPORT FROM GUANGZHOU &
VIENNA

HU FANG

February 2007

REGARDING
THE PAIN AND
THE HAPPINESS
OF OTHERS

HU FANG



“Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds.”

—Excerpt from Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*

My mother has walking problems due to seriously deformed joints, and hooking up to the Internet has become part of her daily ritual. The following is the content of my chat with her one day:

I am watching TV—or, in fact, listening to the TV—at the same time as I am playing on the computer; this has become a habit.

Daddy is already asleep; he generally goes to bed around eight o’clock and gets up around six in the morning. He doesn’t watch much TV. He boils water after getting up in the morning, in an electric kettle.

I generally go to bed around nine o’clock. Lately, I have been using a digital camera to reproduce old photos, which I find quite meaningful. While doing this, I have also learnt something about photography, and have remembered the