



# ACTIVATING ABSTRACTION

The National Gallery has recently acquired a major work by HAEGUE YANG. DOMINIC EICHLER explores the evolution of her sculptural environments, which are as inspired by the art of the past as they are by the possibilities of our culturally hybrid present.



Visitors to South Korean artist Haegue Yang's exhibition *Changing From From To From*, which ran from May until October in 2023 at the National Gallery, might have chanced upon the 'activation' of the sculptural trio *Sonic Intermediates — Three Differential Equations 2020*. The eccentric, larger-than-life abstract figures combine industrial and craft elements with movement and sound. Although their visible handles and casters make them easily rearranged, they are not intended as participatory in a hands-on sense. Instead, Yang's guidelines advise that especially engaged 'activators' or 'facilitators' should push, pull and rotate the sculptures without emotion, improvisation or expressive interaction while following an agreed score developed by the institution. Movement can produce a semblance of life, giving the appearance of agency. When activated, the works' synthetic twine manes swoosh and their nickel- and brass-plated and red powder-coated bells make an uncanny metallic rustling sound. From the sidelines, the scene suggests a mysterious ritual or shamanic rite with an undisclosed purpose. For Yang, art not only has to do with materiality and form but also with the notion of interconnectedness beyond the rational.

Sculpture is often presumed to be static and permanent. Yang's activated figures, however, produce manifold spatial and acoustic compositions against the backdrop of her site-specific companion work *Non-Linear and Non-Periodic Dynamics 2020*. The title of this massive wallpapered digital collage was inspired by the mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz's modelling of the chaotic behaviour of weather. One of his theories, later known as the butterfly effect, noted the consequences generated by the smallest gestures in complex systems—a condition which arguably applies to art as well. Yang's dynamic scenery reimagines

its allotted space as a visually hyperlinked landscape. Like digital Baroque, it generates illusionistic spatial distortions and multiple overlapping interfaces—a multidimensionality rich with allusion and reference. Images of native Australian fish, moths, canoe trees, the Snowy Mountains Scheme and Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin and Weereewa (Lake George) interlock across the complex tessellated surface. While researching for the work, the artist also met with Ngambri, Ngunnawal and Wiradjuri custodian Paul Girrawah House who shared his deep knowledge of the Country. In past interviews, Yang has spoken of the importance of finding an artistic connection wherever she exhibits, explaining:

I am very conscious of that fact, of me being a stranger in most of these exhibiting places. Maybe it comes from being Korean, being from a small country that has suffered so much by frequent foreign invasions, as well as ignorance. I wish to be respectful by making an effort to relate myself to the place and its people.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, Yang's work is charged by cultural crosscurrents. Yang was born in 1971 in Seoul into an intellectual family milieu and studied fine art at Seoul National University. She then completed her masters at the influential Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main, where she became a professor; she was recently appointed the Vice-Rector, and lives between Berlin and Seoul. Yang's work can be seen in galleries and institutions around the globe: recent major solo exhibitions have included *Strange Attractors* (2020) at Tate St Ives in Cornwall—where the National Gallery's *Sonic Intermediates* were first shown—and *Several Reenactments* (2023) at S.M.A.K. in Ghent, Belgium.

Like other celebrated artists of her generation, Yang's work has expanded in parallel to the exponential growth in the visibility of contemporary art over recent decades. Today, more people in more places are engaging with the art of their time than arguably ever before. This has profoundly influenced both the making and experience of art in ways that are still unfolding. Certainly, many artists have long left their garrets for airport departure lounges and their collectors no longer display their work in cosmopolitan salons, but in acclimatised storage in free ports.

One reason for Yang's successful negotiation of the zeitgeist has been how, in various media, she has addressed intercultural dialogue. As the National Gallery's curators Russell Storer and Beatrice Thompson noted, Yang's multifarious works are 'linked by her ever-present concern with movement, migration and transformation.'<sup>2</sup> Fittingly, her practice entails amalgams of studio and post-studio production and juxtaposes dualities such as the handmade and readymade, the geometric and the organic, functional design and ornamentation. These qualities were clear in two other works in the National Gallery installation, including the decorative hanging macrame work *Triple Chalkies 2015* and the audio piece *Genuine Cloning 2020*. The latter—played from clusters of speakers hanging from the ceiling, which Yang calls 'Sound Fruits'—includes a text by the artist recited by a cloned version of her disembodied voice musing on, among other haunting topics, the naming of typhoons and wondering what it means to exist only as a voice. Speaking about the work the artist noted:

A body has an inside and an outside, and there is a border where you end. The skin and body defines you as a territory and location. For me, the AI voice is interesting because it doesn't have a body, but still, a voice implies a throat and a windpipe. The ASMR voice has even less 'body' because it's just the air blowing through the windpipe.<sup>3</sup>







The audio also features a recording of birdsong and camera shutter clicks made during a live broadcast of the portentous 2018 Inter-Korean Summit, during which the leaders of North and South Korea conversed privately on a historical footbridge in the Demilitarized Zone on the countries' border. Time and again, Yang's work contrasts human attempts at control against the power of nature. The work's digital otherworldliness highlights a sense of apartness or loss of bearings.

Another important aspect of Yang's work is its engagement with the history of Modernism, a movement which sought to rebuild sculpture from the ground up. Extensive research inspires both her forms and approach to making. The artist has noted:

These historical figures inhabit my head a bit like creatures in a mystic landscape. They are my tools to carve this landscape, finally becoming mountain peaks and rivers in my mind. I acknowledge or even embrace the weird and idiosyncratic way I bring those historical figures into that mystic "mindscape". The more odd this mindscape becomes, the more successful I actually feel as an artist.<sup>4</sup>

Like many other critically minded artists in recent decades, Yang often examines overlooked or structurally undervalued corners of art history to discover new understandings or alternative readings; she deploys references as other artists use metal or clay. Her approach also builds on the possibilities and inclusiveness of the socio-politically conscious 'expanded field' of sculpture that emerged in the 1960s when sculptures began leaping off their plinths: since then, the medium has become a discursive, shape-shifting tumult that continues to speak in the language of objects, even in our post-internet age.

Each of Yang's three *Sonic Intermediates* refers to a twentieth-century artist: conceptual Chinese artist and poet Li Yuan-chia (1929–94), modernist British sculptor Barbara Hepworth (1903–75) and Russian Constructivist Naum Gabo (1890–1977). Although their very different biographies have fleeting points of intersection, they're not usually grouped together. In their lifetime, each faced personal tribulations but still made radical artistic leaps.

Li left mainland China for Taiwan in 1949 before moving to Italy and then the United Kingdom in the 1960s. Underappreciated in his lifetime and still by far the least known of the three, Li's concrete poetry inspired the stuttering preposition-filled title of Yang's National Gallery exhibition *Changing From From To From*. Li was part of the cosmopolitan scene around London's storied Signals gallery (1964–66), a meeting place for experimental artists with immigrant backgrounds. Later, he established his own museum in northern England, in the village of Banks in Cumbria near Hadrian's Wall, where he mounted exhibitions and continued his experiments with participatory art until his funding was cut. Yang's effigy of him looks like a hairy blob holding a broom—a reference to the hand-coloured photographic self-portraits Li made late in his life which show him holding various implements and wearing a rug over his head, like a mythological sage. Using simple gestures, words, form and symbols, Li's work opened up philosophical dimensions of experience. For example, he imagined humble painted dots as portals to the cosmos.

In the 1930s, the celebrated artist Barbara Hepworth conceived of abstract sculptures that arched, swooped and curved around the negative space of a void or hole. Yang's choice of Hepworth is implicitly feminist, reminding us how few women of the period were widely supported or acclaimed as sculptors. Although not a promoter of the idea of 'women's art', in a 1966 interview with the Australian critic Robert Hughes, Hepworth noted 'there is a deep

prejudice against women in art. Many people—most people still, I imagine—think that women should not involve themselves in the act of creation except on its more trivial fringes.'<sup>5</sup> Yang has never taken the progress made in this respect for granted, nor as complete.

Hepworth met Gabo—the third artist in Yang's line-up—after he had fled Germany as a Russian–Jewish refugee. He had already imagined a wholly new notion of the figure as an abstract form composed of empty partitions—a waffle-like container. His *Realistic Manifesto* 1920 questioned many assumptions about art and sculptural form. For instance, he rejected the delusion of static rhythm in favour of 'kinetic rhythms as the basic forms of our perception of real time.'<sup>6</sup> For him, art had an absolute independent value, regardless of any ideological systems, as an indispensable expression of human experience. A century later, it is easy to see not just formal echoes, but the influence of these far-reaching ideas on Yang.

Yang's particular reforming and reanimation of radical approaches to sculpture from the modernist past seems timely. The vitriol sometimes directed at sculpture in the public realm, in whatever shape or form, shows the importance of a nuanced and historically informed debate. It is easy to tear down monuments, but how will the future learn from past mistakes and what will fill the void? Yang's work offers one approach—generating forms that embrace a multiplicity of cultural histories and allowing for the mysterious to enter the equation.

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Haegue Yang lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Seoul, South Korea. Her exhibition *Changing From From To From*, ran from May until October in 2023 at the National Gallery. In 2022, Yang was awarded the 13th Benesse Prize at the Singapore Biennale. The National Gallery has three of Yang's works in its collection.

Page 58, 59: Installation view of Haegue Yang, *Triple Chalkies* 2015, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberrri/Canberra, gift of Dick Quan and John McGrath 2020, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program © the artist

Opposite: Haegue Yang, *Sonic Intermediate – Parameters and Unknowns After Hepworth* 2020, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberrri/Canberra, purchased 2023 © the artist