

Haegue Yang

In Pursuit of a Marginal Space

Jung-Ah Woo



Venetian blinds captured in the Korean Pavillion, Venice Biennale 2009, by Haegue Yang

Walter Benjamin defines the “aura” of nature, in contrast to historical objects, as mediated by space, time and human sense perception and “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.” He argued that our perception of the auratic qualities of the world around us is confused by our desire to bring things closer in “overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction”. The journey to Haegue Yang’s first solo exhibition in Korea, *Sadong 30* (2006), clearly holds onto Benjamin’s definition of aura, which possesses both a spatial and a temporal dimension of distance. Haegue Yang sent out postcards featuring a hand-drawn map and a combination of digits

for opening a door lock, inviting viewers to a deserted house at Sadong #30 in the city of Incheon. Incheon, once a dilapidated seaport town north of Seoul, has transformed itself into a world-class hub of global transportation with the opening of the Incheon International Airport at the turn of the millennium. Incheon now serves as the bustling gateway to twenty-first century Korea. However, the hour-long excursion from Seoul to the house at the dead-end of a narrow alley in Sadong reveals the persistent traces of the fractured aspects of development in Korea. The further one gets from the ultra-modern city of Seoul, the more one approaches the pre-modern past of its surroundings. Haegue’s old house stands at the end of this backward trail.



Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – Blind Room, 2006, aluminum venetian blinds (black), three video essays (Trilogy 2004-2006), installation view of *COMO VIVER JUNTO* (How to Live Together), 27. Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil, 2006

Odd numbers—13579—unlock the padlock. A naked bulb sheds blue light on the flaking walls of the porch. The small wooden structure exudes the accumulated years of negligence in every detail: several doors are nailed shut; window panes are empty of glass; wallpaper is warped and cracked; and the tilted roof is barely covered with broken tiles. A rusted refrigerator stands in the courtyard outside, welcoming visitors with a warning written on its door: “This house is old and fragile, so please enter one at a time and be cautious. The leaflets are found on the shoe shelf. When you go up to the look-out, you will find bottled drinking water in an ice box. There is no security guard, so please make sure that you lock the door after viewing. You may use toilets in the nearby gas station. Please throw trash in the trash bin - From the property owner.” Indeed, the rickety house projects an eerie air, but the kindness of the owner encourages the visitors to step on the creaky floor.

All along the precarious path through the house, which leads from a sliding door to a room, from one room to the next, and out to the courtyard, the artist has placed small tokens of her works. Colorful *origami* objects are placed at the corner of a door step; humble flowers are planted around the water faucet that seems to be desiccated beyond repair; strings of miniature light bulbs are sprawled over the layers of dust on the floor. These lights breathe warmth into the desolate rooms which are strewn with cobwebs. For the artist, re-connecting electricity to this abandoned house is a highly symbolic gesture: light infuses life into the space. Yet, Haegue handed over the final re-animating breath to the people who willingly venture to this dead-end. These guests revive the

house by opening the door, turning its knobs, walking every corner of the place, and securely locking the door again before leaving. Rather than a leisurely onlooker in the safe haven of a white cube, the visitor is more like a pilgrim determined to achieve the final destination, in spite of all the distance and physical danger.

It may only be for a brief moment, but the visitors inherit the owner’s charge of maintenance and security. By rehydrating their body with bottled water, they make themselves temporarily “at home.” Of course, they have never been here before, but the entire experience is charged with psychic intimacy and physical unity with the space. A wall clock hangs in one room, but the order of its digits is awry. Certainly, as the artist said, “this house lived against time and development.” Suspended in a frozen time, the outmoded house evokes nostalgia for the original place that has been left behind, both temporarily and geographically. This sense of intimacy is clearly inscribed in the Benjaminian notion of aura. The ritual value of artistic aura involves the yearning for the original and authentic object, as well as its frustration, as the object of longing is constantly distanced out of one’s reach. This quest for the unattainable original is at the core of the auratic atmosphere surrounding Yang’s installations.

I called this house a “mythical” home but, to the artist, it is undeniably real. She said, “Even though electricity is invisible, it proves its existence by illumination. Just like that, certain phenomena are invisible, but it does not mean that they are imaginary or a pure



Carla Bianpoen

Haegue Yang's work in the Korean Pavillon, Venice Biennale 2009

fantasy." This is why the light sculptures are so significant in Haegue Yang's work. She believes in the power of invisible things, which reflect the potential of insignificant beings within marginal terrains. Her interest in what remains invisible seems to materialize in the Venetian blinds, which simultaneously transmit and obscure light. They divide the inside and the outside of the space, but the division is always porous. This ambiguity resists a closed reading of the artist's work.

As shown in Yang's recent solo exhibition *Asymmetric Equality*, at REDCAT in Los Angeles (2008), her installations of lighting and blinds challenge the viewer's eyesight. Along with these optical devices, Yang employs domestic gears such as humidifiers, electronic fans, heating lamps, and scent dispensers to create a multi-sensory environment. The delicate changes in temperature, humidity, and atmosphere generate obvious perceptions in the viewer's body, but these physical perceptions inherently evade linguistic articulation. Individuals, though experiencing the same physical phenomenon, are fundamentally alienated from one another by the heterogeneity of their own corporeal perceptions. Communication is impossible, even within a unified space. Haegue Yang's works abound with the sense of alienation and the loneliness of being disconnected. Yet, the artist neither speaks of this anxiety nor appreciates its liberating potential: she requires us to contemplate this state of displacement as an ontological reality.

Graduated from Seoul National University (Korea, 1994) and Meisterschüler in Städelschule Frankfurt am Main (Germany, 1999), Yang currently lives and works in between Seoul and Berlin. "In-between"

aptly explains her living condition, since she has drifted through several countries while participating with, or better yet, making a living through artist residency programs. In the past, she "resided" as an artist in England, Japan, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and the U.S. The durations of the programs ranged from a few weeks up to one year. Ironically, the logistics of these "residencies" allowed her to keep only provisional belongings, which forced her to remain a perpetual stranger. Bataille's concept of the "community of absence" was influential in galvanizing her consciousness of being "other" at home. In a video, *Squandering the Negative Space* (filmed in Brazil, 2006), Yang's voice-over speaks of the frailty of individuals in foreign countries. When residing in "no-home," as the artist phrases it, one becomes extremely sensitive to the subtle differences which, though commonly unnoticed, fundamentally divide different cultures.

For the upcoming 53rd Venice Biennale, Commissioner Eungie Joo (Keith Haring Director and Curator of Education and Public Programs, New Museum in New York) has selected Haegue Yang for a presentation in the Korean Pavilion, where she will show three new pieces that incorporate installation, large-scale sculpture, and video essay. Her signature devices of Venetian blinds, wind, and light will appear, but she will forego the more spectacular effects produced by theatrical light in favor of natural daylight, which will create a more mundane atmosphere. The sculpture will be modeled after household utensils, including those from her own kitchen in Berlin. The video is filmed in Ahyeondong, her own neighborhood in Seoul. The marginal location of Ahyeondong in the city will comment on the placement of the Korean Pavilion in Giardini. Being commissioned to represent Korea in the Venice Biennale means that Haegue Yang has become a major artist on the international stage, but she continues her pursuit of a marginal space, wherein one can rest sometimes in domestic intimacy, sometimes in fundamental solitude, or eternally hover somewhere in between.

Haegue Yang received her B.F.A. from Seoul National University, Fine Arts College in 1994, and her Meisterschüler from Städelschule Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1999. Her works have been exhibited internationally including in BAK, Basis Voor Aktuele Kunst, Utrecht (2006); The 27th Sao Paulo Biennial (2006); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2007); Anyang Public Art Project (2007). In 2008, she was invited to the exhibitions in the 55th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh; Cubitt Gallery, London; Portikus, Frankfurt; REDCAT, Los Angeles; The Power Plant, Toronto; and most recently, Sala Rekalde, Bilbao. Haegue Yang lives and works in Berlin, Germany, and Seoul, Korea. 🇰🇷

Jung-Ah Woo is a visiting professor at KAIST (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) and her research area is the postwar art of Asia and the U.S. with particular interest in the politics of identity and representation. Her latest publication is "Silence and Scream: Yoko Ono's Subversive Aesthetics" in *n. paradoxa* vol. 23 (2009)
