

Binna Choi

Community of Absence, 2006

To the casual observer, Haegue Yang's works can be easily misunderstood as simple *ready-mades*. Her works come into existence through the artist's deliberate act of erasing, misplacing, or rearranging ordinary or trivial objects in slightly odd ways. Yet for those who engage in the deeper complexities of Yang's work, an unfamiliar territory is disclosed—a place where one can enter and observe the distance between oneself and the organizing social structure of those objects, and where one is revealed to be at once a social and singular being. Haegue Yang discusses some changes evident in her most recent artistic practice, how she pursues the creation of a kind of “communal space” in her work, and her exhibition at BAK with Binna Choi.

Binna Choi: It seems to me your work involves intense conflict between social critique and a deeply personal, radically subjective emotional charge. *Storage Piece* (2004) could be an emblematic work in this regard. You shipped a number of your previous works—objects that were in different parts of the world—to a gallery and piled them on crates as if they were just unpacked. The presence of that “sculpture” exposed some unavoidable contradictions between the needs of the art system and the needs of the artist, between the expectations of the audience and those of the artist.

Haegue Yang: *Storage Piece* is certainly a crucial work in terms of how much I have risked exposing self-references, and the anxiety I had about that. I faced an ironical contrast between the lack of space to store works and the offer of space to exhibit, and reacted by displaying that situation through interchanging and juxtaposing these two circumstances. It seemed like some kind of conspiracy in that neither of these problems were solved, and remain in the end non-negotiable and irreconcilable. Ironically, this gesture reintroduced my works into the cycle of commodity exchange because the work was sold to a private collector. I think that further stresses the conflict you commented on.

BC: What is interesting to me is that in producing *Storage Piece* you started to incorporate verbal statements and shifted towards the private and intimate. One can strongly sense this in your two video essays *Unfolding Places* (2004) and *Restrained Courage* (2004). In both works, a voice speaks in first person and reflects on her own vulnerable condition and observations in a confessional tone. The narratives communicate sentiments of solitude and alienation.

HY: The contemplative way of looking at the environment in my videos is indeed quite personal. When I think about it now, private sentiments of aloneness and vulnerability were very important, although I was not necessarily consciously working with the confessional aspects in these works. Rather, these kinds of feelings allow others to “participate” in his or her individual experience and the shared sentiments create a kind of interlaced matrix of people. That is also how I think about the question of how to integrate the political into “sentiment,” or in other words, how to express one's sentiments without losing a political position. I am cautious not to limit either of these concepts in order to generate enough space to react to the rational, seemingly “liberal” capitalist society, and to be critically aware how quickly the “political” becomes nothing but fashionable.

BC: Can a certain silent stance, an “oblique” attitude you seem to take towards the politically embedded reality, be elaborated in this respect? In *Restrained Courage*, for example, one of the most disturbing moments is when the narrator watches a homeless person being beaten by the police and leaves the scene after a while without any intervention. Then she reflects on how painful it was to be a helpless bystander.

HY: This notion of “oblique” intrigues me. You may easily imagine that the political environment in South Korea in which I grew up was extremely politicized and politically polarized. However, I remained uninvolved in any specific political movement or activity, even though many people close to me, including my family, were directly committed to the leftist progressive movement. What in the

world makes me take such a distance to so many urgent political issues and events around me? I keep a kind of territory where my position cannot be fully defined or cultivated, or instrumentalized by anyone else. It is a “territory” where one can become a “poet-activist” whose potential is to act radically. This radical action doesn’t immediately accord with the commonly recognized concept of democracy and it even appears often in the non-political realm. Yet, in this sense I am truly interested in how one can be a political being. What you observed as “oblique” in my works is thus derived from this process—an attempt to be engaged without dogma. Some of my works, in which I try to remain mute about “invisible” aspects of political and aesthetic events, can be seen through this lens as well. *Illiterate Leftovers* (2004) is an example. It resulted from the non-verbal ritual of communication via fax, in which only mechanical traces of the machine are drawn on each sheet. My desire and willingness to engage with the “act of speech” is transformed into highly controversial “silent speech,” which demonstrates a shared procedure of speech, but does not record any legible/visible message to share.

BC: For me the strong subversive potential in your work lies where “the act of speech” and silence meet. But I wonder how your choice to film your new work in Brazil connects to this potential. In previous video works, the places shown are “collected” by your hand-held video camera, as you happen to visit and pass by. But this time you made a “decisive” choice for where to shoot.

HY: As I have been drifting through so many places, a strong desire has grown to commit myself to a place, to which I could devote emotional attachment as well as intellectual respect. But this place is something to be distinguished from an intellectual circle or party of shared tastes or interests. So I took Brazil as a metaphoric place for me, a distant, unfamiliar location where I wanted to see how one could overcome the simple distinction between this community and that, or between “home” and “no home.” I undertook this trip in search of a community—I would call it a “community of absence,” following Bataille, a “community of those who do not have a community.” In other words, I am thinking of a community of the plural that shares nothing but ongoing self-examination and a strange kind of optimism. It should be a rather imaginary—not utopian—community, located outside of detectable and visible territory, maybe somewhere in my mind.

BC: Together with these videos, you are thinking about creating conditions that could accommodate your notion of community for your exhibition at BAK. You use a set of technical devices that include heaters, humidifiers, electric fans, or scent atomizers. It seems to me you apply the same method as we have seen in your work: rearranging common things in an awkward or “uneven” way, while these elements are captured in your videos. But a noticeable difference from your previous works is that you chose elements with little “social” significance and you seem to want to appeal more to the bodily senses.

HY: I want to react to how “neutral” the spaces of exhibition are supposed to be: a sophisticated location for culture based on a Western, postmodern model. I would like to play with the notion of conditional settings for spaces for art and to address the viewers’ physical senses, expanding on the notion of “sentiment” I spoke about before. I want to deal with a more immediate dimension of the “sensible.” What you experience as hot, cold, humid, or smelly is both physically and socially determined. I would thus like to open a hospitable platform for the senses and thus offer a great deal of immediacy and accessibility to the audience. In doing so, I intend to create an uncanny but “(in)common” setting where the somewhat fragile and vulnerable idea of the “community of absence” can be performed.