

REVIEW: The Sea Wall: Haegue Yang with an inclusion by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

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Below is a review written by Colin Glen on The Sea Wall: Haegue Yang with an inclusion by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. This exhibition is at Arnolfini until 14th September 2011.

A curious sense of loss suffuses the delicate and intangible beauty of the installation works in the first room of Sea Wall – Arnolfini’s survey of Haegue Yang’s formative work as catalysed by Felix Gonzalez-Torres – a sense of loss which calls to mind Roland Barthes’ phrase ‘every pleasurable experience is haunted by the spectre of loss.’ Indeed, on passing through the glittering blue, silver and clear hanging beads of Torres’ curtain, Untitled (Water), 1995, which cuts across the entire space [a new embodiment of the work originally shown as a doorway piece at the gallery in 2002] you find yourself visually grasping for a determinable sense of space from that made illusory by the combination of Haegue Yang’s 186.16m³, 2000-2011, thin red string stretching horizontally at 10cm intervals from ceiling to floor, echoed beyond by 49.46m², 2002-2011, red chalk snap lines dusted onto the wall in the same form only shifted slightly by dint of a disconcertingly gentle slant of 1 degree. The loss of determinacy in the collapse of visual space suggested a feeling of one’s own absence by refusing to allow the embodied experience to gain a foothold on its location – in frustrating the desire to be on the other side of the string division. In the manner that Michael Fried designated for the behaviour of minimalist sculpture in the late 1960s there was a refusal to be immersed in the installations of Sea Wall in an absorptive experience but instead an awareness of the social, historical and subjective contexts that generated and framed the works was induced stimulated by the curatorial decision to place walled-based documentation of examples of Yang’s institutional critique and performance work within the same gallery space as the experiential installation pieces. Certificates, 1996-2011, constituting contracts between the artist and the buyer in which the former agreed to trade personal details such as pin numbers and internet passwords was aligned alongside the glistening blue wave patterns of Torres’ Water whilst Practicing Profession, Minus, 2002, which displayed documentation of the artist wearing a custom-made suit while performing ‘self-challenging actions’ during the exhibition marking forty years of the effect of the Fluxus movement was secreted among the columns within the string and chalk pieces’ environment. These works broke the spell of the playful and physically-engaged experience of the divided space encouraging you to relate cerebrally Yang’s formative early work and the influence by Torres on that work. The shift to a more research-based way of thinking signalled the ambitious curatorial approach of combining the apparently incongruous approaches of the phenomenological and the epistemological – a project aimed at enriching the viewer’s experience by combining the function of the gallery as museum – the contemplation of objects as historical documents – with the more embodied experience of installation work. In this sense Arnolfini becomes a viewing frame, a liminal space, not a repository or simply a shop front, but a pointing out device, like a ‘repoussoir’ figure in traditional painting, giving access to current research interests. There was a sense that the liminal works of the show hinted at the potential that all space could be seen as transitional and all experience liminal – hence a loss of the determinate.

The themes of loss and refusal continued on the first floor gallery – the space again divided by Torres’ beaded curtain – a ‘Sea Wall’ that T J Demos termed ‘a division of visibility’. Here the shimmering wave patterns of the curtain are accompanied on either side by an assemblage of Yang’s signature venetian blinds works entitled 5 Rue Benoît, 2008, which referred to the apartment occupied by writer and political activist Marguerite Duras, whose novel ‘The Sea Wall’ lends itself as the exhibition title, during the Second World War. The internalised and parodic inversion of the literalism of the minimalist Morris or Judd box bearing the dimensions and titles of domestic objects such as Kitchen table, Gas stove or Washing machine were in fact derived objects in Yang’s own home, suggesting a process of

the absorption of the poetic and the political from the social world to a saturation of the contents of the personal realm. The works exhibited a transgression of the structural dialectic of inner/outer – perforated metal screens and graduated colour slats of the venetian blinds revealing a glimpse of their tangled contents within – light bulbs, wire, rope, cable, paper and knitting yarn amongst them. The effect of permeating the solidity of such enclosed objects by the light bulbs shining from within was doubled in relation to the Torres' curtain, transforming it from its former character as physical barrier – making the beading more visually permeable and absorbing it into the lattice work screens of Yang's objects. Allowing works from different artists and periods to bleed into each other as a visual and metaphorical form of conceptual leakage is analogous to absorbing the art historical past into the contemporary. As such Yang refuses to be contained within an art historical teleology, a sequential narrative of one art movement leading on to another, 'working against the binaries that shape the false dialectic of the present and recent past' as Liam Gillick puts it in his essay that accompanies the show. Leakage between works also leads the eye aesthetically into the next room, now carpeted and with an installation of chairs borrowed from notaries associated with Arnolfini and set in conversational positions to form VIP's Union, 2001-2011, amongst which Yang's Shower work from the 5 Rue Benoît series is placed – the yellow slats of which connects with the yellow bands of colour in the landscape-like Trustworthies series, 2010-2011, torn envelope 'landscapes' – on the wall beyond. However the device of leakage is not quite so effective in the little room off this gallery which displays Yang's Mirror Series, 2006-7, where two chairs from VIP's Union anthropomorphically face back into the conversation room, almost as representing a couple watching a sunset from a layby. This element punctures the reflective research quality of this room. However, the quotidian reference mirrors the effect of the banality of celebrity – the notion of superficiality of appearances continues to expand on the idea of refusal – a pertinent example of which is Ulterior Thought, 2007, which bears an image within the mirror of an abandoned domestic interior from the film Sadong 30 that switches off as you approach to investigate further. In Eyes Off, 2007, the circular mirror moves away from showing your reflection as the mechanical arm rotates it about 360°. But most poignant is the piece Back, 2006, an oval mirror which has been turned to face the wall. The initially uncomfortable sense of loss, of withdrawal and refusal to engage and reflect identity is tempered by the decision to place it next to a window which looks out onto the street. Although the mirror seems to turn away from its purpose to portray superficial appearance as a 'pool of narcissus' – its placing by the window refers to a desire, through the rejection of superficial appearances, to focus instead on the inner self. There is an alignment that may be proposed for a sense of aesthetic practice rediscovered as political enterprise, as evidenced in Yang's Site Cube, 2010-2011 work which display the artist's political interests, where absorption in the aesthetics of artistic practice can empower the individual through the experience of one's own absence and learning of the pleasure of that loss in experiencing the self as other.

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