



THE WHITENESS OF MEANING

Eluding her role as a “meaning-giver” and instead handing over sovereignty to her materials, Korean artist HAEGUE YANG deems mobility, fluidity, and disappearance to be necessary conditions for her work to integrate the political in the sentiment.

words by
BART VAN DER HEIDE

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Photo: Markus Tretter
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Photo: Markus Tretter
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MONO: HAEGUE YANG



It is not often these days that one encounters an artist who talks about sentimentality. As it happens, sentimentality does not fit an image of the artist as an all-knowing aesthetic strategist—an identity that still enjoys the general approval of today's critical evaluations. It is therefore remarkable that Berlin-based artist Haegue Yang (b. 1971, Seoul) has never shied away from bringing her sentiments to the fore. In a conversation published in 2006, the artist introduces her endeavor to "integrate the political in the sentiment, or in other words, [...] to express one's sentiments without losing political position."¹ Yang merges politics and sentiment by bringing her pathos and vulnerability to specific political, historical, and social contexts. She is not an artist who tells us how things work. Instead, she focuses on exposing what it is to be a creative individual in today's politicized arena of art-production.

The most straightforward example of this exposure can be seen in *Storage Piece* (2004). This installation features a collection of earlier works stored in shipping containers that are wrapped together on several transport pallets. This work incorporates two demands: the artist's private need for affordable storage space and the art market's non-stop demand for the display and distribution of artworks. In this way, *Storage Piece* maps out a socio-critical playing field marked by a highly personal and emotional urgency.

Storage Piece features the exchange between the private and the public as a direct alliance. But it may be relevant to emphasize Yang's position when the balance between the private and the public is disturbed. Between the two poles operates an artist for whom mobility, fluidity, and disappearance seem to be necessary conditions. Hence Yang subjects herself, as an artist, to a similar state of instability when it comes to the public "reading" of her work. The abstract arrangements of her artworks obscure the highly personal processes of association and identification that led to their execution. In this way Yang forsakes an essential part of her role as a meaning-giver and opens her work to the fluctuating judgements, impressions, and interpretations of the general art spectator.

The trilogy of video-essays produced between 2004 and 2006 can be seen as an early example of the artist exposing her work to a large network of possible meanings. The first

ARTIST'S BIO

HAEGUE YANG (b. 1971) lives and works in Seoul and Berlin. Her work has appeared in solo exhibitions at New Museum, New York; Korean Pavilion, 53 Venice Biennale; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Portikus, Frankfurt am Main; Kunsthalle, Hamburg; Cubitt, London; and BAK, Utrecht, among others. It has also been featured in group exhibitions including the 8 Gwangju Biennale; 53 Venice Biennale, Venice; Los Angeles, LACMA; 2 Turin Triennial; and MuHKA, Antwerp.

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

HAEGUE YANG's exhibition "Arrivals" is on view at the Kunsthau, Bregenz, until April 3, 2011. Kunsthalle Lingen will present "Haegue Yang, Rivane Neuenschwander" from October 8 to December 18, 2011. Her work will also appear in solo exhibitions this summer at Modern Art Oxford, Oxford and the Aspen Art Museum.



Squandering Negative Spaces, video stills, 2006
Courtesy: the artist

two parts of this trilogy, *Unfolding Places* (2004) and *Restrained Courage* (2004), fluidly shift between everyday scenes in public spaces in cities such as Seoul, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, and London. A parallel narrative unfolds in which the narrator recounts isolated incidents that reveal her disjointed relation to her environment. As Emily Pethick writes, “A sense of distance and alienation marks each of these encounters, where instances of people getting lost, or publicly abused are met with her own silence.”²

The final part of the trilogy, *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006), was shot in Brazil. In the film, the artist clearly occupies a position of “otherness” in the process of approaching a foreign culture. Yang’s camera follows a succession of unremarkable in-between spaces, non-places, puddles, and stray objects, and finds the subjective within the cracks and incongruities in the urban framework.

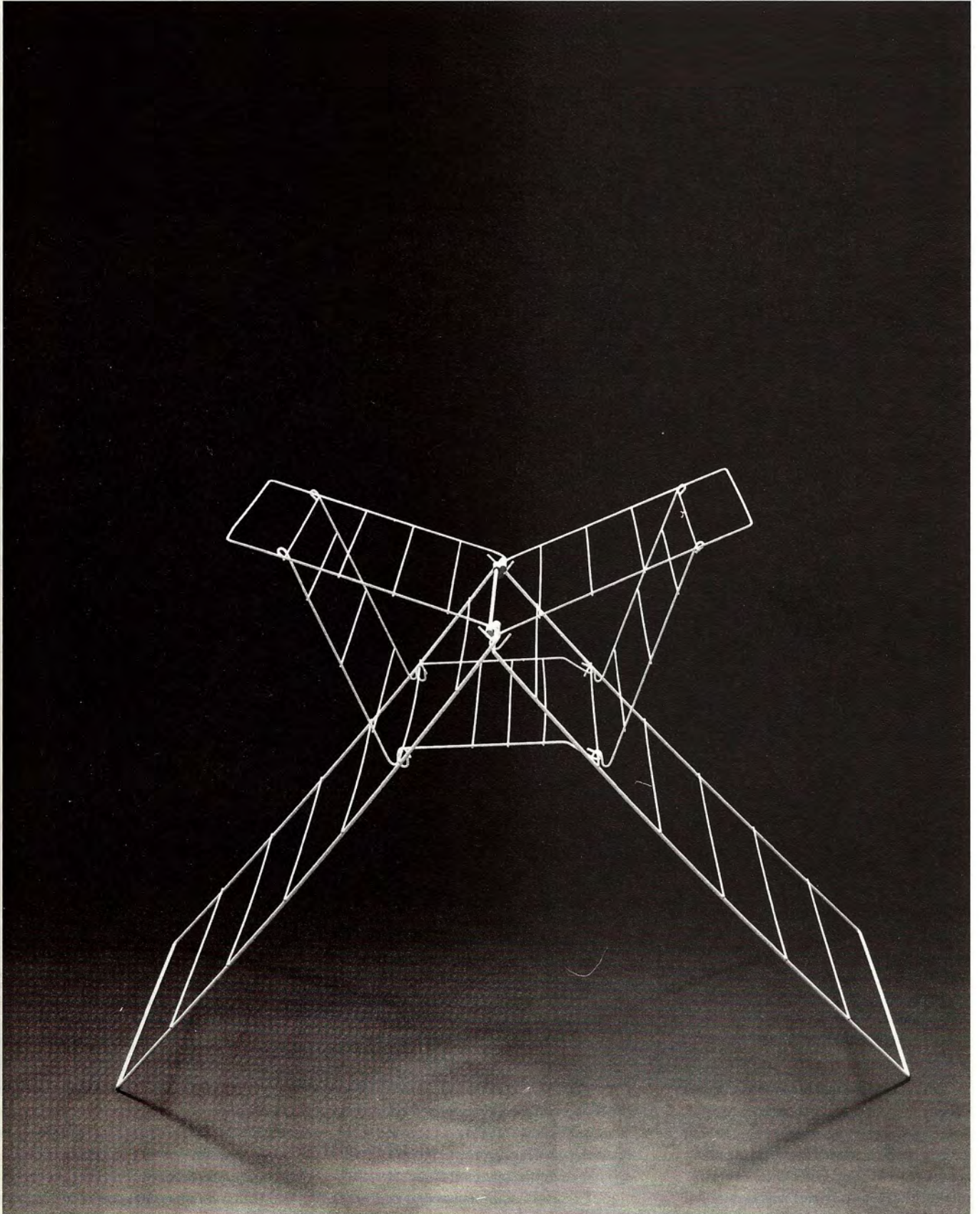
A work Yang made in 2006 and 2007, titled *Quasi MB – In the Middle of its Story*, continues to explore the alienation of the private from the public. For this work, Yang took on the 1969 film, *La Pluie* (*projet pour un texte*), by an artist who deeply influenced her practice, the Belgian conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976). *La Pluie* is a two-minute, black-and-white 16mm film shot in the artist’s back yard, which features the artist sitting on a garden chair and holding open an unraveled scroll of paper on top of a wooden crate. As he dips an old fashioned fountain pen into the inkwell and begins to write in long, cursive strokes, it starts to rain. The water washes away the ink before it has dried, forming black pools across the paper. As the rain gathers momentum and the film draws to an end, Broodthaers appears to sign the text before laying down his pen.

The work *Quasi MB* similarly displays Yang’s attempts to write different texts on paper in the rain. In the end, the papers are battered, torn, and dried up, showing Rorschach-like ink splotches caused by the washed-out text. Yang made eighteen of these and framed them together with the original text she was aiming to write. In these texts, one can see the sentence “Sense of shame” repeated as if it were a forced endurance task.

This historical quotation can be seen as emblematic of the erasure of the artist and the sovereignty of artistic material, comparable to the instability of artistic intention described above with regard to the public reading of Yang’s work. The memory of artistic intention is replaced by an abstract representation of the media that are normally expected to transmit it. A similar approach comes to mind when looking at Yang’s *Illiterate Leftovers* (2004). The work originates from 80 blank sheets of fax paper that were faxed to a receiver with the request to return the sheets by fax unmarked. The consequence of this procedure was that the technical residue of data (name of sender, fax number) that soiled the white pages became the language of its transfer. “Expression is a shameful thing,” says Yang. “We live in a world in which one does not need to express.” This “shamefulness” of expression leads the artist to prefer saying nothing at all: she has said, “What is lost is what we have.”

The particular interest of *Quasi MB* lies in the fact that it demonstrates that there is not one method by which Haegue Yang negotiates her pathos of vulnerability—or in other words, her “sense of shame”—as an artist. In fact, there are several methods that she has explored throughout her career, and in *Quasi MB* two contradicting ones seem to meet. *Quasi MB* also exposes the artist persona in such a way that it instigates a confrontation with the public and even with her inspirations.

The works that Haegue Yang has produced over recent years have lost their previous sense of melancholy and modesty. They are expressive, bold, and awkward, and they are extremely ambitious. When describing *Quasi MB*, the artist explains that she “wanted to make the original performance better to a point that Brood-



Gymnastics of the Foldables, 2006
Courtesy: Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

thaers is completely forgotten.” In a group of “memorial”-installations, produced throughout the course of 2008, Yang went so far as to make her historical protagonists speak her words. Each installation stood for a political figure, a writer, or an activist in recent history who has a personal significance for the artist. At the Hamburger Kunstverein, she realized a portrait on the Korean underground fighter Kim San and American journalist Nym Wales; at Cubitt in London, a memorial to German activist Petra Kelly, and at Portikus in Frankfurt, a memorial to Marguerite Duras. All of the selected protagonists personify a narrative in which private and public is differentiated within the life of one person or personal relationship. However, this is where biographical accuracy ends. The individual portraits have been carried out as a systematic assemblage of the same domestic materials, theater lights, scent diffusers, and paper folding. Again the artist remains elusive in her role as a “meaning-giver,” yet her methodical return to these specific materials lays bare an accession of private identification instead of its ambiguity.

For example, the portrait of Duras was inspired by the writer’s Paris apartment at 5, Rue Saint-Benoît. This apartment set the stage for Duras’ private journal—later published as *La Douleur* (1985)—in which she narrates the return of her husband (Robert L.) from Dachau after WWII. As Carol Murphy argues in *Alienation and Absence in the Novels of Marguerite Duras*, the journal’s inscription of silence—joined by an insistence on having “nothing to say” as the ultimate manifestation of pain—leads to a “whiteness of meaning.” Combined with rhetorical awkwardness, it constitutes a universe of troubling and contagious malaise. As in most of Duras’ writings, the subject of *La Douleur* becomes a ghostly subject: operating on the fringes of death and life, presence and absence, the nonappearance of this subject in *La Douleur* is turned into a subject in itself.

When describing this “identification of absence” in the work of Yang, the choice of this specific reference seems significant. The ethical dilemmas concerning muteness, loss, and incomprehension described by Duras portray a collapse of meaning that the works of Yang seem to face as well. But Yang then continues by appropriating this narrative to expose her own domestic context: the Duras portrait was assembled out of micro-installations that took on the dimensions of the main domestic appliances in Yang’s Berlin apartment, such as her washing machine and her shower.

In “Arrivals,” her first comprehensive European exhibition held at Kunsthaus



Unpacking Storage Piece, 2007
Installation view, haubrokshows, Berlin, 2007
Photo: Ludger Paffrath
Haubrok Collection, Berlin



Bregenz, running until 3 April 2011, the embarrassment of expression defines the pathos of Yang's oeuvre. Here, all the different contexts that led to the artist's different positions between silence and speech are mapped out. This fascinating trajectory furthermore sets the stage for her latest production, an impressive work that takes over one entire floor of the museum, in which the artist directs her attention toward an aesthetic scene that seems to embrace embarrassment itself. This installation, titled *Warrior Believer Lover* (2010), features individual clothing racks that are grouped according to their decorative materials, ranging from wigs and kitchen utensils to artificial exotic flowers. The objects are outrageous, flagrant, clownish, even; with the addition of the soundtrack of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, roaring through the space at specific times, they become an archaic manifestation of creative expression. This reference to Nijinsky's ballet, featuring a young maiden who sacrifices herself for the Sun-god by dancing until she collapses, leads the installation to familiar territories of muteness, yet to muteness brought about through exhaustion. Haegue Yang shows that the artist may be vulnerable when her artistic intention is not taken into account, but stepping out and braving communication can make her just as perilously exposed.

In her ever-changing oeuvre, Haegue Yang has found a way to explore the nature of vulnerability. Her surprising choices and the unexpected directions in which they've taken her enable Yang to continue feeling exposed, and to publicly disclose the sentimental consequences of being an artist. ♦

FOOTNOTES

1. In conversation with Binna Choi, in: 'Community of Absence', ex. cat. *Unevenly*, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2006, Utrecht.
2. Emily Pethick, 'Unevenly, Haegue Yang - BAK, Utrecht', *Frieze Magazine* (November), 2006, London.

AUTHOR

BART VAN DER HEIDE is an art historian living and working in Amsterdam and London. From October 2007 to March 2009, he was curator at Cubitt, London.