Haegue Yang

Haegue Yang’s restless video-essays, such as Unfolded Place (2004) and UNFOLDING PLACES (2006), are made up of almost twenty minutes of apparently insignificant moments from days and nights spent in Amsterdam, London, Berlin, and the city’s site of birth, Seoul, South Korea. Carts thunder underneath a bridge, the sun emerges from behind a wharf building, passengers drift across a station concourse, a tree is reflected in a window. The voice-overs that accompany the handheld footage were scripted by Yang yet are read by actors, and as they repeatedly express sentiments of awkward dislocation and a frustration in relating with others, they bring a vulnerable and confessional inflection to the stream of images. Brightly colored, geometric origami constructions appear strewn across puddles in Unfolded Places. They also feature as elements of Sadong 30 (2006), a project in Inch’on, South Korea, in which Yang transformed the interior and courtyard of a decrepit house with fragile interventions of sculpture and light. Origami constructions carry a metaphorical burden in her work, and the artist has spoken of the contrast between the learned behavior of paper folding and the “nonfolding” method that she aspires to, for which she is a constant attempt to “unlearn” standardized habits. Consequently, beginning in the late 1990s, as her work became known to a wider public, Yang has continued to resist a defining medium, engaging instead with a range of means, including wall drawing, books, sculpture, installation, moving image, and photography.

The oblique self-analysis that Yang uses as both strategy and substance in her “placeless” art is symptomatic of someone who has lived for many years outside of her country of origin and whose life and work antet the high mobility and in transit condition common to many contemporary artists operating internationally. This acute sense of provisional belonging—living at home in what is foreign and feeling foreign in what is home—lends Yang’s work a hair-trigger sensitivity for the inflections of quotidian experiences. The photographic series Social Conditions of the Sitting Table (2001), for example, inventories the practice in Korea of putting low tables outside the front door of some homes—something that...