

**HAEGUE YANG**

# A Strange Kind of Optimism

*Left-wing politics clash with pure abstraction in the Korean artist's dynamic, multi-sensory installations.*

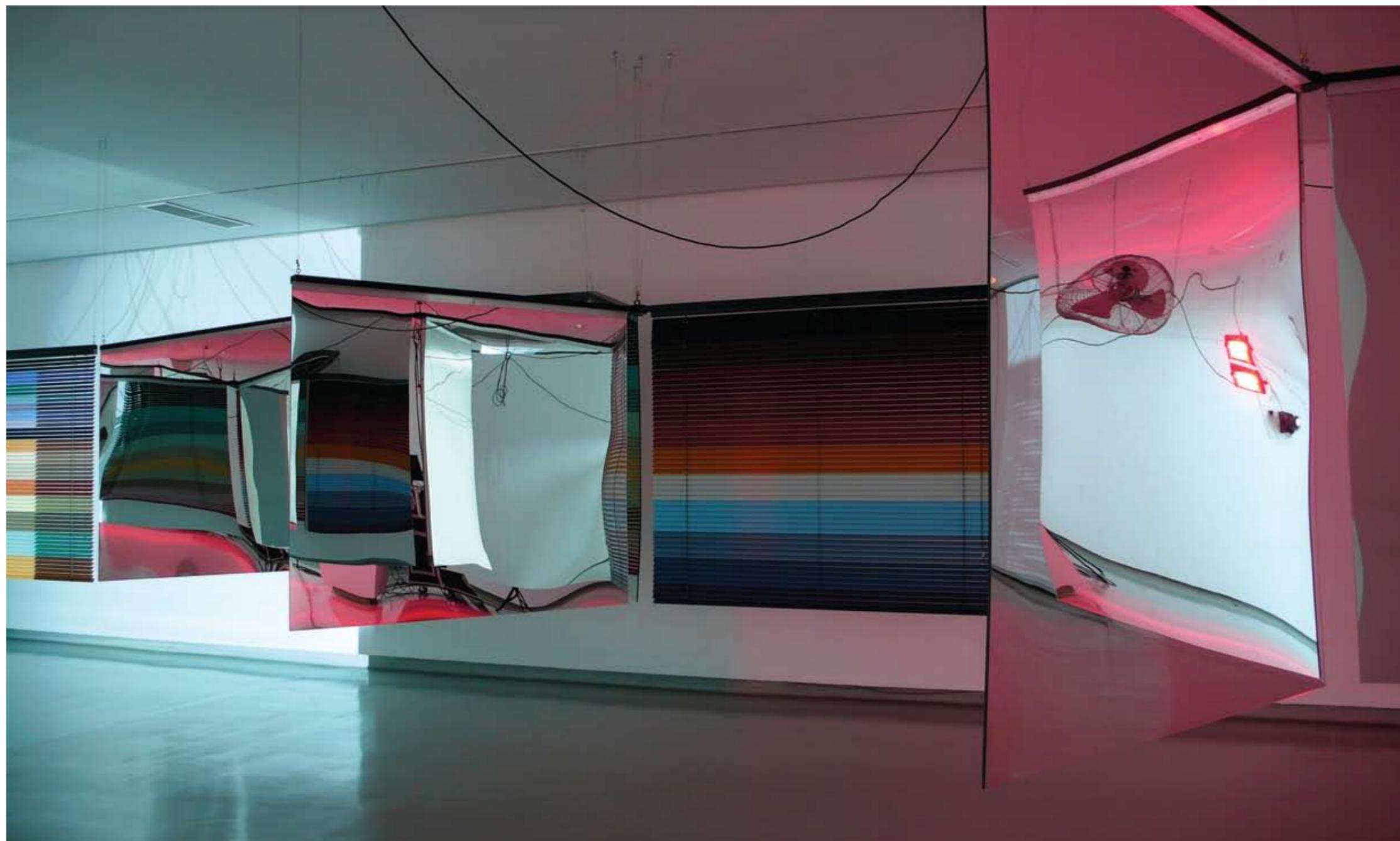
*By HG Masters*

**Three rooms, three constellations of choreographed sensory chaos.**

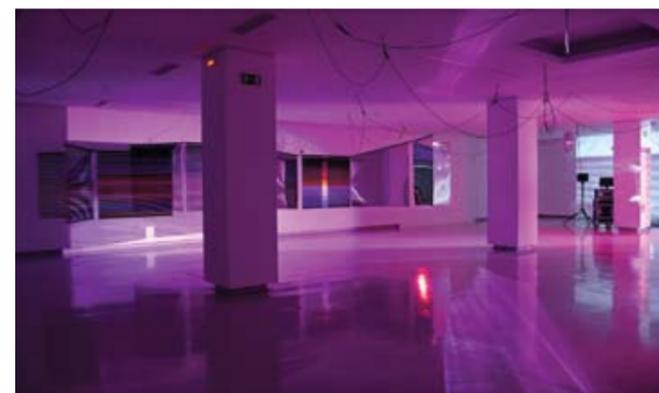
A gyrating spotlight of sharp white light flashes on, its beam circles the gallery, reflecting off a large mirrored panel hanging from the ceiling. Rapid washes of red, blue, then magenta light—originating from elsewhere in the space—momentarily drown out the spot. On another side of the wide room, a red halo of light pans across a hanging arrangement of white venetian blinds hung at oblique angles from the ceiling before shutting off as more bursts of color flood the room.

In a second area, lit by a piercingly bright light, meandering walls of suspended black venetian blinds converge to create a series of semi-private enclosures. An incongruous array of artificial scents—fresh-cut grass, earth, coffee, garlic and burning spices—wafts in from atomizers located throughout the space.

Around the corner in an adjacent room, an infrared heater mounted to the ceiling creates a pocket of warm air. Nearby, a metal ceiling fan whirls on, circulating the balmy, perfumed air. Blinds with strips painted an array of colors from turquoise to orange dangle next to hanging mirrors of the same size. A standing microphone in the corner is available



SERIES OF VULNERABLE ARRANGEMENTS - SHADOWLESS VOICE OVER THREE, 2008, three-



room installation of venetian blinds, hanging mirrors, fans, infrared-heating element, microphone and speakers, installation views at Sala Rekalde, Bilbao. Photo by Begoña Zubero.





**MOUNTAINS OF ENCOUNTER**, 2008, spotlights, red venetian blinds, installation view at the Kunstverein, Hamburg, 2008. Photo by Fred Dott.



**LETHAL LOVE**, 2008, black-painted aluminum blinds, spotlight, mirror, scent atomizer, installation view at Cubitt, London, 2008. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy HG + APT Berlin.

for visitors to use, introducing an added aural and interactive element.

During Haegue Yang's solo show "Symmetric Inequality," which ran from mid-December 2008 until mid-April 2009, the Bilbao nonprofit Sala Rekalde was devoid of objects other than the blinds, mirrors, fans, heating elements and wires strung up to the ceiling. But the entire space was animated by Haegue Yang's dizzying atmospheric abstraction, created by reflections and refractions of colored lights, fragrant smells and echoing sounds. Collectively titled *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—shadowless voice over three* (2008), the three-room installation is the latest installment of Yang's multi-year project "Series of Vulnerable Arrangements" (2006–08) that has now spanned four continents, multiple biennials, and numerous museum and gallery exhibitions.



What is the place of abstraction? For artists, it has been a fraught question ever since the post-Abstract Expressionist generation of painters—a formidable and diverse collection of individuals ranging from European conceptualists Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni to New York-based painters Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Ryman—pulled apart the abstract painting and isolated its components (the brushstroke, the flat canvas surface, the monochrome fields of color). In doing so, they destroyed the transcendent aspirations of painting, emphasizing the making of abstraction over abstraction itself.

This laying bare of technique, or literalizing of gestures, is what the Korean sculptor Haegue Yang has pursued in her "Series of Vulnerable Arrangements" by foregrounding the machinery of her installations—fans, mirrors, spotlights, heating elements—alongside the sensory effects they produce. Born in 1971 in Seoul, Yang studied fine arts at Seoul National University and then at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, where she worked with Georg Herold, a German painter and sculptor who makes abstractions in the most far-fetched manner, sometimes smearing caviar on canvas or suspending bits of plywood in glass vitrines. Though Herold (born in 1947) and Yang are a generation apart, they work in the same miasma of post-abstractism and post-conceptualism—an era of indeterminate ideology that has nurtured artists who probe both the social and formal underpinnings of art-making in the struggle to find some element of truth to call their own. As Yang explained in an interview with curator Binna Choi in 2006: "I want to react to how 'neutral' the spaces of exhibition are supposed to be... to play with the notion of conditional settings for spaces for art and to address the viewer's physical senses."



One of Yang's earliest "Series of Vulnerable Arrangements" was shown at basis voor actuele kunst (BAK) in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in April 2006, as part of her solo exhibition, "Unevenly." Yang arranged devices representing the five sensory elements in a room. She assigned a title to each of the timer-operated components and positioned them in different corners of the gallery. *Relational Irrelevance* is a spotlight whose beam was directed onto a two-meter-tall floor lamp in a redundant light-shining-on-a-light arrangement. Suspended by wires in the middle of the room, the open pot-like *Handful of Obscurity* is an industrial humidifier that releases a continuous cloud of steam. *Possible Synonym of Squandering* comprises two infrared heaters mounted on poles. *Anonymous Movement* is a standing floor fan; *Almost Exhausted* ("Wood Fire") and *Becoming Intro Time Machine* ("Fresh Linen") are two machines that emit the artificial, titular scents, "Wood Fire" and "Fresh Linen."

The room was alternately dark, light (at times tinged with red from the infrared heaters), warm, humid and breezy. Here, three sets of black venetian blinds hung from the ceiling to delineate a space that housed a screen on which Yang projected two 18-minute videos. *Unfolding Places* (2004), shot in London and Seoul, shows a stream of loosely connected images including tunnels, street scenes, the corners of rooms and origami animals strewn in street puddles with a first-person voice-over narrating



**5, RUE SAINT-BENOÎT**, 2008, aluminum venetian blinds, steel frame, metal plates, casters, bulbs, cables, yarn, vinyl, dimensions variable. Installation view at Portikus, Frankfurt, 2008.

what Yang calls her "pursuit of place"—anecdotes and ruminations from her travels from Frankfurt to Seoul, Copenhagen and Tokyo. The other, *Restrained Courage* (2004), is a similarly styled video filmed in European cities and Seoul—Yang has held artist residencies in northern Italy, Paris, London, Tokyo, Utrecht and Los Angeles and now splits her time between Berlin and Seoul—with a voice-over describing stories of her "chosen loneliness."

As the description above suggests, there is nothing succinct about Haegue Yang's art. Her videos, shot on multiple continents, come with lengthy voice-over narrations; her abstract installations are often connected to recondite historical episodes that require explanation in press releases. Despite her repetition of materials—venetian blinds, single strands of lightbulbs, mirrors, geometric origami objects, spotlights, fans, space heaters and scent emitters—Yang's "Series of Vulnerable Arrangements" has never been about a singular subject nor taken one particular form. The works in the series can roughly be divided into two categories: those made by draping assorted lightbulbs over tall, free-standing racks that vaguely resemble floor lamps—made primarily earlier in the series—and those comprised of hanging arrangements of venetian blinds, a later development. "Series of Vulnerable Arrangements" is not simply about altering the supposedly neutral exhibition space. Nor are her artworks about incidents from international left-wing political movements—the Communist revolution in China, the French Resistance, the German Green Party—that Yang cites as inspirations for many of her works. In that same 2006 interview with Choi, she commented: "I remained uninvolved in any specific political movement or activity, even if most of my surroundings, including my family, were directly committed to the leftist progressive movement in Korea."

Yang wrestled with the joyful play of pure abstraction and the countervailing gravity of political narratives—without overtly embracing or promoting a particular stance—in a succession of 2008 exhibitions, which allowed her to create a contiguous suite of works within "Series of Vulnerable Arrangements." The first of these pieces, *Mountains of Encounter* (2008), was shown in a group exhibition at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, Germany, in January 2008, and is an arrangement of hanging red venetian blinds angled at the top to resemble rooftops or the peaks of a mountain range. A floodlight casts a circle of light on the floor and spotlights mounted on the wall shine white light across the screens, creating layered shadows through the cluster of blinds and evoking a rising or setting sun. The work's underlying narrative is the meeting of Kim San, a Korean freedom-fighter who fought alongside the communists in China against the Japanese occupation (1910–45), and Nym Wales, the pseudonym of Helen Foster Snow, an American journalist who later wrote a book on Kim San. Although in an email to *ArtAsiaPacific*, Yang describes the moving lights as "a kind of touching hands," there are no



**DOUBLES AND COUPLES - VERSION TURIN**, 2008, lights, steel, colored venetian blinds, dimensions variable. Installation view at the 2nd Turin Triennale, 2008. Photo by Paolo Pellion.

overt references in the sculpture. The red blinds might allude to the Red Army, the two roving spotlights to San and Wales’ furtive encounters or those watching out for them, but the narrative is more a starting point for her abstraction than a key to its meaning.

Likewise in her show at London’s Cubitt Gallery in February 2008, “Lethal Love,” Yang offered only one clue to the subject of her abstract portraiture, this time of peace activist and German politician Petra Kelly, the founding member of Die Grünen, the German Green Party. In 1992, at age 44, Kelly was murdered in her sleep by her partner Gert Bastian, a former NATO general and fellow Green Party politician, who then killed himself. In Yang’s rendering there are gun-metal aluminum venetian blinds, a white floodlight, a clear spotlight and a large mirrored panel that filled Cubitt’s small space. From behind the mirror, scent atomizers released the fragrance of wild flowers and gun powder—the most overt and sole allusion to Kelly’s life and death.

But the series’ relationship to narrative and portraiture remained tenuous. Yang’s abstract tendency dominates in *Three Kinds* (2008), shown at the biennial Carnegie International at Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in May 2008, as she abandoned the historical subtext for an ebullient, playful formalism. Yang had the blinds—which came in a broad array of colors from purple to yellow to pink—cut into hexagons and octagons and painted with large white triangles. Floodlights pointed at the floor faded on and off and wall-mounted spotlights projected a corresponding pattern of triangles onto the blinds. On the wall were two circular mirrors at eye-level and what resembled a third mirror. In fact, it was a hole in the wall through which one could see a narrow space illuminated by a red light containing a wooden ladder, building materials and an exterior window, revealing the installation’s outer limits.

That same month at Portikus, an exhibition space in Frankfurt am Main, Yang veered back into historical material, premiering “Siblings and Twins,” a two-part installation. Yang again represented the imagined meeting of Kim San and Nym Wales in China, this time in a larger arrangement of hanging red blinds and roving spotlights entitled *Red Broken Mountainous Labyrinth* (2008). In the same space was *5, Rue Saint-Benoît* (2008), eight arrangements of blinds and lights in gray, metal-framed forms whose dimensions approximate objects—a kitchen table, a water heater, a shower stall and a stove—in the apartment of French author and communist Marguerite Duras, whose address in Paris during World War II is the work’s title. From this apartment, Duras and her husband Robert Antelme plotted for the Resistance. These pieces of historical trivia link the figures behind *5, Rue Saint-Benoît* through leftist politics and the fight against foreign occupation to Kim San and Nym Wales, and Petra Kelly and Gert Bastian.

As the series progressed through 2008, Yang’s vacillation between pure abstraction and narrative-inspired abstraction gave way in

“Asymmetric Equality” at the art space REDCAT in Los Angeles. The multi-room installation *Yearning Melancholy Red* (2008) featured arrangements of white and faux-wood venetian blinds, mirrors mounted on a central column, swiveling red and white spotlights attached to the wall and three sets of infrared heaters and fans, which together create an exaggeratedly languorous atmosphere of warm air and red light. Though Yang linked the sultry conditions in the gallery to Marguerite Duras’ upbringing in colonial French Indochina in the 1920s, *Yearning Melancholy Red* features a drum kit connected electronically to the installation’s lighting that viewers could play, causing the lights in the next room to swirl around frantically. “Implying something inevitable, and yet more powerful than a considered composition,” Yang explains, this unpredictable, human element distances *Yearning Melancholy Red* from an evocation of a specific place.

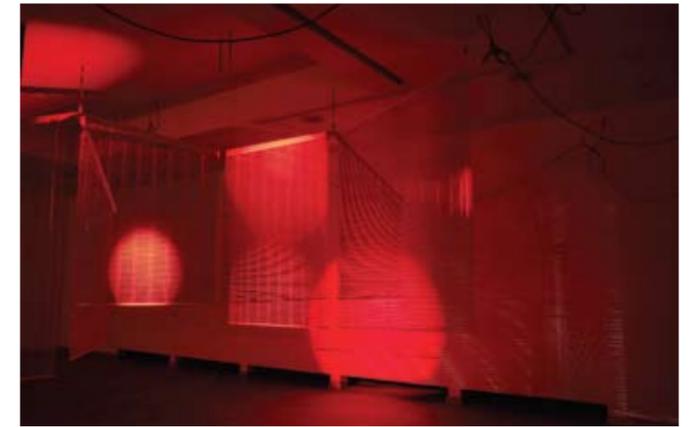
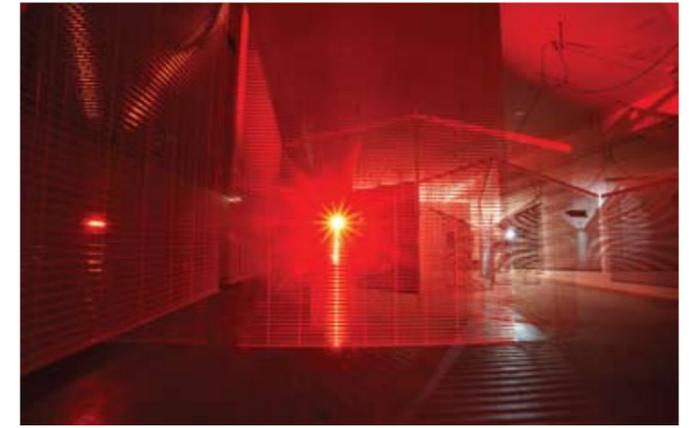
Similarly, at the Turin Triennale in November 2008, Yang showed *Doubles and Couples* (2008), steel-framed forms on wheels or mounted to the wall with multicolored blinds and tangled strands of lightbulbs, which echoed the materials and forms of *5, Rue Saint-Benoît*. But here Yang eschewed the historical referents, just as in *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – shadowless voice over three* Yang echoed *Yearning Melancholy Red* and *Lethal Love* but left behind any narrative associations for references to her own earlier pieces, an indication that her subject is increasingly her own vernacular of abstract gestures.



With her vast geographical, historical and formal lexicon, what then connects the projects of Haegue Yang? Or, in her words: “What in the world makes me keep such a great distance from the many urgent political issues and events taking place around me?” She maintains “a kind of territory where my position could not be fully definable or cultivated, therefore instrumentalized by anyone else. It is a ‘territory’ where one can become a ‘poet-activist’ who has the potential 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 could be a political being.” Or, to put it another way, it is the alternating between formalism and political-historical subject matter that preserves her “chosen loneliness” from the ideology of either abstraction or political art.

One motif that connects Yang’s projects is folding, which she describes as, “magic—how a simple act such as folding can result in such complex three-dimensional space.” Metaphorically, folding is both an act of concealing and revealing, building shapes and destroying them. Origami paper when it is folded reveals a new side; venetian blinds when unfolded subdivide a space while still permitting lines of sight and passage of light. Yang folds tangles of lightbulbs over a standing armature to create a form out of something formless, and mirrors fold space by bending light into a new direction. This destructive-regenerative cycle, similar to the productive recycling Yang does with her own projects, characterizes her open-ended, non-ideological and transnational artworks.

Her series “Non-Foldings” (2007), shown at Galerie Barbara Wien in April 2007, are works on paper hung from clips on the wall to the floor, with a crystalline pattern of silhouettes created by spray-painting and then removing an arrangement of complex geometric origami pieces. In some, the negative shapes are made with white spray paint on black paper, in others with black spray paint on white paper. As she inverts inverted forms and juxtaposes the struggles of leftist radicals with her own experiments with abstraction, Yang admits, “Now I am completely lost. I don’t know what is the way of a good artist. I am still on my way.” Even as she represents South Korea at the Venice Biennale in June and prepares for a September solo exhibition curated by Doryun Chong at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Yang acknowledges that she is still searching for “where to live and how to live,” an open-minded attitude that looks increasingly wise in a year when the world’s assumptions are being undone, reconfigured and remade.



**YEARNING MELANCHOLY RED**, 2008, site-specific installation, aluminum venetian blinds (shiny white, faux-wood), mirror, four Martin mini Mac 250 moving lights, three sets of infrared heaters and fans, drum kit, cables, dimensions variable. Installation view at REDCAT Gallery, Los Angeles, 2008. Courtesy REDCAT Gallery, Los Angeles.