



Haegue Yang
Lethal Love 2008

■ Haegue Yang: Lethal Love

Cubitt London February 22 to April 6

A few days after Alain Robbe-Grillet died, *Lethal Love*, an installation by the Berlin-based artist Haegue Yang, opened in Bart van der Heide's series of Cubitt shows. It was a distinctively, even theatrically beautiful work dominated by a tree-like formation of Venetian blinds, which divided the gallery space and filtered the rotating light that swept across the room. The French word for the blinds – *les jalousies* – gave Robbe-Grillet the title for one of his best-known works, *La Jalousie*, 1957, a story of a jealous husband, a wife and their neighbour in a French colony. The text, an example of the *nouveau roman* movement Robbe-Grillet helped launch and define, centres on the impossibility of knowing anything objectively – an unremitting perspectivalism that is symbolised in the theme of the husband habitually peering through the *jalousies* to watch his wife, known in the novel only as A ... The blinds' relation to both sight and knowledge – their capacity to both allow glimpses outwards and to obscure – is likewise apparent in Yang's installation, which she has devised as a portrait of the late German activist Petra Kelly. At Cubitt, the blinds signify the fact that Kelly's life was both public and private – a dynamic nowhere more apparent than in her circumstances of her death 16 years ago: the Green Party leader was shot in the head while asleep, presumably by her lover, the politician Gert Bastian.

The duality of intimacy and public resonance, love and

hatred inherent in her death is dramatised by two devices, resembling weapons, that are hung behind a large mirror in the installation. These devices, triggered by sensors, emit the smell of flowers and gunpowder respectively, as if buffeting the viewer. This gun/flower opposition is one of a number of literal moves throughout the installation: the transparency and obscurity of the *jalousies*, the reflective symbolism of the mirror, the tree-like formation of the blinds (alluding to the Green Party), and the public eye evoked by the dimming and brightening floodlight. A second, smaller, rotating stagelight emitted a colder light in comparison with the beam of the floodlight; the work created an atmosphere in which light level and quality, smell, shadow and reflections were constantly in flux. In a show at the now closed London non-profit space Flaca last year, Yang constructed a domestic environment using many of the same formal and phenomenological concerns – primarily, light as an active element and an almost territorial ambition to physically occupy the space. A mattress was laid out on the floor and a variety of twisted wires and light bulbs, intermittently going on and off, were positioned around it. In this earlier show the relations made between the elements were more formal than symbolic, and it had a rougher feel than the refined elegance of *Lethal Love*; no doubt *Lethal Love* will please some, and the Flaca show will have pleased others.

But *Lethal Love* – one of a number of 'portraits' Yang will show at European institutions this year – gives reason for its move away from formalism. It sets up a generous relation to classical portraiture, representing its symbolic elements – the extended letter, the raised sceptre, the held chalice – as abstract yet equally legible forms. The portrait commissioned by the present Earl Spencer shows Diana's brother holding out the damning letter he read at her funeral; this sign of spite is not, functionally, far from Yang's cloudy mirror suggesting the continued visibility of Kelly's life, which had been public since her political involvement in her 20s. However, unlike these classical

forms of portraiture – or Robbe-Grillet's theory of 'pure surface', that the illustration of solely external aspects is the only legitimate manner of depiction – Yang affirms Kelly's interiority but asserts that what it consists of cannot be known. The tools at hand to depict the 'private' aspect of her life – that is, concrete visual effects shown in the gallery space – are only publicly available, and the portrait offers up instead Yang's own subjective rendering of the romantic and doomed hero. Competing with this prerogative of the artist and the limitations on depicting subjectivity we have also, undeniably, the perspectivalism of the viewer, who only sees his or her part of what's on show or in the air, illuminated or visible through the blinds. *Lethal Love* becomes an exquisite staging of the problems in representing, or indeed fully knowing, another person. ■

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