

Towards Haegue Yang's *Blind Rooms*

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It is midday in Frankfurt, one-time home of Haegue Yang, the cathedral bells are ringing and it is raining. The instant messaging window next to this text as it is being started reports Haegue Yang's status with an icon of a clock and the legend, "Haegue Yang (haegue) – Away (GMT +9)." She is in Seoul. Now a narrative unfolds of oblique lexicons and veiled biographies, of vulnerable velocities, displacements and abstraction, one told between a German city and a Korean city, looking towards Bilbao and backwards at shadows. A distinct programmatic divergence was manifest and made necessary in Yang's practice on the occasion of *Storage Piece* (2003); the events recounted here take place in the preceding years.

Fold 1.

Assembled at a commercial gallery in London, *Storage Piece* tried to tie loose ends together—or at least to tie them down. The artist had identified several distinct works of art of hers which were due to be returned to her in Berlin, as well as lone artwork elements in her possession, and had them diverted and packaged as a new entity. Palletized and repurposed, a sizeable tranche of Yang's artistic repertoire from the preceding years, having been created for various exhibitions around the globe—from Seoul, the city of her birth, to Frankfurt, to Amsterdam, and other locales—was inventoried, gathered together in a single conglomeration and apparently "stood down" from active artistic service. *Storage Piece* was presented with each work once more unpacked in Berlin in 2007. Yang sent a copy of the accompanying publication *Haegue Yang: Unpacking Storage Piece* (2007) to the present narrator in the post from Berlin to Barcelona. Due to the unusual binding of the book—being folded and stapled on the bias—the envelope had been stiffened with an off-cut of corrugated card in order to better protect the pages in transit. It was accompanied by a taped sheet of white A4 paper. One side of the sheet had formerly functioned as an order receipt from an online bookseller. The following titles were noted: *Nation and Narration* (Paperback) by Homi K. Bhabha (Author); *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir* (Paperback) by Louis Althusser (Author); *The Coming Community* (Theory

Out of Bounds, Vol 1) (Paperback) by Giorgio Agamben (Author), Michael Hardt (Translator).

Triggered by the lack of a proper repository for her art, *Storage Piece's* spatial *zwischenzug* could be traced towards the precariousness and urgency of one artist's personal circumstances and her migratory "lives and works..." biography. Yet Yang's practice is intent on avoiding sentimentalised accounts or facile reflections on mobility as a social phenomenon. Rather, against the backdrop of a globalised, depersonalised circulatory system of transit and trade, *Storage Piece*—like deliberately not claiming luggage—engendered a fresh politics of encounter with the world. Accordingly, in a path from *Storage Piece*, through the video trilogy *Unfolding Places* (2004), *Restrained Courage* (2004), and *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006) which follows to her present room-filling sensory environments with Venetian blinds, Yang's practice unfolds as an attempt to reconcile personal experiences with systemically abstract ones. Yang seeks to design a space for vulnerable emotions which is nevertheless unflinchingly robust in addressing the profundities of capital and history, of ideology and commitment.

Fold 2.

The video-essay trilogy that emerged in the months and years following *Storage Piece*—*Unfolding Places*, *Restrained Courage*, and *Squandering Negative Spaces*—form a reportage from, as the artist's proxy-voiceover from the latter film considers, "a place that one has visited but not discovered." (The words are hers although she does not read them.)¹ Shot with a hand-held camera which lends the footage a hesitant and confessional gaze, each film passively accumulates fleeting scenes from cities including London, Seoul, Berlin, Amsterdam, and São Paulo, rather than synthesizing purposeful montages. Alongside a sometimes circuitous commentary, there is nevertheless nothing from this "place" that could be surmised as a consumable travel experience. Instead, the scenes occur as if continuous digressions which surpass geography and yearn for another kind of declassified knowledge. Reflections in puddles, plants growing in pavement cracks, nocturnal traffic, and in particular footage of shadows and interior or urban lighting effects, each appear imperviously and melancholically immune to their specific locations. Instead such moments record a sparkling and entrancing community of phenomena which refuses to be sure of itself.

1 *Restrained Courage* is voiced by Camille Hesketh, *Unfolding Places* by Helen Cho, and *Squandering Negative Spaces* by David Michael DiGregorio.

With a similar tenor to Yang's art, Rana Dasgupta's 2006 novel *Tokyo Cancelled* treats incandescent experiences against the expanse of global exchange and the rush of modernity. Set in an unnamed airport concourse throughout the course of one night, the book comprises thirteen tales told by thirteen passengers who find themselves stranded because their connecting flight is cancelled. Eschewing an exotic presentation of the places where each of the tales are set—including Delhi and Buenos Aires—*Tokyo Cancelled* relates mundane urban settings that nevertheless host extraordinary and confounding phenomena. The dream of Thomas in "The Memory Editor" uncannily echoes a scene from *Unfolding Places* in which origami shapes are scattered on a rain-soaked pavement: "memories had already begun to cover the ground. Each gust of wind would send them skating across the tarmac to be collected in the gutters... All day and night the memories fell. They floated on puddles like a layer of multicoloured leaves."² Dasgupta's fragmentary stories coincide on a mythic dimension, sanctioning a temporarily intimate place between the displaced travellers that are their tellers.

Considering this novelist's agenda against Yang's art proposes a number of questions, not least, and more of which later, the justificatory "why" courted by Yang's recent use of figures of historical reference. How can sentiments be manifested without them lapsing into thin sentimentality? How can one assemble a contemporary ontology of places, spaces and human beings without lapsing into a thin global poetics? What of coincidence? What elements of grace are permitted by serious discourse?

Yang's indirectly answers such concerns in her work in its increasingly fluent use of shadows or brightness, and by modulating obscurity and "lightness," both literally and figuratively. Correspondingly, her video trilogy sublimates the ingredients for a site of "placeless" and tenuous comfort. In one scene of *Unfolding Places* the camera scans back-and-forth across a blinking neon light as the automatic exposure is surprised into over- and under-exposure, seemingly initiating a kind of perceptual calibration for her works to come. Without prompting a story or suggesting any specific geographic location—and with no need for language—darkness and light provide a synthetic and immaterial respite which anticipate the shared and emotive leasing of space of her "blind room" installations.

Fold 3a.

A coincidence of evanescent darkness and light, bodily proximity, a restless

2 Rana Dasgupta, *Tokyo Cancelled* (2005), Harper Perennial, 2006, p. 43.

community of strangers, under special temporal and spatial conditions: an airline cabin.

A moment in *Unfolding Places* shows the darkened interior of a Korean Airways flight, illuminated only by the small television screens of each seat—the globe’s nocturnal and diurnal rhythms are excluded from time. “The Billionaire’s Sleep” from *Tokyo Cancelled* tells of Rajiv, a permanently insomniac Delhi call centre tycoon. Unable to sleep on a flight, “he now carried Indian Standard Time in his guts into far-flung places, and there was an ear-splitting tectonic scraping within him as it went where it should never have been.”

Time shifted so gently around the surface of the globe, he thought: there should have been no cause for human bodies to be traumatized by its discontinuities—until people started piercing telegraphic holes from one time zone to another, or leaping, jet-engined, between continents. The universe was not born to understand neologisms like *jet lag*.³

Yang’s understanding of placelessness in her practice likewise engenders a relinquishing of synchronous time—“time unfolds as place unfolds and place cannot unfold in exclusion of the time difference” relates *Squandering Negative Spaces*. Each of her “blind room” works (nominally despite their international manifestation), exist additionally as if in a jet lag *space* of uneasy proximity.

Yang connects the concept of jet lag too to the idea of a lover: “Jet lag describes the site of love as time in which one is alone, e.g. awake alone in the night, socially less compatible and in this time-space of aloneness one can love and be loved without a division of self and the other.”⁴

Fold 3b.

Yang’s *Three Kinds in Transition* (2008), shown on a vertically oriented flat screen monitor, was a spatially remote companion to *Three Kinds*, an almost festive “blind room” installation of coloured hexagonal Venetian blinds, like plastic windmill sails or crystals. The screen of the former displayed a progression of sumptuous images of a plastic world globe, sometimes illuminated from within, alongside those of colourful and multifaceted geometric origami constructions. “For four hundred years,” explains Klaus Kaufmann in *Tokyo Cancelled*’s “The House of the Frankfurt Mapmaker”, “people

³ Dasgupta, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁴ Yang, personal communication.

have been taught to believe that Mercator's canny distortions show the world as it truly is."

But we have no need of his deceitful coastlines: we are not a people bobbing about in the unknown looking for land. Which of us, in seeking to travel from Frankfurt to Singapore, spends a moment thinking about problems of navigation? The world is already ours, and what we truly care about is not its shape, but its speed.⁵

Analogously, Yang's re-imagining—or re-imaging—of the world and its relations is created with a sensory logic of mobility, vectors and folds. The Mercator map projection sought to translate a spherical surface on a navigable flat sheet. Yang's practice intimates taking such a sheet with time and within space and folding a model of another abstract reality.

Fold 4.

The oblique desires of Yang's videos have become progressively articulated in physical form and through particular historical figures—made present as room environments which can be encountered and experienced by others. Lightness and darkness, shadows and spotlights, participate in sense-loaded environments in which she explores her own narrative in relation to others through "unlearned" and felt rules of engagement. Her works assemble a community of relations as if by brushing hands with those who might no longer be strangers. While the acutely private "homeless" subjectivity of the video trilogy was at first introduced *within* space—with the creation of secluded areas for the videos' projection—it has lately migrated more fully *into* a typology of space.

With *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Version Utrecht* (BAK, Utrecht, 2006), Yang's practice began this transition by feeling through a range of sense-devices adumbrated in the videos. Through works and exhibitions including *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Blind Room* (2006, São Paulo Biennial), *Lethal Love* (2008, Cubitt, London), *Mountains of Encounter* (2008, Kunstverein Hamburg), *Siblings and Twins* (2008, Portikus, Frankfurt), *Three Kinds* (2008, Carnegie International, Pittsburgh), *Asymmetric Equality* (2008, REDCAT, Los Angeles) to the present exhibition at **sala rekalde**, Yang has developed a finely-tuned articulation of space through deft assemblage that has encompassed mirrors, multifarious electric lamps, scent atomizers, infrared motion detectors, heat sources and Venetian blinds. Various sensory and sensible (i.e. readily perceived), such devices are not

⁵ Dasgupta, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

necessarily socially meaningful in themselves, yet they allow an interactive atmospherics that suggest zones of indeterminate necessities—part domestic interiors, part private theatres—and “localized effects” akin to political action.⁶

Within the limits of such emotive spaces, Yang hosts a coterie of proper names, of characters—based on real individuals, but characters nonetheless—who sanction and haunt these installations. Marguerite Duras for example, the celebrated novelist and screenwriter, is often a point of navigation for Yang. For the artist, Duras’s latter life comprised “a search [for] a home than made her homeless ... she didn’t know her ‘home country’ (France) and the place where she actually grew up [Indochina] was never objectively regarded as her ‘home’, because she was of French descent.”⁷ Yang’s use of proper names and elegant solidarity with certain individuals’ actions in her practice might be compared in this respect with British artist Liam Gillick’s similar use of particular historical figures which facilitate consideration of his architectural premises. Through fictions such as *Erasmus is Late* (1995) and *Literally No Place* (2002), Gillick evokes characters including Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Masura Ibuka, co-founder of Sony, who might metaphorically inhabit his sculptural works. Gillick’s points of entry are the partitions, screens and suspended ceilings of corporate interiors, and he proposes a post-Utopian space of consultancy, accountability, governance and negotiation. Yet it seems Yang’s accumulation of motifs, and her route to her “blind rooms” and beyond, is more concerned with elaborating a political philosophy with an acutely intimate and personal motivation.

Through the extraordinary stories of the lives of Petra Kelly and Gert Bastian, Kim San and Nym Wales, and Marguerite Duras, Yang has sought to articulate what she has described as a confirmation or a recognition of the “blind rooms.” The installations inhabit and recover fragments, the *felt* and the *lived* against the facts of biographical remnants. In other words, they are not really portraits of historical characters with particular resonance for Yang, but attempts to render relations and relationships—whether interpersonal bonds, partisan solidarities, transcultural alliances, or convictions that have not yet been named.⁸ To purloin Lawrence Weiner’s description

6 Talking of *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* Yang has described, “localized sensory experiences scattered through the exhibition space and, at the same time, metaphorically and directly ... explain[ing] the forms of an uneven or highly antidemocratic politicality produced by these localized effects.” Interview with Sujung Kim, *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists from Korea*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009.

7 The artist quoted in “Interview with Haegue Yang by Clara Kim,” leaflet accompanying *Asymmetric Equality* (2008, REDCAT, Los Angeles).

8 For a comprehensive topography of such figures which have been instrumental in Yang’s practice see Doryun Chong’s “A Small Dictionary for Haegue Yang,” in *Haegue Yang: Asymmetric Equality*, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-155.

of his own practice, Yang's installations are invested in the relationships between "human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings."⁹ In *Lethal Love*, for example, the troubled and fatally mysterious companionship of Green politician-activists Kelly and Bastian is evoked as we can move within the duplicitous atmosphere created by branching aluminium "gun metal" Venetian blinds, an intense 2000-watt flood light which pulses on and off, a robotic spotlight like a mini searchlight, and "gunpowder" or "floral" scent devices. "The shadow and at the same time, a lover," the voice in *Squandering Negative Spaces* might echo.

Blinds in Yang's environments, whether as the seemingly organic boundary arrangements of *Lethal Love*, or structured more like architectural origami in *Red Broken Mountainous Labyrinth*—are both scenery and props for situations of illusive encounter which attempt to make remote histories present. The details surrounding Kelly and Bastian's tragic deaths are complex and importantly inconclusive. The justificatory "why," the precise nature of their relationship and demise cannot be known. Similarly, at front and centre of another relationship, between theirs and Yang's installation is a question of solidarity despite indeterminacy. How, or where exactly, is a connection negotiated between these two people whose proper names are ostensibly not present in the installation, or the art work itself? Yang implores a kind of blind trust that the two movements are linked, like a lovers' pact that is an intimate political bargain, perhaps. Resisting facile "personal meets political" interpretations, *Lethal Love* rehearses a kind of ontological crisis with named and nameless phenomena. Although history and systems of belief may be understood as kinds of continuum, Yang seems to suggest, it must also be perceived through particular intense mutuality with particular contexts. For the artist, such localised as well as general work also comprises an art-specific matter: abstraction. "In a departure from the traditional art-historical understanding of abstraction as the opposite of representation, the power of abstraction can be compared to that of literary language," Yang has described, "I believe that behind narratives there are intimations that cannot be materially conveyed. Just as I explore political philosophy rather than artistic politics, through my series of installations I strive to take up the presentness of art possessed by abstract language."¹⁰

Fold 5.

Mountains of Encounter, somewhat less austere than *Lethal Love*, takes place within

9 Weiner quoted in, for example, *Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See*. Edited by Ann Goldstein and Donna De Salvo. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 71.

10 Interview with Sujung Kim, *op. cit.*

an angular spiral of modified primary-red aluminium Venetian blinds which are suspended from the ceiling in an obtuse huddle. Though the slats of each of the twenty one blinds or blind elements remain horizontal—their serried lines variously attenuated or almost full to the floor—the square-sectioned top portions are angular and some are divorced from their slats entirely. Together the jagged arrangement surmise a stage shorthand succession of peaks: the mountains of the title, perhaps. Scanning over the hanging blinds are four focussed beams of light which are thrown from wall-mounted robotic lamps, while at the core of the almost-maze two suspended companion theatrical spotlights cast wider arcs in floodlit circles around the structure.

Yang's "blindness" is ostensibly formed from unremarkable material fragments into a somewhere between interior and exterior that has "unlearned" its mythic dimension. The blind attracts little metaphorical burden compared to the figure of the window which it more usually presses against. Nevertheless the blind—a word synonymous with concealment, lack of perception, impulsiveness, or lack of sight in the English language (the Spanish *persiana* intimates an Orientalist influence)—is defined by its very fickle opaqueness. Comprised of a panoply of domestic and institutional barriers—blinds, curtains, nets, fences—Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles's vast installation *Through* (1983-9) might function as an enigmatic ancestor to Yang's recent works. Both deal with domains of transparent abstraction, where gaze and permeability are made critical. While blinds can allow light, air, sound and smell to pass through, what they reveal to direct vision is strictly a matter of oblique degrees. When a spotlight passes over a closed blind, the suspended interference can function almost like a projection screen. When the blind is open, light is cast beyond, onto another blind "filter," or onto a wall. Together with blinds, the effect of lights in Yang's works as both directed and ambient sources create scenarios which more-or-less "shed light on" themselves and "misuse" energy. Certain moments spent in Yang's installations suggest a site of possible performance—bringing to mind David Lamelas's light works including *Límite de una proyección I* (Limit of a Projection I), 1967, a lone spotlight casting a perfectly circular pool of light on a gallery floor. Such works of Lamelas use light as a medium for conjuring a state of self-awareness and suggest an in-between space and time in which reality, or presentness, and fiction, or theatricality, cannot easily be distinguished. Similarly, light in Yang's installations simultaneously limits and amplifies, presenting an emotive repost to the assumed neutrality of abstract practices. Venetian blinds' most persuasive cultural appearance relates of course film *noir*. Whether articulating stolen glances through private-detective-office slats, or casting raking shadows across a room as if graphic prison bars, blinds in *noir* allow for

the nostalgic accumulation of asymmetric suspicion and suffocating intrigue and for the creation of spaces in which characters and motives cannot clearly be determined.

Yang's appropriation of the blind into her sensory sculptural lexicon similarly describes with conviction a space of representation that is nevertheless fallible and full of doubt. Yang's own immaterial place, or the place of her persona, is critically underdetermined in this equation—she does not necessarily know any more than we do.

Fold 6.

It is 4.45 on a sunny afternoon Frankfurt almost two weeks later. The instant messaging window next to this text as it is being concluded reports Haegue Yang's status with an icon of a clock and the legend, "Haegue Yang (haegue) – Away (GMT +9)." In Seoul it is almost midnight.
