

# Stack of Evidence: Haegue Yang

– Max Andrews

Published in *Sense and Sustainability: Reading*, Urdaibai Arte, Fundación 2012 Fundazioa, July 2012.

Haegue Yang's art resists a defining medium, engaging instead with what could be characterised as a range of tools or symptoms including collage, sculpture, video, light, smell, and the invention and testing of concepts. Broaching abstraction, Korean history, biography, politico-philosophical ideas of the self, community and labour, Yang's practice inscribes seemingly-banal things with emotional memory and intellectual acuity. In a series of large-scale installations including *Cittadella* (2011) or *Three Kinds in Transition* (2008), for example, she has arranged custom-shaped aluminium Venetian blinds in conjunction with sensory devices which seemingly lack meaning in themselves – diverse light and heat sources, motion detectors, mirrors and scent atomisers – to create room environments of shadow and light which attempt to communicate effects akin to personal sentiments or micro-political action.

*Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – Voice and Wind* (2009) was conceived as one element of *Condensation*, Yang's exhibition for the Korean Pavilion of the 53rd Venice Biennale. Six industrial fans constantly altered the dynamics of the installation and animated a system of angular, unfurled or partly-closed Venetian blinds realised in a range of gaudy colours and flooded with natural light during the daytime. Scent emitters produced wafts of evocative environmental smells (conjuring "Rainforest", "Fresh Cut Grass", "Ocean Mist", for example). Such works imagine sites of invisible connections that are somewhere between interior and exterior. They are in part decorative while functioning to screen-off sections of space as if to entrust zones of domestic privacy, and "where the self is cared for and contemplated" as she has explained.<sup>1</sup> In the present context of Urdaibai and *Sense and Sustainability* (a series of projects which takes place within the idiom of *public art*), Yang's approach to her contribution might first be traced back through two earlier projects which especially crystallise this juncture between publicness and interiority, between outdoor display and intramural exhibition.

*Sadong 30* (2006), a project in Incheon, South Korea, cannot be characterised as public art in the traditional sense, yet neither was it a conventional exhibition. Having followed sporadically-publicised instructions to find a deserted Japanese-style house, the visitor had to unlock the entrance padlock themselves to then find a series of rooms and a courtyard which had been subtly altered by interventions of light, scattered origami constructions and plants. Strangely fragile, melancholic and beautiful, the ruined house was, for Yang, a temporal repository of everything disallowed by the typical logic of urban development. Literally and symbolically illuminating the character of what was once a domestic home, Yang's interventions acted as enhancements and triggers in order to contemplate a state of extraordinary absence and deficiency.

Unlike the self-organised and almost clandestine *Sadong 30*, Yang's project under the title *Looking for a Lost Pebble* (2007) was realised in the framework of an art project for outdoor sites, the Anyang Public Art Project. Several distinct elements were located throughout four different children's playgrounds in Anyang, a satellite city of the capital Seoul. Yang's work responded to the challenge of intervening in a public domain recently transformed by the imposition of a substantial new urban plan, and where hardly any idiosyncratic or improvised features were to be found. The playgrounds were located within a highly branded and homogenous neighbourhood comprised of residential tower blocks, shopping malls as well as administrative and educational institutions. Yang's artistic interventions thus enhanced these rather loveless and under-used community spaces designated for children's recreation, cherishing their

---

<sup>1</sup> *Condensation*: Haegue Yang. Ed. Eungie Joo. Arts Council Korea, 2009.

potential in what otherwise would be a wholly sterile dormitory city. Whereas some elements were semi-camouflaged by their utility in the context, others were more conspicuous. A large red metal crystalline shape appeared beneath some pine trees for example, yet the joining of three sets of existing wooden benches may have gone largely unnoticed. A willow was planted, something remarkable only that this type of tree was not normally used in the city's landscaping, and a drinking fountain in the shape of a shell-encrusted scholar's rock was installed. Most disconcertingly mirrors above the sinks in the toilets transformed themselves into a light-box with an image of the park littered with colourful origami shapes when triggered by motion-detectors. And, in a routine only readily noticeable by regular park users, a wooden climbing frame was inexplicably painted alternately white and black every four months.

Despite the different context, or because of it, both *Sadong 30* and *Looking for a Lost Pebble*, indicate how Yang is seeking to define place as possibility through dramatising the emotional assumptions of personal space on the one hand, and the ideological trappings of public space on the other. At the same time, she articulates the different subjectivities produced by visiting a site (one might add "merely"), or moreover, by discovering one, though not necessarily deliberately. Yet the affects of invitation or encounter within the personal or the communal are undoubtedly synthesised in Yang's work as a continuous gradient, a negotiable blending or transition, rather than an equivocal state.

Yang's project, for Urdaibai – entitled *Tectonic Texture* – has its beginnings and the bulk of its physical and metaphorical investment in what is perhaps the most traditional of raw materials for artistic decoration and representation: stone. In particular she became interested in the characteristic stones of the Urdaibai region – including grey limestone and Rojo Ereño, which has been quarried in the region since at least Roman times. The latter, also known as Rojo Bilbao, is technically a recrystallised limestone which is a deep meaty red colour with whorls of grey and white which are the fossilised remains of rudists, bivalves which were the major reef builders of the tropical seas of the Cretaceous. Yang proposed a stack in which 80 cm square slabs of Rojo Ereño are alternated with slabs of grey limestone. Additionally, a mason from Urdaibai was commissioned to carve the top surface – a square sandstone plate, also from the region – with a combination of his own raised geometric designs and a series of engraved handprints like impressions left in wet concrete. The five handprints are intended to encourage people to touch the form and initiate a direct contact with the materiality of the stone. *Tectonic Texture* is installed one of the few Ereño marble quarries in the region which has not been completely abandoned and is surrounded by the stagger-cut cliff faces where millennia of excavations have cut down below the forested surface. The sculptural material of which it is comprised originated from the same quarry. The depth of the quarry witnesses the vast displacement of rock that has taken place, and the steady transposition of a section of landscape which itself originated as ocean life approximately 100 million years ago into symbolic and cultural forms – buildings facades, altars and monuments distributed throughout the Basque country and beyond.

Yang's work is a kind of non-sculpture – perhaps closer to a memorial or a secular shrine – which connects to a highly-specific local labour tradition, through the apparent paradox of a representation of stone that is itself stone. Its form might also suggest that it is a kind of column or pedestal for an invisible form on top of it – an expectant platform articulated through the reorganisation of the excess symbolic value found in the anthropogenic landscape where it stands. The location of the quarry is somewhat hidden within the landscape of the Urdaibai biosphere reserve, and approaching the work in its context evokes a quasi-mystical feeling despite that fact the area bears the scars of modern industry. With *Tectonic Texture*, Yang was particularly interested in this strange collision of industrial exploitation and managed nature inherent in the site, as well as the Urdaibai region's pride in its ecological fecundity as a new kind of resource with political dimensions.

