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From the elegantly austere to the joyfully overstuffed, spaces that play with volume

SPACE, FORM, LINE

Haegue Yang, photographed in Miami on Dec. 4, 2019. The artist's work looks at themes including memory, loss and cultural identity.

The Artist of Nowhere

Haegue Yang's complex reflections on modern loneliness have done nothing less than create a new mold: the truly global artist who gains her sense of self from being permanently out of place.

By Zoë Lescaze
Portrait by Shane Lavalette

WHEN THE ARTIST Haegue Yang shows old artworks in new places, she likes to create a fresh piece that links the exhibition to the local context. For her current presentation at the Bass, a museum in Miami Beach, Yang asked the curators what the region's famously multicultural residents have in common. A particular holiday? A certain food? Not really, they told her. "But isn't there any commonality you can think of?" she asked. The curators looked at one another. "Hurricanes," they said, half joking.

The notion of violent storms as a binding force fascinated the 48-year-old South Korean artist, whose sculptures, room-size environments and videos often address themes of individual and national identity, displacement, isolation and community. After months of meteorological research, Yang produced a new work for the Bass show: "Coordinates of Speculative Solidarity," a chaotic floor-to-ceiling digital collage swirling with storm-tracking symbols, satellite photos of Floridian McMansions, distorted palm trees and sinister gyres that covers vast swathes of the museum like dystopian wallpaper. The show is called "In the Cone of Uncertainty," which in forecasting terms refers to hurricane projection but might as well be a description of Yang's overall philosophy.

Over the past decade, Yang's work has appeared at some of the most esteemed contemporary art forums in the world — including Documenta in Kassel, Germany, and the Venice Biennale — and she recently filled the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York with an ambitious installation blending sculpture and performance. With sensual, melancholy works made from venetian blinds and other domestic objects, Yang has managed to escape the conspicuous identity politics that define much of the contemporary art world. "Every institution now wants to be global and to have a more international and cosmopolitan point of view, but what does that really mean?" asked Stuart Comer, MoMA's chief curator of media and performance, who organized Yang's exhibition. At its worst, it can mean that non-Western artists are tacitly required to represent (or perform) the cultures they came from. Just as the institutions of the 1980s and '90s seized on artists creating work around their socially marginalized identities (female, gay, nonwhite), it sometimes feels as though the current art world showcases people born outside the United States or Europe only on the grounds that their art refers to their heritage. Yang, however — an artist who is not known to spend more than a few days or weeks at a time in any given place — takes a stubbornly elliptical approach, refusing to embody any single nationality or perspective in her work. By embracing ambiguity, Yang has found a way to make art about identity without tying herself to one based on gender, race or geography. "You cannot reduce it to a political one-liner," said Comer.

The artist herself is like the calm center of a high-velocity hurricane. In 2019 alone, she was in 15 shows on four continents. Remarks on how busy she must be tend to be greeted with the sort of wary skepticism with which one might regard a doctor's suggestion to lay off the exercise and have a cigarette. Yang acknowledges that she might be "doing a lot," but on the other hand, she suggests, notions of "rest" and "free time" are "sometimes too neoliberal to protect blindly. When passion and devotion goes over the border, is it something to condemn?" She is always working, and has spent her career deliberately isolating herself from friends and family as a kind of artistic method. The only downside is existential: "What comes along with the intensity of the work is you almost lose yourself," she said, although even this condition has its advantages: "I think the confusion is good to have."

Lately, Yang's success has kept her shuttling between her studios in Seoul and Berlin, a professorship in Frankfurt and her many exhibitions. In November, she made a brief appearance in Graz, Austria, to install work in a group show at the city's contemporary art museum, Kunsthaus Graz. We spoke in an old-fashioned cafe with scuffed parquet floors and a resplendent strudel that Yang discovered a few years ago when she had a solo exhibition at the same institution. She wore a roomy black sweatshirt over a white collared shirt, Yohji Yamamoto skirt-pants and an air of pensive self-reflection. She mentioned her solitude early, and I asked her if she ever gets lonely. Yang, who often communicates in diagrams, reached for a pen and drew two circles on a page. "Here is loneliness," she said, pointing to one of them, "and here is humbleness. If I didn't travel, I imagine I'd feel much more confident, but not so humbled." Yang is single by design, and has no children and few close friends. A writer whose work resonates with Yang, the

French novelist Marguerite Duras, once said, "One does not find solitude, one creates it." In fact, now that she's found success, her biggest struggle is maintaining a sense of alienation akin to what she experienced during her student years in Germany. The currents of personal doubt and instability that give her art its enigmatic allure stem from this nomadic condition: "Loneliness," she said, "is the price I pay." To continue producing meditations on belonging, Yang cannot afford to feel at home.

YANG'S INTEREST IN contentious borders — of nations, between neighbors and within one's self — stems partly from the series of separations that marked her childhood. She was born in Seoul in 1971, 26 years after the Korean Peninsula had been divided, amid political upheaval that would cleave her family apart. Yang's father, along with 160 colleagues, was fired from his job as a newspaper journalist for protesting government censorship when she was 3. After years of unemployment, he — and hundreds of thousands of other South Koreans — left the family behind in the '80s to find construction work in the Middle East. Decades later, Yang would address his absence in an installation at the 2015 Sharjah Biennial 12, in which she constructed a labyrinth of cinder blocks, turbine vents, steel grates and several rooms, including one where a Korean TV channel played on mute. Her mother, a teacher who became an author and then an activist, raised Yang and her twin brothers alone. Not long after Yang's father's return in 1988, her parents divorced; her mother moved away to join the workers' and trade-union movement soon after. Yang was not politically engaged at the time, but these experiences became intrinsic parts of her work, as did the rapid industrialization of South Korea, which underscores her interest in labor and the effects of mass-produced goods on traditional crafts and the natural world. A single sculpture of hers might include hand-knit textiles, light bulbs, bamboo roots and hamster tunnels, all dangling from a metal garment rack on wheels. Tellingly, Yang, who is never in one place for very long, often makes use of the kinds of household items people only acquire when they have settled somewhere: cans of artichoke hearts, umbrella stands, fridge magnets, towels, tomato paste.

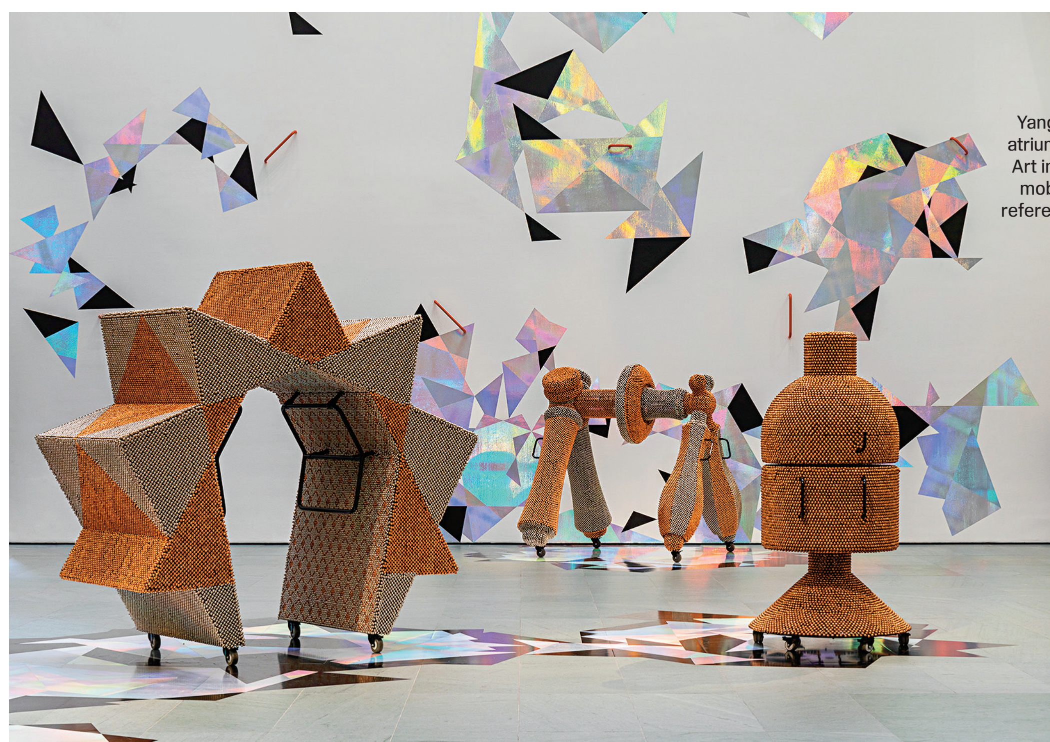
Yang knew she wanted to be an artist early on, and earned her B.F.A. from Seoul National University. She would have stayed, but the school rejected her graduate application, and so, in 1994, she moved to Frankfurt to attend the Städelschule. The experience was harrowing but deeply formative: the genesis of her identity as an outsider. She arrived barely able to speak German, and even the simplest interactions would expose how little she knew about European languages, customs and institutions. The difficulties she experienced, not just linguistically but as an Asian woman in a homogeneous white milieu, made Yang realize that selves are fragile things — they can break in transit. "I have the feeling as if my person, like my use of the German language, were characterized by incompleteness, as if it had a crack," she wrote in an early text piece from 2000 called "Science of Communication — A Study on How to Make Myself Understood." The fractured, confessional document, which she presented on a plain typewritten page taped to a gallery wall, was an exercise in self-exposure. As uncomfortable as this period was, it arguably forms the core of her practice. The embarrassments of not being able to communicate effectively or to pass as a local remain creatively beneficial for Yang: "I believe that out of the alienation one can mobilize the unusual strength to sympathize with the others," she once said. Vulnerability, she often emphasizes, is a state to embrace, not move beyond.

For her thesis show in 1998, Yang presented a large case on metal legs, the kind that might display artifacts or specimens. Inside was a selection of her work to date, including a plaster cast of her hand and an Ikea mug with her name written on it. The piece, "Anthology of Haegue Archives," might be read as ironic: a humorously self-important gesture from an obscure young artist whose career was a long way off from institutional support. But, as Yang has noted, it also might have been "an act of self-empowerment by an immigrant artist" at a moment when gaining international art-world recognition as an Asian woman was practically unheard-of. "It just didn't exist," she said. Role models were scarce. The Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, who is known for performances in which he cooks and serves meals for large audiences, "was the only one who wasn't painted by Orientalism," she said, meaning that he was seen as an artist first, an Asian artist second.

By the time Yang graduated from the Städelschule in 1999, however, the art world's borders and barricades were becoming more porous, and she began to make a modest name for herself. She benefited from the post-Cold War moment itself, which was increasingly interconnected. "We talk about a 'globalized world' as if it was such a shallow, trendy thing, but that merging of cultures had such a big impact on my biography," she said. "Europe became a very different society." Still, Yang remained ambivalent about its effects on a personal level, and her art became a running commentary on her perpetual feelings of displacement. Often these themes manifested in an affection for objects that have lost their usefulness but linger on, out of step with their surroundings. One early work, "Furnitury Objects — Students' Union Satie" (2000) involves a small table she salvaged from the streets of Frankfurt alongside a neglected chair borrowed from a friend and a bench from a theater. Fliers atop the table offered musings about our capacity to overlook banal elements of our surroundings, about belongings as expressions of their owners, approaches to furnishing institutional spaces and ambient compositions by Erik Satie. The dealer Barbara Wien gave Yang her first solo show in Berlin in 2000 and began taking her work to fairs, but the pieces often failed to sell. By 2004, neither Yang nor the gallery could afford to store her previous work or fund the production of new pieces — a dilemma that inadvertently gave rise to her first major installation: "Storage Piece," a pile of crates full of her work, stacked atop shipping pallets. Demoralized and in debt, Yang decided that she had "struggled enough." She scaled back her practice and got a full-time job organizing talks for the Frankfurt Book Fair.

One of Yang's first big comeback pieces, and the one that launched her career, was 2006's "Sadong 30," which took place in Incheon, a port city in South Korea, inside her late grandmother's old house, abandoned for nearly a decade. It was a ruin, with missing windows, peeling wallpaper and holes in the ceiling. Yang placed broken and intact mirrors, a folding laundry rack, lights, an oscillating fan and clusters of delicate origami stars within the derelict rooms. Visitors could unlock the house with a code and stay there alone for as long as they wanted. It was a work so personal that being there might have felt like an intrusion, but Yang's subtle gestures tapped a universal pain — of loss, of change, of our shared inability to keep things from ending.

The piece also began the seemingly endless exhibition tour she's been on ever since. That same year, at the São Paulo Biennial, Yang considered her perpetual displacement in "Series of Vulnerable Arrangements — Blind Room." Black venetian blinds hung from the ceiling surrounding a video trilogy in which Yang muses on being both geographically and existentially



Yang's 2019 installation in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which includes mobile sculptures and subtle references to geopolitical events.

HAEGUE YANG, "HANDLES," 2019, INSTALLATION VIEW OF 6 SONIC SCULPTURES, SOUND, WALL AND FLOOR ELEMENT, COMMISSIONED FOR THE MARRON ATRIUM BY THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, PHOTO BY DAWN BLACKMAN, IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK AND MOMA

lost. A humidifier, an infrared heater, scent emitters and an air-conditioner suffused the space with shifting notes of sensuality, discomfort and nostalgia. The blinds, permeable barriers between the public and private realms, remain one of Yang's signature materials. In her work, they are metaphors for obscurity and exposure, symbols of contact between people and of willful isolation.

AT THE SAME time her stature was rising, Yang was becoming suspicious of the commercial art world and questioning whether participating in it might blunt her intellectual edge. Until a year and a half ago, when she finally moved, her Berlin apartment had nothing in it except a futon on the floor and a lighting system she rigged to switch on and off while she was away. The Mexican artist Damián Ortega, who met Yang at the São Paulo Biennial and became one of her few confidants, recalls going to dinner with Yang and his dealers, the owners of Kurimanzutto gallery, in Mexico City. They went to a "beautiful" ceviche restaurant, but Yang ordered just a single bowl of rice. "It was a very provocative gesture," said Ortega. After the meal, he asked her why she did it. "Nobody will hold me from the tongue," she told him, meaning that she could not be bought with fancy dinners. "She did these kind of radical things," he said, to engage with the art world on her own terms. "She always creates conditions for her own security or her own confidence."

Today, Yang has made peace with the market. She is represented by galleries on three continents and her works are a ubiquitous presence at art fairs, where her larger pieces sell for six figures. "I keep losing my faith, but then I regain it," she said. The art world might be "vain" and "parasitic," but "at the same time, this is also often a shelter for so many minor voices" with "so much more tolerance that you cannot find anywhere else." This isn't to say she doesn't still come home "depressed" and "disgusted" from some of the obligatory social functions that come with the job, but she has also come to embrace her position within the industry, if somewhat ambivalently. "I want to be critical but at the same [time] I don't want to be someone who keeps complaining," she said.

Even so, Yang remains a grudging, and sometimes awkward, participant in art world rituals. At the opening of the group exhibition at Kunsthaus Graz, a futuristic space that has more in common architecturally with the Death Star than with the typical art museum, she spent the party perched on a small leather sofa at the end of a long, glassy black bubble of a room overlooking the otherwise quaint Austrian city. Crouched there, as far away as possible from the throng around the bar, she told me that she has always felt irrelevant at openings, ever since her first show: "like my job is done and I should disappear." She gestured at the crowd of people sipping glasses of Gelber Muskateller. "I'm not so good at celebrating," she said. It's not just professional engagements — Yang stopped accepting invitations to birthdays and weddings, even those of close friends, a long time ago. "I used to endure those things even if I couldn't enjoy them," she said. "It's a tough job to be my friend." Ortega emphatically agreed. "Sometimes I meet her and I spend the next day totally depressed because she's very critical," he said.

Yang is the first to admit she can be manic and "inhumane" when she is planning exhibitions. The curators she likes best are the ones who challenge her. "She's very demanding and not everyone can stand it," said Barbara Steiner, the director of Kunsthaus Graz, who curated Yang's solo exhibition there. "I have colleagues who told me they will never, ever work with Haegue again." Steiner, who invited Yang to come back and participate in the group show, dismissed these complaints. The experience is worth it for the rare effect of Yang's work, she said: "You never know what it is, exactly. It feels familiar, but it's alien." And Yang is loyal to the people who support her, tantrums and all. She continues to include Wien, an early champion of her work, in the acknowledgments for projects the dealer did not directly fund, such as one of her presentations at the Venice Biennale. Eungie Joo, who curated the Korean Pavilion that Yang was a part of in 2009, said, "We had to credit Barbara because Haegue wouldn't have been able to psychologically maintain herself without people like Barbara always believing in her."

ON A RECENT afternoon at MoMA, more than 100 people were looking at Yang's installation in the atrium: a menagerie of large abstract sculptures covered in thousands of gleaming, spherical bells. Five performers danced the wheeled pieces around the space in lilting arcs. Trails of black and iridescent vinyl polygons fanned across the floor and up the walls, as though an elaborate origami creature was in the process of unfolding itself. Audio of chirping birds played through speakers overhead.

The hypnotic spectacle was enough to stop tourists, and even regulars ("This is the strangest thing I've ever seen at MoMA," one man said to his companion as the sculptures jingled by). But the installation was also laced with cryptic references to historical figures — the Swiss polymath Sophie Taeuber-Arp, the Eastern-European mystic G. I. Gurdjieff, the exiled Korean composer Isang Yun — and to political events. The chirps were inadvertently captured by reporters while attempting to record a recent private conversation between the leaders of North and South Korea. These elements were illuminated in the nearby wall text, but the bells went unexplained. They allude to Korean shamanism, Yang told me. Shamans in training will go door to door begging for unwanted metal — old spoons and other jetsam — which they melt and recast into rattles. These instruments, said Yang, "train their ears to listen to ghosts." Rattles in hand, the shamans act as messengers between the human and spirit worlds. In a way, Yang is also a kind of translator — her works contain unlikely conversations, between craft, technology, abstraction and narrative, in which one can hear echoes of the past and whispers of the cataclysmic present.

For all her momentum and ambition, Yang sometimes questions whether she is capable of sustaining her current levels of travel and production. "Can I really digest all this and give something back?" she wondered aloud at the cafe in Graz. "I don't know if I can continue doing only this. So far I can maintain it but . . . what then? I don't know. I don't know." She stared off at the city she would leave in less than a day. Yang is usually moving too fast to think about slowing down. ◥

Yang's 2004 "Storage Piece," a sculptural installation of some of her older artworks that have been wrapped and stacked. Above: Yang's 2006 installation "Sadong 30," in an abandoned home in Incheon, South Korea.

FROM TOP: HAEGUE YANG, "SADONG 30," 2006, INSTALLATION VIEW, LIGHT BULBS, STROBES, LIGHT CHAINS, MIRROR, ORIGAMI OBJECTS, DRYING RACK, FABRIC, FAN, VIEWING TERRACE, COOLER, MINERAL-WATER BOTTLES, CHRYSANTHEMUMS, GARDEN BALSAMS, WOODEN BENCH, WALL CLOCK, FLUORESCENT PAINT, WOODPILES, SPRAY PAINT, IV STAND IN AN ABANDONED HOME IN INCHEON, SOUTH KOREA, PHOTO BY DAENAM KIM, IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK; HAEGUE YANG, "STORAGE PIECE," 2004, INSTALLATION VIEW, WRAPPED AND STACKED ART WORKS, EURO PALLETS, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE, HAUBROK COLLECTION, BERLIN, PHOTO BY LAWRENCE O'HANA GALLERY, IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK