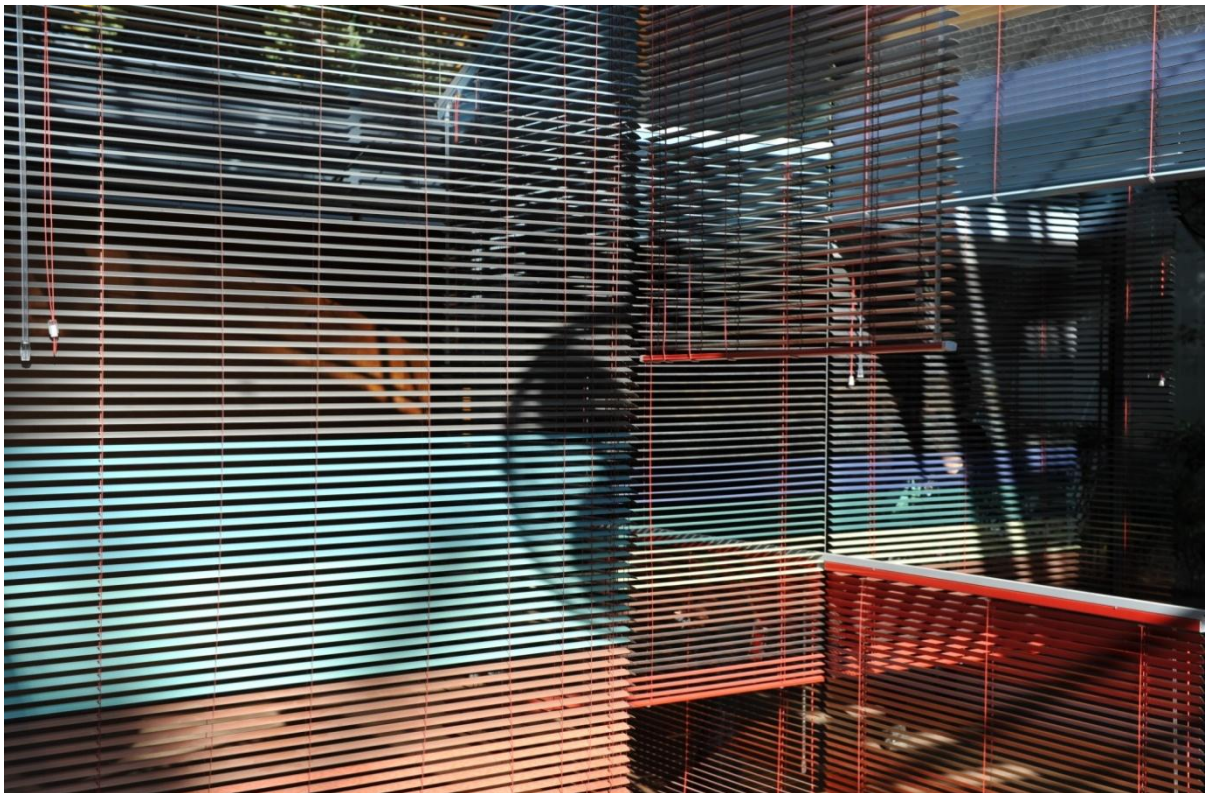


Frozen Dialectics in the Work of Haegue Yang

Julian Stallabrass

[Aspen Art Museum/ Modern Art Oxford, Haegue Yang: Wild Against Gravity, Oxford/ Aspen, CO 2011, pp. 93-111.]

Amid the national pavilions at the 2009 Venice Biennale, Haegue Yang's installation came as a surprise. In contrast to the various post-conceptual tactics on display, this carefully composed assembly of Venetian blinds, fans and scent emitters, brightly lit by the sun, was overtly beautiful. This was my subjective reaction, of course, though, talking to others, I was not alone in having it—and it came as a surprise because biennial artists are often cautious about such offerings, only tendering a beauty guarded by concepts, or accompanied by an element of darkness or even terror. By comparison, Yang's work seemed light, playful and optimistic, and I tried to respond in kind by taking this photograph, a freezing the movement of light reflecting from its surfaces.



Yet my reaction was not purely aesthetic, and I was aware of being presented with a peculiar assemblage of objects, the purpose of which I did not understand; and that the arrangement of blinds placed me in a curious relation to other viewers, half-seen, sliced-up figures from whom I

was partially hidden. Yang writes of ‘the dialectic combination of light and venetian blinds’, and even a brief survey of her writings and statements reveals an insistent courting of contradiction.¹

Presenting viewers with contradiction is a standard tactic in contemporary art, but the word ‘dialectic’, with its Hegelian or Marxist connotations, its suggestion of the structural and productive combination of opposing elements that feed each other, and which may create a synthetic melding of the two, is something else again. Contradiction implies helplessness before paradoxical complexity; dialectics implies knowledge of the interaction of opposing elements, a grasp of the unity that binds them, and the possibility of acting upon them.

Yang’s work is comprised of a series of interlocking oppositions which may yield dialectical moments. I will take a few of them to see where they lead: first, the connection between free expression and professional duty in the image of the artist; second, description and abstraction in installation and video; and last, the socially passive environment set against the possibilities for radical political action.



Haegue Yang: *Study for Doubles and Halves (Ahyun-dong)*

In the constructed and self-conscious figure of the artist herself, the old tension between amateur individualist and competent professional is at play. Most often, Yang is the former—a meandering, melancholic intellectual with a highly distinct (even eccentric) set of literary and

¹ Korean Pavilion, 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, *Condensation: Haegue Yang*, Arts Council Korea, Seoul 2009, p. 21.

theoretical interests. Floating above the mundane world of work, money and utility, she drifts between art-world centres, creating paradoxical objects which appear as poetic emanations of her inner self. In her exile and her wandering, she finds loneliness and disconnection but also freedom, and is able to cultivate a distant, critical and simultaneously lyrical view of everyday life, work, politics and the environment. In her video, *Doubles and Halves* (2009), the viewer sees through the artist's lens as she moves through quiet, narrow Seoul backstreets, tracking her hesitation at junctions, and her treading quietly into dead ends which have been claimed from the street as semi-private yard spaces. Yang shies away from people, who are glimpsed in the distance, and dwells on their attempts to beautify their concrete surroundings with lanterns and flowers.

The artist is highly aware of the consequences of this separation from the business of everyday life, and has written a number of recollections, which are also fables about the failure to establish personal connections. In one, she looks on a crying child only through the optic of her own annoyance; in another, she fails to intervene when a policeman is beating up a homeless man; in another, she does not help people going the wrong way at a railway station, even though she knows that the consequences of their missing their train will be serious.² In each story, she looks on as a spectator, as if paralysed by the image.

Yet the artist's image—over which she has limited control, since it is a collective construction of photographers, editors, writers as well as the artist herself—also carries an allure, which has drawn in many critics who have been happy to dwell within Yang's fabric of references and allusions. A fragile, wandering intellectual, she seems blown by the wind from one place to another, eyes wide, mind open, alienated and melancholy.³ Complemented by deep learning, it is as if this anachronistic, unworldly exile intellectual channelled Walter Benjamin in the unlikely form of a female contemporary artist in the body of an East Asian woman. Yang, as so often, is there ahead of the critics, saying that she was long ignorant of her privilege:

I should have known how privileged I am, as an artist, a woman, an educated person, a Korean, and how many dangers are hidden in that privilege.⁴

That privilege is easily grasped in the various photographs of Yang, small and slight, usually clad in black, usually unsmiling, regarding the camera calmly, looking slightly lost before the installations that she has created. Here is found both an expression of subjectivity and a strategy to insert herself into mainstream art circuits through exploiting her eccentricity and exoticism.⁵

² Haegue Yang, 'Script Excerpt from *Restrained Courage*, 2004', in Sala Rekalde, *Haegue Yang: Symmetric Inequality*, Sala Rekalde Aretoa/ REDCAT, Bilbao 2008

³ Melancholy is a recurrent theme in Yang's work and writing. See, for example, 'Eemotion: An Interview with Haegue Yang by Doryun Chong', *Uovo*, no. 14, July-September 2007, p. 198. Yang has made works with the titles *Melancholy is a Longing for Absoluteness*, and *Warm Melancholy*.

⁴ 'Opening Speech—A Current of Self-Reflection', 2005, in Sala Rekalde, *Haegue Yang: Symmetric Inequality*, Sala Rekalde Aretoa/ REDCAT, Bilbao 2008, p. 90. Some critics see Yang as exotic: see, for example, Kim No-Am, 'Made in Germany' review, July 2007: http://east-bridge.net/bbs/zboard.php?id=asian_reviews&page=3&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&csc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=9

⁵ Doryun Chong, 'A Small Dictionary for Haegue Yang', in REDCAT, Los Angeles, *Haegue Yang: Asymmetric Equality*, Roy and Edna Disney/ Cal Arts Theater, Los Angeles 2008, p. 154.

For Yang is also a professional global artist, who is contracted to perform, installing her works and ratifying them with her presence in venue after venue. Biennial artists are often described as ‘parachuting’ into a location, making work swiftly and then moving on, and Yang is fully aware of the tension between her free artistic persona and her professional duties. She writes of the dowdy framework of timetables and deadlines:

My world is about production and labour. Am I exaggerating? I don’t think so. It’s a territory ruled by efficiency and discipline, full of deadlines.⁶

She also writes of how what is often romantically described as the ‘nomadism’ of the contemporary artist is merely an elongated commute, and (strikingly) of artists not as parachutists but as airborne troops.⁷ That metaphor gets at the brisk efficiency with which artistic operations are carried out, the complex, rigid bureaucracies that lie behind them, and the imperial impetus behind the expansion of global art, and its relations to ‘backward’, enclosed local art scenes. So, bound up in a single figure, is someone rather like the exiled Walter Benjamin and a cultural stormtrooper.

Where might that noxious opposition lead? Yang talks of the ‘self-colonisation’ that takes place in taming or assimilating oneself to a new environment.⁸ This phrase raises the concept of ‘spectacle’, the colonisation of social relations by business.⁹ What is seen, in the acid combination of exile intellectual and conquering soldier is merely an extreme version of a public-private contract which all cultural workers increasingly have to trade.¹⁰ In the dissolution of public and private, the individual is urged to be ceaselessly creative and self-expressive, to throw unreservedly every iota of their subjectivity into their work, and to erase the boundaries of employment, play, social life and leisure. This can clearly be seen in the mix of professional and personal display on social networking sites. All artists now necessarily compete in this arena of social interaction. In this light, Yang’s admiration for Marguerite Duras, for example, is both private quirk and public tactic, each feeding off the other; and the artist’s sticking to deadlines (as it is for all those who work) is both a professional duty and tends to become an internalised, personal character trait. The networked artist, whose ‘work’ is partly the development of social relations with curators, writers, collectors and other artists is the archetypal public-private figure, manufacturing their ‘unique’ individuality amongst a field of competing and also unique individuals, and producing out of that construction ‘art’: frozen social relations for sale.¹¹

A similar play of opposing elements is found in Yang’s process of making work, and is held in tension in the resulting videos, photographs, sculptural objects and installations. ‘Abstraction’ is the term often used by the artist and her interpreters to describe that process, but it can hardly

⁶ Haegue Yang, ‘Drunken Speech’, 2007, in Sala Rekalde, *Haegue Yang: Symmetric Inequality*, Sala Rekalde Aretoa/ REDCAT, Bilbao 2008, p. 105.

⁷ Haegue Yang, ‘Speech for Busan Biennale’, 2004; ‘Speech for *Storage Piece*’ (2005-6), both in Sala Rekalde, *Haegue Yang: Symmetric Inequality*, Sala Rekalde Aretoa/ REDCAT, Bilbao 2008, pp. 81, 37.

⁸ Haegue Yang, voiceover to the video *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006) in Sala Rekalde, *Haegue Yang: Symmetric Inequality*, Sala Rekalde Aretoa/ REDCAT, Bilbao 2008, p. 69.

⁹ This is a central argument in Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York 1994.

¹⁰ Luc Boltanski/ Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London 2006, ch. 1.

¹¹ Isabelle Graw effectively argues that artists were among the first such figures. See Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2009, pp. 75, 176.

be meant in its usual sense. Yang's use of the dimensions of household appliances to make box-sculptures, which are sometimes coupled together, evokes a strange collision of André Breton and Donald Judd. Similarly, the personages assembled from light bulbs and other found materials (particularly fabrics), draped over IV stands, appear more in the spirit of a nostalgic and romantic surrealism than stern abstraction. Sometimes, Yang uses form to tell, or at least evoke, stories—the triangular peaks of *Red Broken Mountainous Labyrinth* (2008) referring to the meeting place of the writer Nym Wales and the Korean resistance fighter Kim San in 1937, shortly before he died in his struggle against the Japanese. At other times, a highly elusive and allusive, even secretive, set of references and artistic operations upon them conceals rather than reveals the source.¹² It is a strange, literary abstraction that makes characters and tells stories, or animates and couples domestic appliances.



‘Abstraction’ is a term that is used outside the art world, of course, and can mean the process by which concrete particulars are reduced to make usable general concepts. In that abstraction, some elements taken are held up as essential and defining, while others are dismissed as contingent. Yang seems to abstract in this way when she strips away the qualities of her kitchen stoves, washing-machines and boilers, except their size and material (steel), or when she reduces narrative to evocative scene in her installations. There is a fine dialectic at work here, in which an artistic abstraction, which strips use from the useful (kitchen appliances and moral tales) also, as with most reductions, turns contingent and incommensurable objects into useable, tradable symbols. This opposition is related to that of professional practice and amateur freedom in the figure of the artist. The link can be strengthened by thinking about the object and the commodity as a persona, familiar from the vast number of advertisements that animate all kinds of products from breakfast cereals to drain cleaners. In this sense, Yang's objects which suggest animation (the IV stand characters, the coupled appliances) use personification to evoke, not an

¹² A connected point is made in Bart van der Heide, ‘Recovering Loss: The “Durassian” Condition Within Conceptual Ethics’, in Portikus, *Haegue Yang: Siblings and Twins*, Frankfurt am Main 2008, p. 88.

allegorical superhero that embodies the strength of a drain cleaner, but some surrealist mystery which stands for the conundrum of the artist.

Another register in which this dialectic is pursued is the use of light in Yang's installations, photographs and videos. Her installations frequently include lit household bulbs and spotlights, often powered from a single socket, in which the wires linking each element are plain to see. In photographs and videos, lights often appear, sometimes in motion so that the viewer is made aware of how light models and describes an object as the beam tracks across it. The lights also produce artefacts on the camera's CCD: there are bright lines that cut vertically across the screen, or the camera is handled so that light momentarily floods the meter, blotting out the image. Here there is a similarity, perhaps, to the experience of viewing Yang's electrical installations, in which the lights both illuminate the objects, casting shadows and creating reflections, and, as the eye moves over the burning bulbs, degrade the retinal image by dazzling the viewer and leaving afterimages.

The link to abstraction is in the mental play between light and shadow as descriptive elements, offering information about a scene, and as obliterating forces, dissolving form. The latter, in Yang's view, is an abstract, universal force.¹³ In the videos, the opposition is made very plain: in *Doubles and Halves*, as we have seen, the viewer follows the artist about quiet Seoul backstreets. As in many of her videos, there is a concentration on showing mundane city features and signs of everyday living, such as the DIY shelters and gardens that people construct on the flat roofs of houses and apartment blocks, steep steps in alleyways, tangles of electrical wires, and bathetic attempts by locals to beautify their streets. This modest, documentary-style depiction is accompanied by passages in which light degrades the image, once again when the mechanical eye is flooded, or when pulsing vertical bars of light cut across the screen. In *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006), there is a similar play of mundane description and illuminated dissolution, made more complex as the artist focuses on mobile reflections on puddles in heavy rain, moving headlights, and rain on a windscreen backlit by streetlamps to produce a dance of glittering refracted light which obscures the city beyond.

Like light, shadow may describe or efface, inform or deceive. From the story of Plato's cave and into the present, there has been a bias in Western thinking about shadow as deception. Christian Boltanski, who also frequently uses light bulbs in his work, echoes Aesop in writing about how small objects can cast large shadows, proclaiming: "The shadow is a fraud."¹⁴ Both documenting and writing against such views, Michael Baxandall, in his meticulous consideration of the knowledge yielded by shadows, recounts the various ways that they convey crucial information about the shape, substance and tonality of our surroundings.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the old opinions run deep and are difficult to banish. The philosophical mistrust of light effects, the vagaries of colour, and the deceptiveness of shadow are picked up in Yang's play with the limits of the video

¹³ Yang is cited as describing it as 'nameless and characterless' in Doryun Chong, 'A Small Dictionary for Haegue Yang', in REDCAT, Los Angeles, *Haegue Yang: Asymmetric Equality*, Roy and Edna Disney/ Cal Arts Theater, Los Angeles 2008, p. 150.

¹⁴ Christian Boltanski, *Inventar*, Hamburg 1991, pp. 73-5; cited in Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, Reaktion Books, London 1997, p. 201. Stoichita provides an account of intellectual and artistic attitudes towards shadow. In a tale by Aesop, a wolf, deceived by the size of his shadow into thinking he can be king of the beasts, is devoured by a lion.

¹⁵ Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1995, Part III.

camera's CCD and processing modules, and point also to the spatchcocked assemblage of visual processing elements that form our vision revealed in myriad optical illusions.¹⁶ Yet abstraction is a better way to see this than deception: the artefacts on CCD or retina are revelatory, too: of light as a material force, and of the limits of perceptual apparatus which are themselves both abstracting mechanisms, and the basis for the ability to abstract.

So in Yang's work there is a regular opposition constructed between, in the videos and photographs, light as a revealer and annihilator of objects; and in her sculptural assemblages, between object and surface; material and light; emission, reflection and shadow. She says that, in arranging her assemblages, many of which are composed from found elements, she does not so much 'make' as 'take'.¹⁷ The contrast is reminiscent of tussles over those terms in art photography, in which Ansel Adams (to take the most prominent example) asserted that he did not take pictures but made them:¹⁸ instead of there being a pre-existing image in the world that photographic artists merely find, they laboriously construct it, first in the camera and then in the darkroom. Yang's attachment to taking is like that of the modest photographer whose task is to point out found things and scenes. It implies the synthesis of description and abstraction, and of light and shadow as describing or obliterating, which produces a still image—a photograph—in which objects, light and shadow are given equal weight, since a shadow is as solid as concrete, and concrete as spectral as shadow. This synthesis goes some way to explaining the affinity of Yang's assemblages with photography, which they warmly invite, and which offer, like Le Corbusier's architecture, a series of vistas at which to pause and take in the view (the static image seen from a vantage point), before moving to the next.¹⁹

The third opposition is about the relation of a degraded, instrumental social and political environment to the possibilities for a politics, taken in a broad sense, which either opposes it or manages to make an entirely independent life for itself.

On the first of these, Yang is clear and conventional: her *Sadong 30* project (2006), in which she invited visitors to the derelict home that had once belonged to her grandmother, placing various objects in its rooms, restoring the electricity, and lighting it with bare bulbs, brought attention to an area near Seoul's main airport, stranded and isolated by a tide of speculation and 'development'. The house is held up as virtuous because of its obdurate uselessness. People often responded sentimentally to the place and the installation, and while at first Yang found their comments naïve and nostalgic, she later accepted them and reproduced them in her Venice Biennale catalogue.²⁰ Here is one of them:

¹⁶ There are many accessible accounts of the brain's visual processing elements. See, for example, Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, Allen Lane/ The Penguin Press, London 1997, ch. 4.

¹⁷ Korean Pavilion, 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, *Condensation: Haegue Yang*, Arts Council Korea, Seoul 2009, p. 21.

¹⁸ See Ansel Adams (with Mary Street Alinder), *An Autobiography*, New York Graphic Society/ Little Brown and Company, Boston 1985, p. 79.

¹⁹ 'La promenade architecturale', in Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvres Complètes 1910-1929*, Les Editions d'Architecture, Zurich 1964, p. 60.

²⁰ The comments are reproduced in Korean Pavilion, 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, *Condensation: Haegue Yang*, Arts Council Korea, Seoul 2009, pp. 281-309. For Yang's reaction to visitor comments, see Haegue Yang and Eungie Joo, 'A Conversation', in the same volume, p. 18.

The light creeps through the ceiling and touches the floor. The sunlight that comes into the kitchen, as I look at these things, I smell mackerel, and think of my mother. I half expect my childhood self and siblings to suddenly burst into the yard. I have just seen the sunshine of 4 o'clock, which I used to look at through the door of my childhood.²¹

Just as the artist searches for the non-instrumental, for lyricism in the overlooked, so some of her viewers hark back to the freedoms of their childhood—to a life less timetabled, and an environment less controlled, freighted with youthful sentiment.



Sadong 30

The issue of modernisation is particularly apparent in Yang's work. She leaves Korea to live in Germany, both frontline states in the Cold War, both brutally and rapidly industrialised in a way that erased much of the past, and both thrust into an Americanised consumer existence. Other well-known Korean artists of Yang's generation have also responded with bitter evocations of a lost cultural past: Do Ho Suh, for example, recreates in various installations the traditional home of his childhood; Oh Inhwan uses detritus from city streets to construct letters across different sites that spell out the words 'Home', 'Here' or 'There', in a self-consciously futile attempt to make place from space; in a different register, CYJO photographs and interviews members of

²¹ Ibid., p. 301.

the large Korean diaspora, scattered across Europe and the US, about their fractured relations to Korean culture.²²

Even so, the elements of modernisation that Yang fixes on are hardly specific to Korea or Germany but can be found in all cities where the mass of the populace is in formal employment. Her diary-like video trilogy (*Unfolding Places*, 2004; *Restrained Courage*, 2004; and *Squandering Negative Spaces*, 2006) is shot in many cities, including Amsterdam, Busan, London and São Paulo. The routine lack of care for the environment of the ordinary working city serves as a melancholic allegory for stunted, utilitarian human relationships. Yang sometimes adds fragile elements to the scenes—windmills, little paper cut-outs floated on puddles, abstract origami shapes—all transient, wind-blown, and vulnerable to being dirtied or crushed. In *Squandering Negative Spaces*, a glittering windmill is tied to a pole sunk into a scrappy piece of grass; as it is blown in the breeze, it turns but also appears to struggle against its bonds. The voiceover to this scene, in good dialectical style, says that:

Vulnerability is a kind of crack within an entity believed to be a unity. Just as the crack cannot be established without the frame called unity, when vulnerability is extinguished, the grounds to confirm unity disappear.²³

So the mundane and the poetic are bound together, as are the life of use and that of self-determination, confirming each other's borders, and appearing to offer no exit from their unequal relationship.

There are also signals of that degraded life and its politics in the installations. Viewers moving about the gallery space may trigger fans or scent emitters, usually without being aware that it is their movements that activate the devices. This uneven and localised experience, says Yang, is a reference to anti-democratic politics within democracies.²⁴ She refers here to Jacques Rancière's remarkable essay, *Hatred of Democracy*, in which he skewers the contradictory attitudes of the elite (along with their mouthpieces in journalism and academia) to the populace.²⁵ The elite want democracy to run in such a way that they can exercise technocratic control over decision-making without interference from the public, but equally they despise the decadence produced by their actions in blocking people off from political life and power. There is only one good democracy, writes Rancière, echoing the elite view: 'the one that represses the catastrophe of democratic civilisation.'²⁶ Against this stitch-up, people do strive to wreck the elite's monopoly of public life—and only those actions deserve the name 'democracy'. Unlike some influential theorists, notably Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who see the seeds of equality and cooperation emerging from new forms of technology and work, Rancière claims that: 'Unequal society does

²² For accounts of this generation, see the essays in Christine Starkman and Lynn Zelevansky, eds., *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists from Korea*; Yale University Press, New Haven 2009; and Joan Kee, 'Some Thoughts on the Practice of Oscillation in Works by Suh Do-Ho and Oh Inwan', *Third Text*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2003, pp. 141-50; CYJO, *KYOPO*, Umbrage Editions, New York 2011.

²³ Sala Rekalde, *Haegue Yang: Symmetric Inequality*, Sala Rekalde Aretoa/ REDCAT, Bilbao 2008, p. 71.

²⁴ Sunjung Kim interview with Haegue Yang, in Christine Starkman/ Lyn Zelevansky, *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists from Korea*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston/ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Yale University Press 2009, p. 176.

²⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran, Verso, London 2006.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

not carry any equal society in its womb.²⁷ Rather, these acts of opposition are precarious and contingent.²⁸

This brings us to the pairings of Yang's various avatars of political and personal contradiction, rare figures, many of whom have been forgotten or underplayed by history. The brief and perilous mountain meetings of Kim San and the writer Nym Wales is one: in Korea, Kim's memory was suppressed during the Cold War because of his communist affiliations, and his life was mostly known through a Japanese translation of Wales' book which circulated in samizdat fashion among those active against the military dictatorships. It was read in the language of the hated colonisers that Kim fought.²⁹ This encounter is alluded to, strangely and indirectly, in various installations by Yang, including *Mountainous of Encounter* (2007). Here, the narrative is reduced to a scene, constructed of altered found elements, predominantly Venetian blinds and moving spotlights which evoke an imagined air of the story. There is also the seemingly unlikely romantic alliance of Petra Kelly, head of the German Green Party, with Gert Bastian, previously a Bundeswehr General, and later a Green MP and steadfast opponent of the stationing of nuclear missiles in Europe. It ended with the apparent murder of Kelly by Bastian, who then killed himself. In her work *Lethal Love* (2008), Yang refers to this coupling with the literal device of scent-emitters which fill the air with the odours of wildflowers and gunpowder, and blinds arranged to suggest trees. Such pairings offer contingent and highly individual couplings in which the personal and the political are at odds, and in which strange and uncharted circumstances produce dangerous radical alliances and actions.

Beyond these willed, brief and vulnerable political and personal arrangements, Yang is attached to the extreme ideal of a voluntary community, one willed into being without a material or utilitarian basis, and sharing 'nothing but ongoing self-examination and a strange kind of optimism'.³⁰ Unlike communist or capitalist societies, these communities are not founded on work. The character, Bartelby, from Herman Melville's short story is an archetype here: this passive protagonist, whom the narrator describes as 'singularly sedate', and 'pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!', slowly carries acts of refusal to the extreme where he chooses not to work, talk or, finally, eat.³¹ No community forms around him, and cannot, since he rejects all utilitarian associations.

The refuge in such a social and political formulation seems to be a response to dark circumstances in which the prospects for conventional acts of resistance appear bleak. It is the terminus inhabited by many artists, despairing at a toxic political environment from which there seems to be no obvious route of escape, though the regular response is to indulge in an ironic

²⁷ Ibid., p. 96. The target here is particularly Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

²⁹ See Doryun Chong, 'A Small Dictionary for Haegue Yang', in REDCAT, Los Angeles, *Haegue Yang: Asymmetric Equality*, Roy and Edna Disney/ Cal Arts Theater, Los Angeles 2008., pp. 149-50. Nym Wales, *Song of Ariran: A Korean Communist in the Chinese Revolution*, Ramparts Press, Berkeley, CA 1972.

³⁰ Yang cited in Doryun Chong, 'A Small Dictionary for Haegue Yang', in REDCAT, Los Angeles, *Haegue Yang: Asymmetric Equality*, Roy and Edna Disney/ Cal Arts Theater, Los Angeles 2008, p. 143. Her models here are Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Inoperative Community', in Peter Connor, ed., *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1991; and Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavonable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris, Station Hill Press, Barrytown, NY 1988.

³¹ Herman Melville, *Bartelby the Scrivener*, [1853], Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 2002, p. 10.

nostalgia for radical glories of the past (the late 1960s or even the Soviet Revolution), or in a black, partially melancholic enjoyment of the decadence of the current era. Yet in Yang's work, melancholy is accompanied by a fragile and unexpected optimism: if political resistance and unaccountable communities can be willed into existence, then such optimism is needed to bring them into being. In this way, though its techniques and theoretical underpinnings are quite different, there seems to be an affinity with the artistic creation of temporary utopian 'bubbles' in relational aesthetics, which is also set against the grim world utility, bureaucracy and the minute division of labour.³² Yang does not insist that her viewers interact with one another (as we have seen, in many of her installations, she partially separates them from each other with her blinds), yet she does offer a light, playful and positive vision of ideal interaction, along with an awareness of the tragedies that free relationships may bring. The ideal may seem close to Gramsci's famous exhortation, written from prison under threat of execution: pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will.³³ It is not: for Gramsci, political power would only emerge and develop from groups bound by work and material interest, the precise opposite of the community that stands as Yang's ideal.

Yang's world is partly structured by the opposition between a willed shunning of work and the industrialised, formal labour of developed economies, of which Korea and Germany serve as exemplars. Her view is trained on and against the daily eight-hour imprisonment in factory or office, not on the involuntary worklessness and underemployment of the new masses, or their unregulated city life, with its vast and rapidly growing jerry-built slums, crowded to the extent that it would be impossible to wander about them without constantly encountering people.

The synthesis of the environment of use and willed acts of political radicalism is frozen in a sequence of suspended images in Yang's work: in the blinds, of course, with the partial glimpses that they offer of other people; in the open yards seen in her videos, places where public and private are blurred, along with use and décor, the banal and the personal; and in the kitchen from where she draws the blueprints for many of her sculptural objects, the site of care for and sustenance of others, and of conversation—in Yang's memory, of her activist mother hosting political debate and dissent.³⁴ Torn from childhood reminiscence, kitchen dialogue becomes a coupling of abstracted kitchen units, rendered now as useless illuminated metal boxes placed in surreal conjunctions. These may be read (with the artist) back towards a living zone of opposition, or (perhaps against her) forwards to the nostalgic freezing of such relations in commodified art objects, trading on the air of old political intimacies.

The various oppositions that we have looked at (freedom and professionalism, description and abstraction, and the contradictions of actually existing democracy) offer syntheses which condense as further oppositions between image and action: the artist as a networking individual who is also a branded persona; the work as a photographic play of object and light but also as a manipulator of its viewers; an attitude of nostalgic melancholia and social disconnection allied

³² See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance/ Fronza Woods, Les Presses du reel, Dijon 2002.

³³ Gramsci's phrasing was a little different, and the idea was borrowed from his supporter, Romain Rolland. See Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, trans. Lynne Lawner, Quartet, London 1979, p. 159.

³⁴ See Haegue Yang and Eungie Joo, 'A Conversation', in Korean Pavilion, 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, *Condensation: Haegue Yang*, Arts Council Korea, Seoul 2009, p. 19.

with a wilful and non-instrumental optimistic radicalism. The suspension of process and image in these fixed syntheses may amount to a ‘holiday’ in Yang’s sense—a limited period, granted by authority, in which some rules are suspended and replaced by others.³⁵ As the holiday sanctions and protects work, so art sanctions and protects instrumental life. Can one, though, imagine the dialectic in Yang, or indeed in the paradoxical oppositions spun by so many artists, differently?

In Yang’s work, development appears to offer little of virtue, but is instead a Weberian stripping from life of poetry, play and freedom to offer an iron cage of routine, procedure, discipline and use.³⁶ This judgement may be considered undialectical because it refuses to embrace and accept one of its opposing terms and so grasp the interaction of opposites. Fredric Jameson, in his recent book on aspects of the dialectic, writes that it encompasses ‘the indivisibility of the negative and the positive’, including the ‘Heisenberg principle’ of the ideology of our point of view (in which the same phenomenon, viewed this way or that, may appear as particle or wave).³⁷ In one essay, he offers a particularly provocative demonstration of a dialectical analysis which does just that by viewing Wal-Mart as utopian. Rather than seeing its massive scale, monopolising practices, price-squeezing, low wages and anti-union stance as perversions of normal business operations, it is ‘the purest expression of that dynamic of capitalism which devours itself, which abolishes the market by means of the market itself.’³⁸ Even radicals should aesthetically appreciate Wal-Mart’s innovations and streamlined organisation.³⁹ As for the utopian: ‘what is currently negative can also be imagined as positive in that immense changing of valences which is the Utopian future.’⁴⁰ This means seizing on what is positive in the emergent, rather than moralising or being looking back fondly to the past.

There are elements in Yang’s work that could be turned to such a reading. If we return to the circuits that power her installations, and her choice to reveal the wiring that binds one element to another, and think of the connection of a single power point to the electrical grid (that extraordinary, moment-to-moment balancing of supply and demand across a nation or beyond), we start to move in that direction. Here, a vast and finely organised technical apparatus, a networked grid of consuming and producing nodes, offers its fragment of power to Yang’s particular vision. Without coordination, economy, bureaucracy and planning, no poetry.

³⁵ The artist’s view of the holiday is aired in the voiceover to her video *Holiday Story*, 2007.

³⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, George Allen & Unwin, London 1930, passim; the famous phrase ‘iron cage’ is found on p. 181.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279. Werner Heisenberg, *The Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory*, trans. Carl Eckart and F.C. Hoyt, Dover Publications, New York 1949, pp. 10-12.

³⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, Verso, London 2009, p. 421.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 421, 423.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 423.



In the slide projection *Dehors* (2006), light synthesises its descriptive and obliterating powers: it shows real estate advertisements from Korean daily newspapers with their photographs of high-rise flats and luxury vacation spots. Because the papers have been laid out on a lightbox, news headlines bleed through, setting the mundane daily round of incidents against the utopian dreams that attach to a new home. Here light produces a truly dialectical image of the type described by Benjamin, in which two linked and opposing elements are brought together in a critical synthesis which makes clear their connection, and opens onto a realisation of how things may be otherwise. It is a frozen dialectic, or in Benjamin's words, 'dialectics at a standstill'.⁴¹

In this, to return to Hardt and Negri, we may see the emergence of a new politics and new forms of collective cooperation.⁴² The workless (many of them well-educated), a large and ever-growing class, are more than aware of the opportunities and suffering bound up in the enforced freedom from regular employment. Artists, theorists and labour activists grope towards a positive description of their state, one liberated from the overweening ideal of the full employment.⁴³ It is

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1999, p. 463. See also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p. 219.

⁴² Hardt and Negri have pursued this ideas across three interrelated books, *Empire*, previously mentioned, and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, The Penguin Press, New York 2004; *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2009.

⁴³ This is the task of Michael Denning in his analysis of past and present models of description for the workless. See 'Wageless Life', *New Left Review*, new series, no. 66, November-December 2010, pp. 79-97.

also one of the major points of Jameson's reflections on the dialectic, which are meant to open up a view of the historical contingency of the present, as against the technocratic view that neoliberalism represents the only available future. If current capitalism yields more redundancy than work, and if the present crisis, as its consequences unfold over the following decades, brings this fully and inescapably into view, then the end of the system may creep back into the political imagination.⁴⁴ If the dialectic is to become productive, it must also be collective, bound to history and development, unearthing the seeds of the future in the present. Could this be another light in which to see Yang's optimism, now taken not merely as an individual character trait, but also as a response to an era of plainly hollow hopes, floated on vast state and personal debt, now vanishing, and offering new opportunities for thought, association and action?

Yet such a view also throws a question over Yang's project, and over the art world as a whole, institutionally committed as it is to displays of eccentric individuality. Is this 'holiday' from the uniform the enemy of an emerging collectivity? How does it relate, for example, to the billions of photographs and videos made and uploaded to social networking sites?

This, in turn, points to the oppositions at work in this essay. In some ways, it behaves as one would expect for a catalogue essay written about and for a living artist. The reader may well have anticipated the sympathetic unfolding of a theoretical and historical framework in which the artist's work is placed, in which her statements are respectfully reviewed, and in which the writer labours to serve as the artist's mouthpiece. The basic function of such a text is clear: it adds intellectual ballast to the illustrations in a piece of promotional literature. It is difficult to write about Yang's work in exactly that conventional way: her work is immensely complicated and self-referential, and the artist has talked and written about it a good deal—this configuration, as so often, tends to drive writers to produce their own poetry in the spirit of the artist, using the group of interests that she has staked out as her own. Poetry smothers the dialectic, leaving artist and viewer in the comfortable art world place of tame contradiction. So a dialectic runs through this text, too: between faithful performance of the task for which I have been paid; and an oppositional focus on the text's function, on the limits of Yang's products, and in a refusal simply to endorse their value. It, too, freezes its dialectic as an image, hesitating (as Yang does at a crossroads) between paths, for now little knowing how to throw itself, its subject and its judgement open to the new forms of the collective.

⁴⁴ Jameson, *Valences*, ch. 19; see also Gopal Balakrishnan's fine account of the book and its political implications, 'The Coming Contradiction: On Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic*', *New Left Review*, new series, no. 66, November-December 2010, pp. 31-53.