

A Certain Uncertainty

April, 2020 | By Christopher Phillips

profile

# A Certain Uncertainty

Over the past twenty years, Korean-born Haegue Yang has created a tremendously varied body of enigmatic work, both sculptural and graphic.

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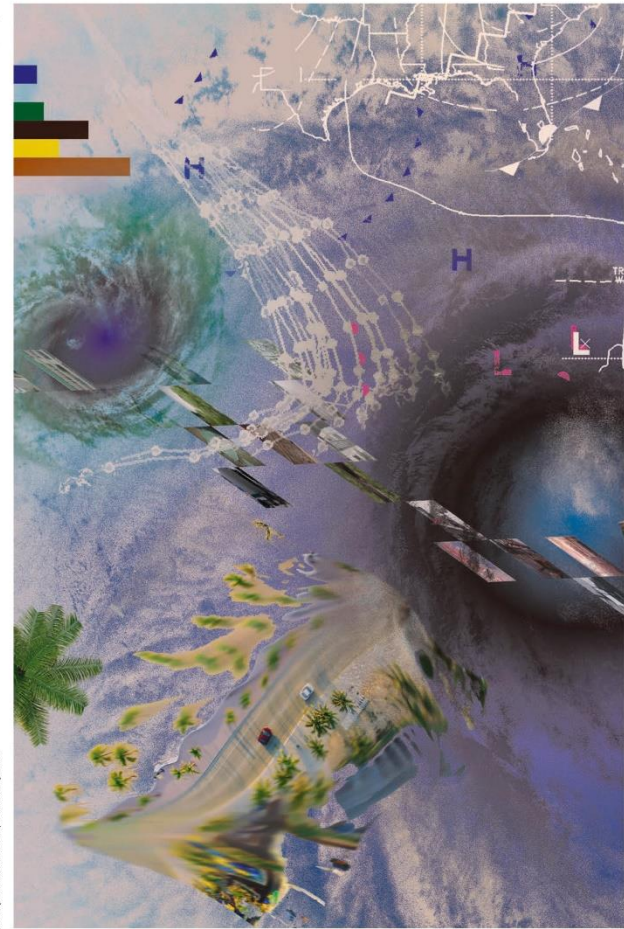
Haegue Yang, *Coordinates of Speculative Solidarity* (detail), 2019, site-specific wallpaper.

**SWIRLING OCEAN WATERS. A TROPICAL STORM** veering toward the Florida coast, a tempest's catastrophic impact. Halfway through "In the Cone of Uncertainty," Haegue Yang's current exhibition at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, visitors confront a large mural whose ominous imagery brings new meaning to Yang's long-standing themes of precariousness and unpredictable change.

Since 2011, the Korean-born, Berlin- and Seoul-based artist has utilized an unusual method of conceiving the compact survey exhibitions of her work that have appeared in museums and galleries around the world. Containing pieces from throughout her twenty-five-year career, these exhibitions unfold within a conceptual wrapper furnished by wall-size graphic imagery that Yang creates, frequently (as at the Bass) in collaboration with Berlin designer Manuel Raeder. The murals are sometimes keyed to Yang's own artworks and visual sources; in other cases, they reflect her research into the history and culture of the locale where the exhibition will take place. The unifying power of these wall graphics permits Yang to juxtapose wildly heterogeneous examples of her work from past and present. These can include her coolly conceptual text pieces; geometrically shaped collage "Trustworthies"; sculptures fashioned from modest domestic objects; monumental Constructivist-style arrangements of venetian blinds; the quasi-anthropomorphic Intermeditates sculptures, created largely from woven artificial straw; and bell-covered, almost figurative sculptures that can be rolled around on casters. When it succeeds, as it does at the Bass, this approach supplies a visual context for her newest artworks and creates a fresh perspective on her older or lesser-known pieces.<sup>1</sup>



Courtesy the Bass, Miami Beach/Photo: Anthony Scleris



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In her early meetings with Bass director Silvia Karman Cubiñá and curator Leilani Lynch, Yang sought a theme for her commissioned wall graphic that could speak to all of Miami's inhabitants. She found herself wondering, in particular, how South Florida's residents have coped with the region's increasingly extreme weather conditions. She was struck by the phrase "cone of uncertainty," a meteorological term that has become part of the everyday vocabulary of the region, which refers to the predictably unpredictable path of a fast-moving tropical storm. The site-specific wall graphic that Yang and Raeder devised ingeniously mixes the visual idiom of weather infographics—thermal mapping, orange wind-speed bars—with aerial views of Miami neighborhoods seen through queasily rippling layers of atmospheric distortion.

One day after the opening of the exhibition last November, Yang took part in a lively and well-attended public conversation at the Bass with John Morales, a low-key and extremely well-informed TV weatherman. With the serene chirps of recorded birdsong—an element of Yang's exhibition—audible from a nearby gallery, Morales explained the new (to me) practice of "climate gentrification." This involves the abandonment of once sought-after waterfront dwellings by the well-to-do, and their search for safe-

ty in lower-income, higher-elevation districts. For her part, Yang speculated that unanticipated new forms of local community might arise from the shared experience of climate disaster. Morales recounted the steady increase in the intensity of tropical storms in the South Florida region, and urged everyone in the audience to be prepared for the inevitable. "There is no stopping the water," he said. When he asked how many in the audience had already stocked supplies of canned food at home for weather emergencies, the hands of about half of those present shot up.

**Bottom, view of Yang's exhibition "In the Cone of Uncertainty," 2019–20, showing the installation *Boxing Bullet*, 2013–15.**

**Below, *Can Cans—Pomodori pelati 400g (detail)*, 2010, five tomato cans and yuzu, approx. 4 by 4 by 3 inches each.**



The mention of canned foods was probably not accidental. Only a few steps away, at the top of a wide staircase, alongside which runs Yang and Raeder's storm-themed wall graphic, is a gallery filled with examples of Yang's "Can Cans" (2010–) and "Roll Cans" (2011–). These long-running series consist of commercial canned foods and paper rolls (in this case jumbo toilet tissue rolls) lovingly covered by the artist's hand-crocheted protective sleeves. Arranged in groups on minimalist pedestals, the Cans shared the gallery space with two other quirky domestic works: low-hung, multipart wall sculptures made from rectangular segments of venetian blinds that are backlit by light bulbs. Their modest dimensions match those of heating units in two Berlin flats where Yang has lived. Conjuring up associations with

domestic comfort, these works contrast sharply with menacing images in the wallpaper that covers the room's largest wall: swirling abstractions suggesting violent tropical storm activity and blurry photographic images showing deserted city streets slammed by raging winds and torrential rain.



Left: Courtesy Museum Ludwig, Cologne/Photo Susan Whipple. "In the Cone of Uncertainty." Center: the Bass, Miami Beach/Photo Zsuzsanna Balazs.



**Left, *Mountains of Encounter*, 2008, skimmable venetian blinds, rope, spotlights, floodlights, and cables, dimensions variable.**

**Right, *Towel Light Sculpture—Budget Discipline Towards 900 Euro*, 2012, clothing rack, light bulbs, cable, zip ties, nylon cord, and mixed materials, 72% by 94% by 33% inches.**

Left: Courtesy Museum Ludwig, Cologne/Photo Susan Whipple. Right: Courtesy Goren Collection, Munich.

This gallery effectively sets the tone for "In the Cone of Uncertainty," which comprises around twenty of Yang's sculptural groups and installations made between 2008 and 2019. The exhibition includes examples of some of the artist's best-known works—not only her remarkable venetian blind installations, but also her eerily creaturelike light pieces and woven-straw sculptures, as well as *Boxing Bullet* (2013–15), a room installation of semi-figurative objects covered with bells and mounted on rollers or suspended from cables. Less frequently seen works are also on view, such as *Rotating Notes—Dispersed Episodes* (2013), in which Yang's notes on her readings of figures like Jean Genet, Edward Said, and Primo Levi are attached to irregularly shaped, magnetized canvases that viewers or attendants can set to spinning; and examples of the "Carsick Drawings" (2016) that she made on a bumpy road trip near the China-Vietnam border. A *Chronology of Conflated Dispersal—Duras and Yun* (2018), is presented as an enormous text panel. In it Yang merges, to surprisingly evocative effect, the biographical timelines of two twentieth-century figures whose creative lives played out against a backdrop of war and political upheaval: French writer and filmmaker Marguerite Duras and Korean modernist composer Isang Yun.

YANG IS AN ARTIST OF SEEMINGLY BOUNDLESS productivity—over 1,400 works are detailed in the catalogue of her 2018 exhibition "ETIA" at Cologne's Museum Ludwig. So it's surprising today to recall how long it took her to define her trajectory as an artist. Born in 1971 in Seoul, she is the daughter of committed activists in the political movement that sought to end South Korea's repressive military government. After attending the Seoul High School of Art, Music, and Dance, she studied sculpture at Seoul National University and in 1994 moved to Frankfurt, Germany, to enter the graduate program at the highly regarded Städelschule art academy. In Frankfurt she began to familiarize herself with Western art currents previously unknown to her, such as post-conceptualism, institutional critique, and context art. The works she made during her student years and immediately after show her trying her hand at almost everything: Arte Povera-esque plaster sculptures, enigmatic objects, wall arrays of small ink drawings, color photographs of movie-theater curtains, groupings of found furniture parts, minimalist installations of stretched white thread, collages made from imagery in hardware-store catalogues, and abstract lacquer paintings, along with performances and occasional text pieces. I remember seeing her work for the first time at the Manifesta biennial in Frankfurt in 2002 and having no idea what to make of it: a group of unassuming fluorescent tubes illuminating a woefully neglected corner in one of the exhibition's peripheral spaces. Only much later did it become possible to see Yang's early efforts as quietly preparing a distinctive artistic ground that she would cultivate.



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Yang moved to Berlin in 2005, after meeting the gallerist and art-book dealer Barbara Wien and exhibiting at her Berlin gallery, Yang's Storage Piece brought her serious critical attention that year. Created for Lawrence O'Hana Gallery in London, the installation featured a large grouping of the still-wrapped early works that she could no longer afford to keep in a storage facility. Storage Piece brought into public view a seldom-seen part of the art-world's infrastructure at the same time that it highlighted the kind of financial obstacle regularly encountered by many artists.

A year later, in 2006, Yang's work began to attain a distinctive and increasingly challenging character. She began what became an extended series of sometimes humorous, sometimes unsettling light sculptures whose diverse components were mounted on medical IV stands. For an exhibition at the Dutch art center BAK in Utrecht, she created the installation *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Version Utrecht* (2006). It was one of her first works to employ a range of sensory devices—fans, infrared heaters, scent emitters—as well as videos. It also marked her first use of venetian blinds, a common household fixture that, she discovered, had almost inexhaustible formal possibilities and could be scaled up to create monumental installations. That same year also saw Yang devise a highly unusual work, *Sadong 30*, in Incheon, a port city about an hour from Seoul. Meant as a way to break out of the confining routine of exhibition-making, *Sadong 30* was a personal initiative in a decidedly noninstitutional setting: the work's title refers to the address of the dilapidated, long-abandoned house where the artist's grandmother had once lived. Informally announced online, the installation attracted a small audience of peripatetic art world professionals and curiosity-filled members of the Korean public at large. What they discovered was a casual arrangement of Yang's light sculptures, original sculptures, and other works spread throughout an otherwise empty, crumbling, backstreet dwelling. To judge from the written accounts of those who saw it, the installation proved an intense and moving experience.<sup>9</sup>

In the 2010s, Yang commenced various new series and groups of work. The Trustworthies began in 2010 with collages made from the geometric patterns found on the inside of security envelopes. Eventually incorporating Yang's own distorted graph-paper designs, these works grew into dynamic, multipart, wall-filling displays. The Sonic Sculptures appeared in 2013 as



**Rotating Notes—Dispersed Episodes, 2013**, powder-coated steel, ball bearings, noise, and magnets.



**Storage Piece, 2004**, wrapped artworks, palettes, audio player, and speakers, dimensions variable.

quasi-figurative pieces incorporating small bells. The related *Sonic Rotating Lines, Ovals, and Geometries* use similar bells in wall-mounted pieces that can be rotated by hand. If the works are spun fast enough, their bell-covered surfaces become a blur, making the sound of the bells the predominant impression. The *Intermediates* appeared around 2015. This sculptural series arose after Yang, during a wintertime trip to Japan, visited a park where trees were wrapped in a protective sheath of woven straw, a practice she had already seen in Korea. Her new interest the Japanese and Korean "strawcraft" tradition led to the sculptures based on quasi-figurative and sometimes architectural motifs. To insure a degree of separation from actual folk art traditions, Yang consistently employs artificial rather than natural straw in making the *Intermediates*.

In addition to producing a steady stream of artworks, Yang also makes time for tangential interests. She has strong, unconventional ideas about book design, for example. Aside from her own Grid Bloc artist's books, she regularly collaborates with experimentally inclined book designers on her distinctive exhibition catalogues, often bookworks in their own right. These publications consciously push the boundaries of book size and form, cover materials, paper texture, typography, and page design. In 2010, Yang's

**Grid Bloc Square—Five Folios, 2012**, artist's book, offset printing on graph paper, past, 72 pages.



**View of the installation Sadong 30, 2006**, light bulbs, strobe lights, mirror, wood plies, IV stand, and mixed mediums.



Artwork Photo Courtesy: Galerie Chantal Doward/Photo Point; Installation: Sadong Piece: Hannah Cole/Arten; Berlin/Seoul/Los Angeles/O'Hana Gallery; Grid Bloc: Wim Vester

Sadong 30: Photo: Barbara Wien

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long fascination with Duras's writings led her to adapt one of the author's most enigmatic works, *The Melody of Death* (1982), for the stage. The Duras novel centers on a self-absorbed, emotionally withdrawn man and the diffident young woman whom he hires as his nightly sexual companion. He hopes that she can introduce him to the experience of love, but the experiment fails disastrously. Yang, supplying her own twist by staging the Duras text as a monodrama, with a single female performer/reader delivering all the lines, has presented this work in different countries several times during the past decade.

**AT THE BASS, THE VISUAL POWER AND** complexity of Yang's work can be gauged in the three imposing installations that dominate the exhibition's second floor. Both the venetian blind works on view, *Yearning Melancholy Red* and *Red Broken Mountains Labyrinth*, were made in 2008 and incorporate references to the biographies of real historical individuals, an element she has since progressively abandoned.

The Bass presents these pieces in an enormous gallery with twenty-five-foot ceilings. Viewers who experience them from multiple perspectives are likely to fall under the spell of Yang's stagecraft. Between the two

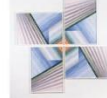
*The Melody of Death—Monodrama with Joanne Balibar, 2012, performance, approx. 70 minutes at the Staatstheater Kassel, Germany*

installations are set aluminum bleachers that allow visitors to sit and contemplate the slow movement of the works' programmed spotlights. By means of short wall texts, both works evoke individuals caught up in dramatic circumstances, although ultimately Yang does not rely on an explicit narrative. Instead setting in motion a highly abstracted visual language.\*

*Yearning Melancholy Red* conjures up the langorous heat and humidity of colonial-era French Indochina, where Duras spent her childhood. (Duras evoked this milieu in her 1984 novel *The Lover*.) In the darkened gallery, intense beams of red light shoot out from slowly rotating spotlights, illuminating sets of hanging white blinds arranged in pinwheel fashion. Nearby, a standing floor fan faces a similarly scaled, stand-mounted bank of infrared lamps that emit waves of warm air. Overhead, playing off the geometric patterning of the blinds, a thick tangle of dark electrical wires suggests a jungle canopy. In one corner of the gallery is a drum set that visitors are allowed (though not expressly encouraged) to play. My feeble efforts at some drum rolls, when detected by an audio sensor, interrupted the programmed movement of the spotlights, although the effect proved impossible to control.



*Yearning Melancholy Red* (detail)



Top to bottom:

*Flute—Trustworthy Offer Branches #187, 2011, four paper collages, 61 1/2 by 82 1/4 inches overall.*

*Textural Ikeno Erectus—Trustworthy #226, 2013, envelope, six color, patterned and sandpapers, 27 1/2 inches square; 27 1/2 by 78 1/2 inches (2); 30 1/2 by 27 1/2 inches.*

*Elked Colorful Diamond Glow—Trustworthy #192, 2013, two paper collages, 75 by 97 inches overall.*

*Windmill—Trustworthy Offer Invitations #189, #192, four paper collages, 82 1/4 by 82 1/4 inches.*

*Red Broken Mountains Labyrinth* refers to an almost forgotten historical episode: the late 1930s encounter of Kim San (1905–1938), a Korean independence fighter who had joined Mao Zedong's Communist forces in the mountains of northern China, and Helen Foster Snow (1907–1997), a left-wing American journalist. She carried out a series of interviews with Kim in China in 1937, a year before he fell victim to political intrigue and was turned over by his supposed Chinese allies to the Japanese for execution. Under the nom de plume Nym Wales, Snow subsequently published *The Song of Ariran* (1941), a biography that eventually turned Kim into a political icon in South Korea. In Yang's work, the sharply angled hanging of the red venetian blinds suggests an abstracted, jagged mountainscape, and the programmed movement of multiple lights introduce a film-noir mood of furtive searching and discovery. Slowly revolving spotlights send their bright beams through the blinds and across the gallery walls in creeping geometric patterns. Powerful overhead searchlights throw ever-changing circles of illumination on the floor, hinting at a menacing surveillance apparatus.

In *Boxing Ballet*, Yang—reinterpreting the marionette-like figures designed by Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer for his *Trialle Ballet* of 1922—critically engages the legacy of the twentieth-century European avant-garde. The unabashed theatricality of her installation comes across as an intentional riposte to the modernist “white cube” aesthetic. On the floor at the Bass, a long, spiraling black line suggests a planetary orbit. Although Yang's life-size figures—four standing on casters, two hanging from the ceiling—resemble Schlemmer's in outline, their metal-mesh surfaces are covered with small, gold-colored bells. Pushing or pulling the figures produces the sound of tinkling bells. “The bells are intended to trigger associations with ancient times in the history of civilization, where they were often used for shamanic rituals, calling out the spirits through their sound,” Yang explains. “In my recent sculptural development, the bells seem to be endowing a life-giving and communicative quality to robotic and rigid figures.”<sup>23</sup>

Although some of the *Boxing Ballet* figures sport armlike handles that seem to invite visitors to roll them around, Yang clearly has unresolved feelings about hands-on audience interaction with her work. Having seen the rough treatment given her wall-mounted, bell-covered *Sonic Geometries* in museums that permitted visitors to spin them, I can understand her hesitation. The Bass stipulated that the *Boxing Ballet* figures could be touched and moved only by museum personnel at regularly scheduled times. (MoMA follows similar guidelines in displaying the six *Sonic Sculptures* that are part of Yang's current “Handles” installation in its second-floor atrium.) When an audience member at the public conversation at the Bass, wondering if the museum was subverting Yang's artistic vision, asked her why visitors could not handle the pieces, the artist said simply, “These works are not my own any longer.” She explained that almost all the pieces in the exhibition belong to institutions and private collectors. Elsewhere, Yang has acknow-



*Knotty Spell in Windy Acoustical Gradation* (detail), 2017, clothing rack, marbled veneer, jute twine, nylon cord, knitting yarn, bells, vintage jewelry, and mixed mediums, 76 1/2 by 146 by 146 inches overall.

ledged that many of her sculptural works extend an implied “offer” to touch or “dance” with them. But she has confessed that she is not unhappy if visitors decide to decline that offer and take a more contemplative stance.<sup>24</sup>

**WHEN IT COMES TO ASSESSING THE LARGER** significance of Yang's work, the artist is not inclined to provide much direction. Although in the course of numerous interviews she has described the twists and turns of her creative process—a mix of concentrated reading, constant self-questioning, and spontaneous associative leaps—she does not think it is her job to speculate about her output's ultimate meaning. An artistic practice, she says, should be “something to experience, not necessarily to understand; and if should rather resist the conventional idea of possessing a common thread or summary in the sense of an understandable message.”<sup>25</sup>

As demonstrated by the essays in the recently published *Hague Yang Anthology 2006–2018*, the artist has had no shortage of provocative critical commentators.<sup>26</sup> One of the most consistently surprising has been Nicolas Bourriaud, the French writer and curator who popularized relational aesthetics. Bourriaud insists on Yang's status as one of the most important figures in contemporary sculpture. Her work, he argues, successfully updates the central concern of sculpture, which he identifies as the “profound reflection on the human body in space.”<sup>27</sup> Yang, he suggests, has moved beyond the question that preoccupied recent



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**Top, *The Internalslate-Dragon Conglomerate*, 2016, artificial straw, steel, plaster coating, cotton, and plastic fibers, 70 1/2 by 43 1/2 by 43 1/2 inches.**

**Bottom, *The Internalslate-Pair Incarnate, Gwytheline and Ursula*, 2015, artificial straw, steel, cotton, plastic mesh, string, bells, and Korean ritual cones, 80 1/2 by 43 1/2 by 35 1/2 inches.**



**Top: *Internalslate-Dragon Conglomerate*, bottom: *Internalslate-Pair Incarnate, Gwytheline and Ursula*, 2015. Photo: © Haegue Yang. All rights reserved. Photo: © Haegue Yang. All rights reserved.**



**View of the exhibition *“Haegue Yang: Handles”*, 2018, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.**

generations of sculptors: the relation between nature and the accumulated cultural debris that now fills the industrialized world. Instead, she intuitively responds to an emerging world that is increasingly occupied by autonomous technological objects: machines that can move independently and communicate with each other, existing almost entirely outside of human consciousness. For Bourriaud, Yang epitomizes a new generation “for whom art represents a point of passage between human and non-human.” By placing things and human beings on an equal footing, he maintains, Yang “establishes connections between the entire set of components existing in the world—everything is able to gesture or speak to us if we listen carefully enough.”

It’s possible to shrug off such ideas as evidence of the triumph of mysticism or science fiction over criticism. Yang’s own statements, though, often convey quite similar thoughts in more subdued language. She acknowledges, for example, her “tendency to personalize not only historical figures and events but also machines and objects that are largely domestic.” And she has expressed an odd longing to emulate what

she regards as the admirable qualities of household appliances: their “silent presence, supportiveness, loyalty, understatement, and substance.”<sup>10</sup> With her rich, idiosyncratic visual language still developing rapidly, it will be fascinating to see what direction Yang’s art takes next. ■

<sup>10</sup> An elaborate, illustrated “Cosmology of Wallpaper and Mural Works, 2011–12” is included in the catalogue of the first exhibition, *Haegue Yang: It Is the Cow of Uncertainty*, Harjo Catta, 2019, pp. 64–107.

<sup>11</sup> Franz Erhardy, ed., *Haegue Yang: EEI, 1994–2016*, Cologne, Museum Ludwig and Walter König, 2016. Yang’s website ([haeguyang.com](http://haeguyang.com)) contains a wealth of well-organized information about her works and exhibitions.

<sup>12</sup> See Inyoung Chang, “Haegue Yang: Intergenerational Invention,” curator’s statement accompanying the exhibition of the same title at the Walker Art Center, 2009, [walkerart.org](http://walkerart.org); Hyunjin Kim, “To Encounter the House of So-Young, Persisting in Its Own Absence in Time,” in *Haegue Yang: So-Young*, ed. Berlin, Wiener Verlag, 2006, pp. 6–7; and the extensive excerpts from the exhibition press books reproduced in *Haegue Yang: Yang, Kim, and So-Young*, ed. Pirano, eds., Haegue Yang, Copenhagen, Seoul, Arts Council of Korea, 2009, pp. 279–302.

<sup>13</sup> Inyoung Chang provides an enlightening overview of Yang’s 2008 hybrid works in his essay “What Are Your Desires, Haegue Yang?” in *Melanie D’Amore*, ed., *Haegue Yang: Shifting and Shifting*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2010, pp. 138–49.

<sup>14</sup> Yang quoted in Anna Diklik, “Haegue Yang: Part Two” in *Conversation with Anna Diklik*, 10/16, Sept. 3, 2014, [artforum.com](http://artforum.com).

<sup>15</sup> Platform Presents *Haegue Yang Book Launch*, video recording of Yang in

conversation with Kathy Noble, Bergen Rønnevoll, Bergen, Norway, 2013, at 30:43, [vimeo.com](http://vimeo.com).

<sup>16</sup> Yang quoted in Anna Diklik, “Haegue Yang: Part Two.”

<sup>17</sup> Brian Alexander, ed., *Haegue Yang: Artforum 2006–2018: Tightrope Walking and Drifting*, London, MUMUKSHU, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> This and the subsequent Nicolas Bourriaud quotations are from his essay “Unfolding Topologies: Haegue Yang and Sculpture Today,” in *Shooting the Deputy? Thinking the Zephyr*, catb. cat, Seoul, Lecture, Saemangeum Museum of Art, 2013, p. 22. For Bourriaud’s thoughts on “speculative realism,” see Itoshiro Hoshino, “Between Practice and Theory,” *ARTforum*, Mar. 19, 2018, [artforum.com](http://artforum.com).

<sup>19</sup> “A Conversation: Haegue Yang and Inyoung Chang,” in *Haegue Yang: Contributions*, p. 25.

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**CURRENTLY ON VIEW / OPENING SOON**

**“Haegue Yang: In the Cone of Uncertainty,” at the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, through Apr. 5; “Haegue Yang: Handles,” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through Apr. 15; “Haegue Yang: Emergence,” the artist’s first North American retrospective, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Apr. 30–Nov. 8; and “Haegue Yang,” at Tate St. Ives, UK, May 23–Oct. 11.**