

strange attraction

May 2021 | By Francesca Gavin

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Text Francesca Gavin

Haegue Yang in her exhibition
When The Year 2000 Comes
at Kukje Gallery, Seoul, 2019
© Haegue Yang, courtesy
Kukje Gallery, Seoul, photo:
Chunho An

The undefinable Haegue Yang explores where sound, weather and subjectivity collide



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Fluidity on Nonagonal Crystal Matrix – Trustworthy #400
2020
Various security envelopes, graph paper, sandpaper, laser prints,
self-adhesive holographic vinyl film on alu-dibond, framed
2 parts, 86.2 x 86.2 cm; 43.2 x 43.2 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris
Photo: Nick Ash



The Intermediate - Airflow of Pyramid Winnow
2015
Artificial straw, powder-coated steel frame,
casters, plastic raffia string, artificial plants
180 x 95 x 95 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin
Photo: Sang Tae Kim

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Mundus Cushion – Yielding X
2020
Clear-coated plywood, adjustable feet,
screws, pegs, chip foam, canvas, wool
yarn, cotton yarn, jute yarn
182 x 311 x 309 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Installation view of Haegue Yang: Strange
Attractors at Tate St Ives, 2020.
Photo: Tate (Matt Greenwood)



Haegue Yang is a very rare artist. She is not defined by aesthetic, medium, genre or even approach. Over the past 20 years she has created installations, sculptures, sound pieces, fabric works, choreographed performances and collages that explore everything from colonial diaspora to climate change, domestic objects to coincidence. Her inventive and experiential approach to art making is filled with ideas and inspiration, philosophy and politics, poetry and history. It is not surprise that she has had major presentations at *MoMA*, *South London Gallery* and the *Centre Pompidou*, been included in *Documenta*, and the *Liverpool*, *Sharjah* and *Gwangju Biennials* (in this case three times). Originally from South Korea, Yang has been based between Seoul and Germany since the 1990s. Speaking about her process and most recent projects, which has included a major solo show at *Tate St Ives*, she comes across as a woman unafraid to take on anything – be that art history, philosophy and even the macrocosm of global weather.

Where do the ideas for your exhibitions come from? What is the impetus?

Haegue Yang: In working across different locations, I rely on the institution as my first lens or native informant; to obtain initial knowledge about the place and its local and surrounding communities where I am exhibiting. Inquiries about the core of life in the locality and about the bonds and relationships often challenge my previous assumptions or learned knowledge of a place and the people who live there.

When I posed these initial questions to the curators at the Bass Museum in Miami Beach, Florida, USA, I had a speculative idea in my mind about ethnic commonality in migrant societies, as might apply to the Spanish-speaking Latino community there. My institutional partners were not convinced about my assumptions of pan-ethnic readings since they know too well about how each group holds distinct cultures and characteristics. They also murmured about annual hurricanes as a shared and common experience among the population. That really stuck in my head, and I started to research the histories of weather and cyclones. Almost simultaneously, I also received an invitation to make an exhibition at MCAD in Manila in the Philippines. I was aware the region is also impacted by typhoons, because those in South Korea almost always arrive from there. Whole communities bond against the disastrous damage and devastation caused by the weather every year: which is not a social issue, nor a cultural or civilizational legacy.

Answers and responses are as varied as the communities and institutions I work with. The issues, challenges and communal experiences are different in the rural and coastal communities of Cornwall, UK, for example, than in places with different climates, histories and cultures. But, there are also commonalities, and these can span and connect across geography and time. The mythologies, hopes and anxieties that are found in communities today can echo across the globe, and throughout histories and eras.

What interests you about the aesthetic nature of what you're researching here? Looking at the St Ives show, the visuals of chaos, weather and craft all feel very important.

HY: Broadly, as my thoughts grow and develop and references become deeper, the material, visual ideas and methods follow.

Imagine an infographic which predicts the behaviour and movements of a cyclone, for tomorrow and across a week. The whole trajectory appears like a cone – a very common graphic form – and refers to an increasing unpredictability from the point of 'now'. That's what we know, today, through Edward Lorenz's scientific study of Chaos Theory, or the butterfly effect.

At Tate St Ives, my vast wallpaper work *Non-Linear and Non-Periodic Dynamics* responds to the culture, climate and weather that I encountered during my visits to Cornwall. Where land meets ocean, unpredictable and polarised weather often accompanies violent coastline phenomena. In this work, photographic elements of weather and water are interspersed with mirrored motifs which resemble the butterfly effect. Although fixed as an image, the work suggests moments of phenomena that hold multiple potentialities and futures. And you cannot divide communities from the landscapes in which they live. People are shaped by, and shape, the land itself. *Mundus Cushion – Yielding X* references the time and skills of the hand-crafted kneeler cushions found at the church in Zennor, near St Ives, and the hopes and anxieties found in their motifs. Many of these tell the stories of a community bound with the land and sea.

The title of my exhibition at The Bass in Manila is *The Cone of Uncertainty*, and the show in Manila is *The Cone of Concern*. Both terminologies arise from meteorology, such as weather forecasting or as well as chaos theory, which reflects the human being's desire to predict the future – a very basic human curiosity. An instinctive reaction, like fear, is a feeling in front of the uncertainty – curiosity is another.

What interests you about working with such a breath of methods and unconventional media?

HY: Broadly, as my thoughts grow and develop and references become deeper, the material, visual ideas and methods follow. I do not want to tie or assign myself to one working method, process or practice. I continue to work with venetian blinds and other materials and agonize about them over a long period of time, but I don't want these materials to prescribe my artistic identity. The journey itself is more important, and the feeling of genuine engagement. So in terms of the

selection of motifs or the decisions on processes and materiality, I would say half is a cumulative evolution and the remainder develops through research, encounters and experiences. It is both planned and accidental.

Many of your sculptures and installations have a sound element. Even sculptures that are quiet but have the possibility of movement and the activation of sound.

HY: I used to work with sound rather indirectly. Sonic effects occur from motorized venetian blinds, which rise and fall as the slats click open and then closed, or when a electric fans, or robotic moving lights moves a sound of the motor, or a ventilator.

Other sound effects might appear conscious and intentional but the boundaries of my control over this vary. *Sonic Half Moons*, for example, are hanging sculptures which periodically demonstrate the sweeping and rattling sound-patterns that they are capable of making. Their sounds depend on factors such as the strength and motion of the facilitator activating them, or the atmospheric conditions in which they are shown. In the Liverpool Biennial 2018, I used recordings of rain, storms and wind from the British Sound Library. I was also granted permission to use the recordings of ambient bird sound and camera noises that documented a 2018 meeting between the North and South Korean leaders, held on a public footbridge in the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Their public conversation could not be heard but the background sounds were recorded, and this audio-document was implanted into several recent exhibitions, including at *Handies*, MoMA, New York, USA. The recorded noises operate as a disembodied vessel, carrying notions of political action, event documentation, unheard conversations, and unknowable outcomes.

Have you ever used human voices?
HY: A sound piece with human voice, *Genuine Cloning*, connects three current solo exhibitions: at Tate St Ives, UK; at MCAD in Manila, Philippines; and at MMCA in Seoul, South Korea. The work features a TTS (text-to-speech) clone of my voice, which speaks about oneself as being without a boundary such as the body, while the DMZ birdsong recording was inserted as chapters, dividing sounds between my ASMR voiceover. The voice is fleeting, floating and drifting in the air, yet still able to communicate. The disembodied, artificial voice states itself as an outsider, yet it is close to a human being. It mischievously observes us, and mocks what humans do with the non-human. The voice contemplates the act of naming typhoons and cyclones and describes the Typhoon Committee, consisting of 14 countries who contribute to a pool of names as if it is the most fair thing to do with natural phenomena. Annually, some names are re-circulated, but the names of notorious, damaging or deadly cyclones are retired from the pool. Another name from the same language will replace it, to maintain the same 'fair' proportions. So, the typhoons get strange national flavors to them as well. They used to only call them by female names.

Looking at ideas of nation and identity are intertwined here.

HY: There are many commodified voices on the market, developed for navigating in your car, or even animating your domestic rice cooker or refrigerator. The devices speak in a designated language, in which a gender and age is suggested. For the show at the South London Gallery, I orchestrated over twenty differently accented English voices, from open sources, such as 'English female voice with French accent', 'British female voice with Indian accent', or 'male voice in American English with Japanese accent'. They repeat a sentence, "The source of art is in the life of the people." This motto is inscribed in the wooden marquetry by Walter Crane inlaid into the historical floor of the South London Gallery, which is now hidden and invisible underneath a new floor for its protection. Installed right above the original spot of the motto, I placed speakers with motion sensors and your own body can trigger the chorus of twenty-two synthetic TTS voices chanting the sentence. The voices appear real and compelling, perhaps due to their vocal imperfections. By tracing the motto over and over again with one's own bodily presence, I wanted to honour the artistic engagement in the notion of the people and especially bring institutional legacy and spirit into the present by extending the notion of 'people' to migrant communities and the non-human, as well as the technological. *Forum for Drone Speech – Singapore Simulations* was commissioned by the National Gallery Singapore, which is located in a historical building. This work includes a recording of a social robot 'Nadine' reading out a script I wrote from

its non-human perspective, and was supported by the lab at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Maybe you've heard of social robots?

No, I haven't.

HY: Social robots are made to socialize with human beings, and have convincing facial expressions and conversation skills. The NTU's social robot Nadine is a source of national pride and can converse in six international languages, including two of the official languages of the country (Mandarin, English, German, French, Hindi and Japanese). She speaks without an accent and looks European. In fact, her appearance is based on the chief of the lab, who is a female scientist from Switzerland. Adopting Nadine's perspective, the script (speech) contemplates her non-human identity as well as questions of ethnicity and belonging. One can encounter Nadine's approximately 12 minute speech near the historical balcony of the former city hall building, facing Padang Square, where the self-governance of Singapore was announced.

You've been based in Berlin since 2005, and now teach in Frankfurt at the Städelschule. The diasporic experience, that idea of belonging or migration seems to come up in your work, without directly being about identity politics.

HY: I think that I am very direct and frank about my interests in identity politics, but I am elusive, vague or ambiguous to some people, because the identity I keep paying attention to is the identity of absence.

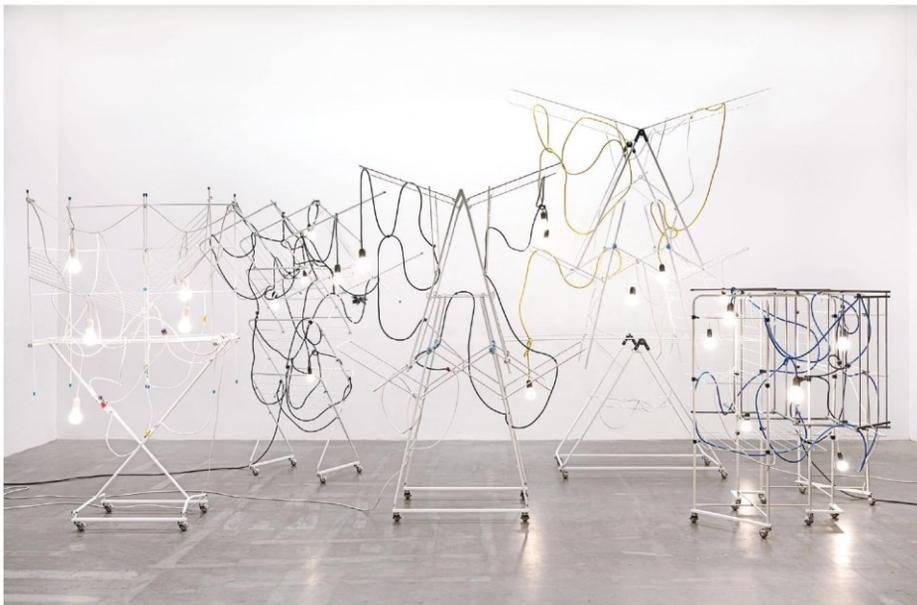
You bring historic and diasporic artists and crafts into your exhibitions, placing yourself in dialogue with art and alternative histories. What do you find interesting about those combinations?

HY: Human experiences are built on what came before. As there are universal phenomena – such as weather and climate, or absence – there are repeated questions, ideas and practices that are reimagined and enacted across multiple times and cultures. We can have an individual or personal response to a universal experience, without realising how connected we are.

The Sonic Intermediates – Three Differential Equations, shown in *Strange Attractors* at Tate St Ives, is a tri-part sculpture representing a speculative encounter between three figures of British Modern Art: Li Yuan-chia, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo. The three artists all journeyed and worked internationally, and their paths are both closely and distantly interconnected through events, geographical locations and art histories. Their legacies still impact and resonate today, and this work brings the three figures into conversation beyond the conventions of era or place.

The 'strange attractors' motif goes back to theories of unpredictability. The movement of a particle – the shift from here to there – we call it the butterfly effect and we cannot predict its path or expect a linear result. But, we are also certain of interrelations. Sometimes, the consequences of the butterfly swing could bring a rainstorm. That's the reality, and for me, peacefully somehow, it's a perfect kind of formula. Imagine the artists' relationships and the effects upon each other, and now ourselves?

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Non-Indépliables, nue
2010/2020
Drying racks, light bulbs, cable, zip ties, terminal strips
Left to right:
Non-Indépliable, nue – Crownly Figure in Crossed Leg
183 x 105 x 78 cm
Non-Indépliable, nue – Lifting Up
191 x 140 x 75 cm
Non-Indépliable, nue – Three Hearts Lifts a Sprout
198 x 144 x 62 cm
Non-Indépliable, nue – Three Times on Shoulder
264 x 188 x 62 cm
Non-Indépliable, nue – Sandwich Swing Squeezed Between Buildings
129 x 156 x 108 cm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Nick Ash



Sonic Half Moon Type III – Large Light #22
2015
Powder-coated steel frame, powder-coated mesh, steel
wire rope, brass and nickel plated bells, metal rings
187 x 84 x 84 cm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Florian Kleinfenn



The Intermediate - Tilted Bushy Lumpy Bumpy
2016
Artificial straw, powder-coated steel frame, powder-
coated mesh, casters
203 x 120 x 120 cm
Marc and Annette Kemmner Collection
Photo: Studio Haegue Yang