IN THE JUNGLE OF THE SELF

As a recipient of the 100,000 euro Wolfgang Hahn Prize, the Museum Ludwig is honoring Haegue Yang with a comprehensive exhibition. The artist talks with the museum’s director, Yilmaz Dziewior, about wild, sprawling works, venetian blinds as a metaphor, and her struggle for independence.

BY
SIMONE SONDERMANN

PORTRAITS
RAMON HAINDL
Meeting Haegue Yang is a challenge. The internationally sought-after artist not only commutes between Berlin, Frankfurt, and Seoul, but also travels extensively. Luckily, Cologne, where Yilmaz Dziewior works, is only an hour's train ride away from Frankfurt, where in the evening hours at the Stieglitzschule, the two sat back and had a stimulating conversation about her work and the exhibition at Museum Ludwig they planned together.

You share a common history. In 2011, as the director of Kunsthalle Bregenz, you mounted a large-scale Haegue Yang exhibition. How did you come across her work?

YILMAZ DZIEWIOR: Our first collaboration was in 2008, a group exhibition at the Kunstverein in Hamburg. But it feels like I've known Haegue Yang's work for a long time. The theme of the show in Hamburg was the relationship between autobiographical elements and the national background of the participating artists, in other words, the extent to which autobiographical history stands in relation to historiography. We produced a large work for the exhibition, Mountains of Encounter. The work is important because it was the first work in which she used blinds on a large scale as a spatial intervention.

HAEGUE YANG: Shortly beforehand, I had discovered blinds as a material and recognized their potential. I thought I would like to work with them and formalize something I had been thinking about. My concern at the time was how can I start with a narrative but end in abstraction, and in doing so use blinds as a material?

What was the narrative?

YD: It was about two historical figures, Kim San, a Korean anarchist, and the American journalist Nyn Wales, whom many only know as the wife of Edgar Snow, the journalist who interviewed Mao. Nyn Wales went to China alone in the 1930s to write biographies of Chinese revolutionaries. In the end, she only published a book about Kim San.

And what was the narrative?

YD: It was about two historical figures, Kim San, a Korean anarchist, and the American journalist Nyn Wales, whom many only know as the wife of Edgar Snow, the journalist who interviewed Mao. Nyn Wales went to China alone in the 1930s to write biographies of Chinese revolutionaries. In the end, she only published a book about Kim San, who was not Chinese but Korean. She conducted interviews with him and brought out the book after his death, as she had promised him. He was executed for being an alleged collaborator with the Japanese imperialists, which of course he was not. Kim San was one of hundreds of thousands of Korean freedom fighters that lived underground at the time. I and many other Koreans know him only from her books. It was an act of historiography. In the work, I was interested in how the two people illuminate one another. At the time, I opened for a bright red surface, which was cut out, with strong, moving, protruding lights. They circled through the room like searchlights, and you could also see them on the blinds. It was poetic on the one hand—it looked like a room rising in the mountains, but also menacing. What I still like a lot about the work is the duality of abstraction and figuration, the fact that the meaning appears but then vanishes again. The Wolfgang Hahn Prize is always connected with a purchase by Museum Ludwig, and we are currently intensely discussing whether to choose Mountains of Encounter. To my mind, that would close a circle.

Mountains of Encounter was your first large installation using venetian blinds, a material you have worked with for ten years and for which you have become known. Why did you start using it?

YD: It began when certain devices crept into my vocabulary, such as infrared heating, scent diffuser, humidifier, and fan. They formed an interesting field. Again, it was about narration and non-narration. I actually didn't want to tell a story anymore, but at the same time I didn't want to give up storytelling altogether as a possibility. So I tried to communicate with sensory organs, through heat, through humidity, so that everyone could mobilize their own experience. I also wanted to integrate video cases. I wanted the voice in the video to play a key role in this field of sensory experience, but I didn't want to build walls, so I used blinds instead.

So, initially, you used blinds as a practical solution.

YD: Absolutely. The effect of the blinds was astonishing. I noticed that more happened than I had expected. How do lights, scents, or wind go through them? How far you open or...
close them articulates something. I understand that blinds could be a metaphor for the relationship between the self and others, between the subject and the world. With them, I can guide the visitor through sheer through and, at the same time, acknowledge the space as a whole. The existence of the blinds was ghostly. They occupied a structured space, but willed from a certain angle they were almost not there. As a sculptor I am compelled to fully unfold the potential of the material. Subsequently, I continually tried to develop new aspects of blinds, on the adventure continued.

YD: If we have a look at the entire spectrum of your work with blinds, starting with Mountains of Encounters, then at Italienne in Bregenz as a silver virgin, and now—hightlight in my opinion—the installation with its slowly moving spiral interior at the former Kindl brewery in Berlin, it becomes apparent that Haegue Yang accepts the diversity of the material.

At the Kindl in Berlin, one is aware of the stillness. At the same time there is a subtle movement, like a soundless dance. It links this work with your anthropomorphic works, for example, Racing Ballad, which recalls the visual language of Oskar Schlemmer’s Triadic Ballet. How important are rhythm and musicality to you?

YD: Only because aware of the theme of movement about five years ago. Although I had shown light sculptures previously, at Kunsthalle Bregenz, for example, they looked like they were dancing, though they were static without exception. So far, there have only been three blinds works that actually moved physically: my work at Documents in 2013, then the installation Time Tides and Multiple Touts shown in Glasgow in 2015, and now Stairs of Silence – Critical Core at Kindl. The work at Documents is coupled in my mind with the work at Kindl. Both tell of industrialization, but each in its own way. At Kindl, there was a structure of about 45 meters high, and at Kindl, I made used a spacious, high, flat-like space. The moment in Approaching Choreography as a Negative Tone was mechanical and loud, a hard opening and closing sound. At Kindl, the silence is decisive; the movement is a single rotation, gilding. It doesn’t produce a sound, which can be quieter than noise.

YD: In Bregenz, we played “Sacre du Printemps” several times a day accompanying sculpture works such as Hair Raiser Lawn, which have wheels, implying movement only in this way: Igre Strawinski composed it in 1927 for the Ballet Russes under Sergei Diaghilev. The light went out and the music played. For the exhibition in Cologne, we are currently developing a musical framework program. Haegue Yang has also made a play, a stage piece.

YD: Well, some theater people would laugh if you said that I made a play...

YD: That’s why called it a stage piece! (laughs). This similarity no performance is also often found in her exhibitions, even when something doesn’t move, movement and the theatrical aspect are implicit.

As for the new exhibition at the Museum Ludwig, is it a retrospective?

YD: Haegue Yang is still young for a retrospective. We call it a mid-career survey. It begins with her very early works, created in these rooms at the Städelschule, most of which have been lost or destroyed and have been reconstructed. The last work will bear the date 2018...

Is it being produced specifically for the show?

YD: Yes, but that is more specific. It might be a small work, say, a collage. We’re not
The anthropomorphic Warrior Believer Lever consists of 33 light sculptures which are static yet recall a well-dance formation on account of their wheels. The ensemble was shown at Kunsthalle Bregenz in 2018 and accompanied by a recording of Stravinsky’s Le Sacre du Printemps.
interested in new productions, but in giving an overview of her work thus far. We want to emphasize the diversity. Many associate Haegue Yang with blind art, and perhaps also with the clothingrack pieces, but we are also showing the ephemeral works, sound pieces, collages, and works on paper. The aim is to do justice to the complexity of her work. I very much like the fact that her works are poetic, that the material is selected and used with loving care. But when you come closer to them, there is also something unsettling about them. You notice it's not the dreamy world it may have seemed to be at first glance.

While preparing the exhibition I recently thought of a metaphor: it felt like you're taking a stroll through a wild jungle. So far, the works have simply grown wildly, with no shame. There are many branches starting in every direction, but with no path yet. This is the first time I have looked back in this way, so the exhibition preparations have been fascinating for me.

Growing wild, that's nice.

Mr. Diedriouk, do you view Haegue Yang as an Asian artist? And if so, what role does this play in the reception of her work?

That's a misfield...

True (laughs). Every inscription of identity gives rise to pugnolobing. I have a Turkish first name and Polish family name, and I'm often asked about my identity. When I introduce myself, the usual reaction is: what an interesting name, where does it come from? I have a similar impulse when I meet someone with an unusual name. At the same time, I find this absurd because I'm German through and through. I grew up in Germany, in Bonn, my mother tongue is German, and when I spent a year abroad I realized how much my German heritage has shaped me. So I find such attributions very problematic. Yet I know they make sense...

I've often been asked how Korean I am. Not just in Germany and Europe, but even in Korea. I sometimes ask myself the same question, but I don't know exactly how to answer it (laughs).

It's interesting that you're asked that in Korea too. I would have thought that's a typically German question, a question that wouldn't be asked, say, in America?

Especially in America? I'd say Europe.

To my mind, the question of identity is tied up with who is speaking. For example, in our press release at the museum we wrote that Haegue Yang is the first Korean artist to receive the Wolfgang Hahn Prize. The alarm bells go off immediately. Now Haegue Yang's origins are being instrumentalyzed, and that's true, they are. But this sentence is also to put it somewhat romantically used as a weapon to show that something is wrong here. Two years ago the prize went to Huang Yong Ping. That was the first time the prize was given to an artist who wasn't from Europe or North America. It's one of the world's most important awards, and generously endowed. Stating that it has now been given to a Korean artist for the first time can be important and the right thing to do to draw attention to this problem.

But what actually influenced you? What role does the cultural sphere you grew up in play?

I don't think my position is easy to define in Asia either. It's not a typical position, for any place. I see myself as occupying an independent position. I don't belong anywhere. I'm proud of myself that I'm not striving but actually working as an artist in various parts of the world. For me, this is a sign that there is no need to define my own thing. My art may be difficult to grasp due to its diversity, due to my scattered interests. It's clear to me that I stand for something, whether I want to or not, but that it's not Korean, not even Asian, and perhaps not necessarily European. I think I'm on the way to becoming something hybrid. I'm very much looking forward to the exhibitions in Cologne. I'm showing the full spectrum of my work, and I wonder how visitors will react.

"Haegue Yang, "As We Are," 2015; "Wolfgang Hahn Prize 2015", Museum Ludwig, April 28 to August 12"