

Haegue Yang Handles

2019

Ensemble consisting of / Ensemble mit: 6 sculptures / 6 Skulpturen

Sonic Coupe Nickel – Enclosed Unity

Sonic Coupe Copper – Enclosed Unity

Sonic Gate – Law of Nine

Sonic Handles – For Head and Heart

Sonic Handles – Law of Three Bodies

Sonic Handles – The Fourth Force

Commissioned for the exhibition / in Auftrag gegeben für die Ausstellung

Haegue Yang: Handles as part of the Opening Season Fall 2019 at the / als Teil der

Eröffnungssaison Herbst 2019 in dem **Marron Atrium, MoMA, New York, USA, 2019 – 2021**

Wall and floor element / Wand- und Bodenelement: Self-adhesive holographic, black, and transparent vinyl film and powder-coated steel handles / selbstklebende holografische, schwarze und transparente Vinylfolie und pulverbeschichtete Stahlgriffe

Sound element: Digital sound file, 29:55 min., looped

This broadcast recording made at the Inter-Korean Summit in the Korean Demilitarized Zone on April 27, 2018, is included by permission of the Presidential Office of the Republic of Korea. / Die Nutzung dieser Aufnahme, die beim Gipfeltreffen der Staatsoberhäupter aus Süd- und Nordkorea am 27. April 2018 in der DMZ (demilitarisierte Zone zwischen Süd- und Nordkorea) gemacht wurde, ist genehmigt durch das Präsidialbüro der Republik Korea

Haegue Yang: Handles as part of *Moved by Schlemmer. 100 Years of Triadic Ballet*, **Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany / Deutschland, April 10 – October 9, 2022**

On the first Sunday of each month, the sculptures in Haegue Yang's installation are set in motion three times a day. Accompanied by the composition *Images* (1968) by Isang Yun, a quartet for flute, oboe, violin and violoncello, the activation highlights the performative aspects of *Handles*.

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Handles

2019

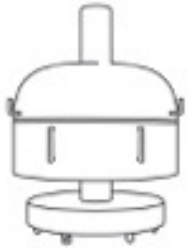
Exhibition view of / Ausstellungssansicht von *Haegue Yang: Handles*, MoMA, New York, USA 2019 – 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnYxOWODzpY>

Haegue Yang

Korean, born 1971

Handles 2019



Sonic Coupe Nickel – Enclosed Unity

Powder-coated steel frame, mesh, and handles, ball bearing, casters, nickel-plated bells, and metal rings



Sonic Coupe Copper – Enclosed Unity

Powder-coated steel frame, mesh, and handles, ball bearing, casters, copper-plated bells, and metal rings



Sonic Gate – Law of Nine

Powder-coated steel frame, mesh, and handles, casters, copper- and nickel-plated bells, and metal rings



Sonic Handles – For Head and Heart

Powder-coated steel frame, mesh, and handles, casters, copper-plated bells, and metal rings



Sonic Handles – Law of Three Bodies

Powder-coated steel frame, mesh, and handles, casters, nickel-plated bells, and metal rings



Sonic Handles – The Fourth Force

Powder-coated steel frame, mesh, and handles, casters, copper- and nickel-plated bells, and metal rings

Wall and floor element

Self-adhesive holographic, black, and transparent vinyl film and powder-coated steel handles

Sound element

Digital sound file, 29:55 min., looped

This broadcast recording made at the Inter-Korean Summit in the Korean Demilitarized Zone on April 27, 2018, is included by permission of the Presidential Office of the Republic of Korea.



Handles
2019
right / rechts: Wall text from the / Wandtext aus dem MoMA

Haegue Yang: *Handles*

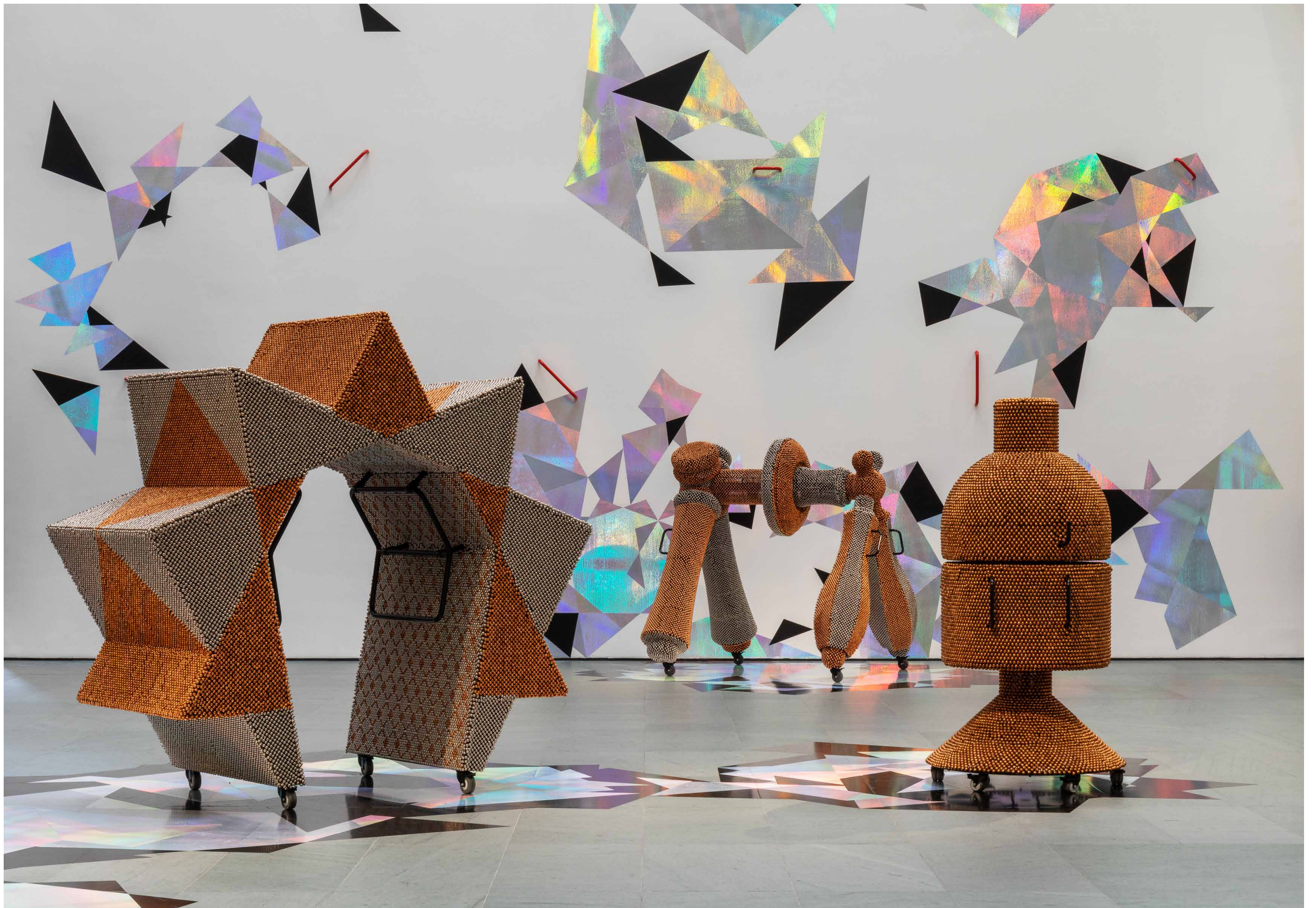
Handles imply attachment, a point of contact with the material world. In her dynamic installation *Handles*, commissioned for MoMA's Marron Atrium, Haegue Yang considers this everyday interface between people and things. Steel grab bars are attached to the walls amid an iridescent pattern, and put to functional use in her sonic sculptures. These imposing works come in distinctive shapes and draw on Yang's research into various sources, ranging from everyday objects and shamanistic rites to the early-twentieth-century artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp and the spiritual philosophies of G. I. Gurdjieff. Mounted on casters and covered in skins of bells, these sculptures produce a shimmering sound when they are set in motion. The natural ambient noise of birdsong, which also permeates the space, was recorded at a tense political moment in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea during the historic summit in 2018. Reporters strained to hear the private conversation between the two nations' leaders, but their audio devices only picked up the chirping of birds and the faint click of cameras. *Handles* integrates these seemingly disparate narratives into an artistic language uniquely Yang's own, offering an evocative take on modernism and a critical reading of its legacy in the present.

Facilitators will activate the sculptures daily at 4:00 p.m.

Hyundai Card

This commission is presented as part of The Hyundai Card Performance Series.

Organized by Stuart Comer, The Lonti Ebers Chief Curator of Media and Performance, Department of Media and Performance, with Taylor Walsh, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints; performances produced by Lizzie Gorfaine, Producer, and Kate Scherer, Manager, with Stavvia Grimani, Assistant Performance Coordinator, Performance and Live Programs.



Handles

2019

Exhibition view of / Ausstellungsansicht von Haegue Yang: *Handles*, MoMA, New York, USA 2019 – 2021



Handles

2019

Exhibition view of / Ausstellungssansicht von *Haegue Yang: Handles*, MoMA, New York, USA 2019 – 2021



Handles

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Exhibition view of / Ausstellungsansicht von Haegue Yang: *Handles*, MoMA, New York, USA 2019 – 2021



Handles
2019

Activation of the sculptures in the exhibition / Aktivierung der Skulpturen in der Ausstellung *Haegue Yang: Handles*, MoMA, New York, USA 2019 – 2021



Handles

2019

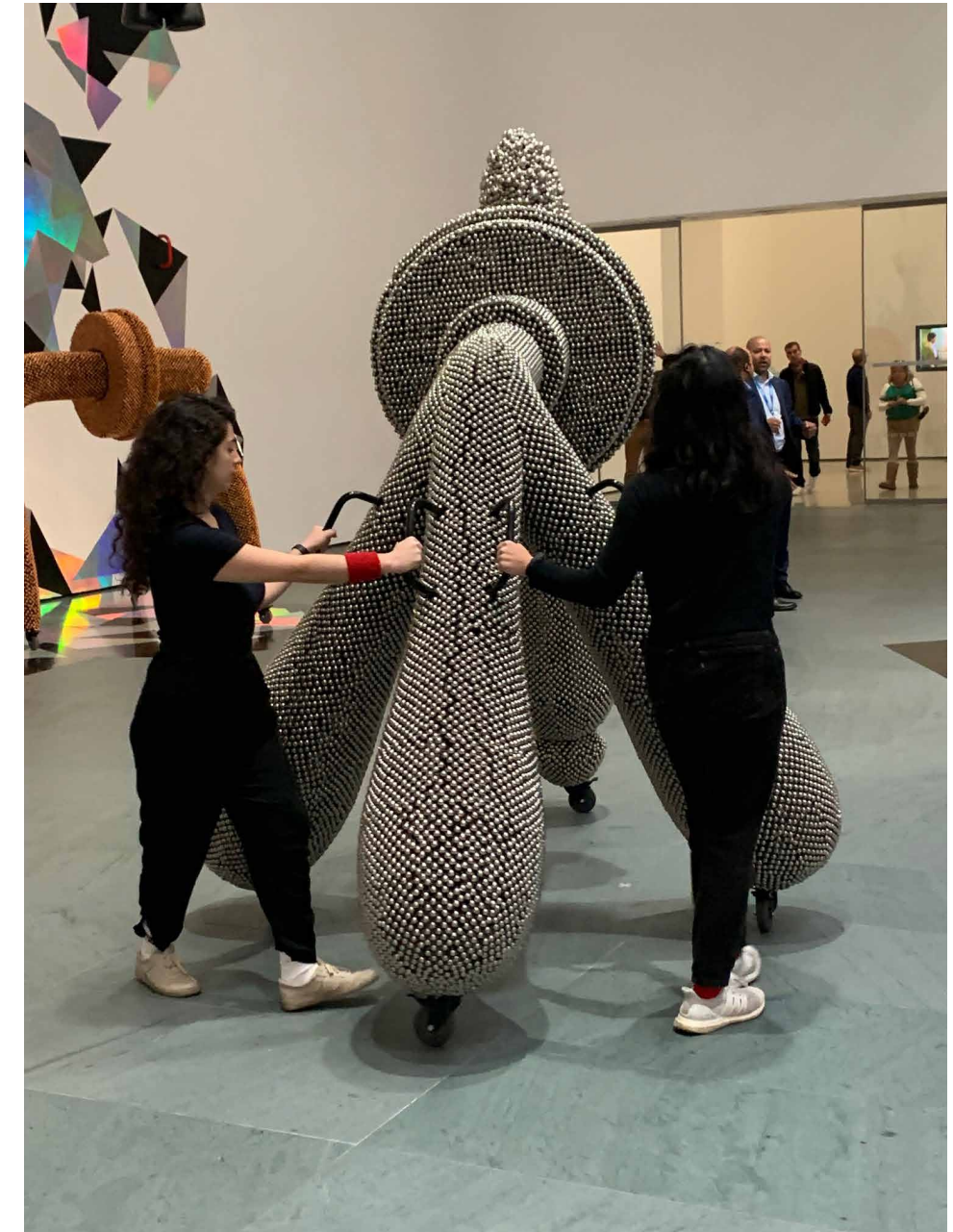
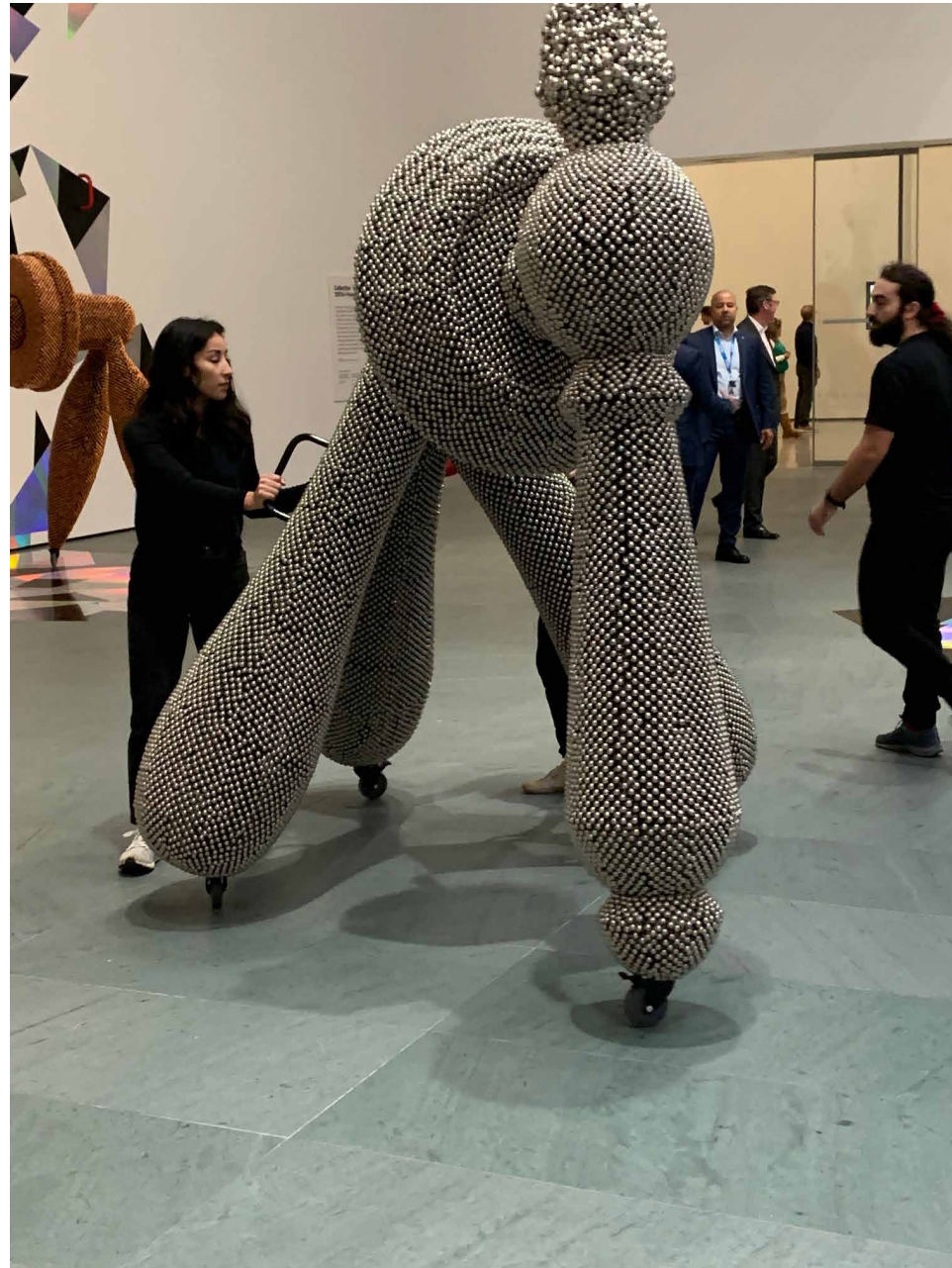
Activation of the sculptures in the exhibition / Aktivierung der Skulpturen in der Ausstellung *Haegue Yang: Handles*, MoMA, New York, USA 2019 – 2021



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Haegue Yang

Handles

2019

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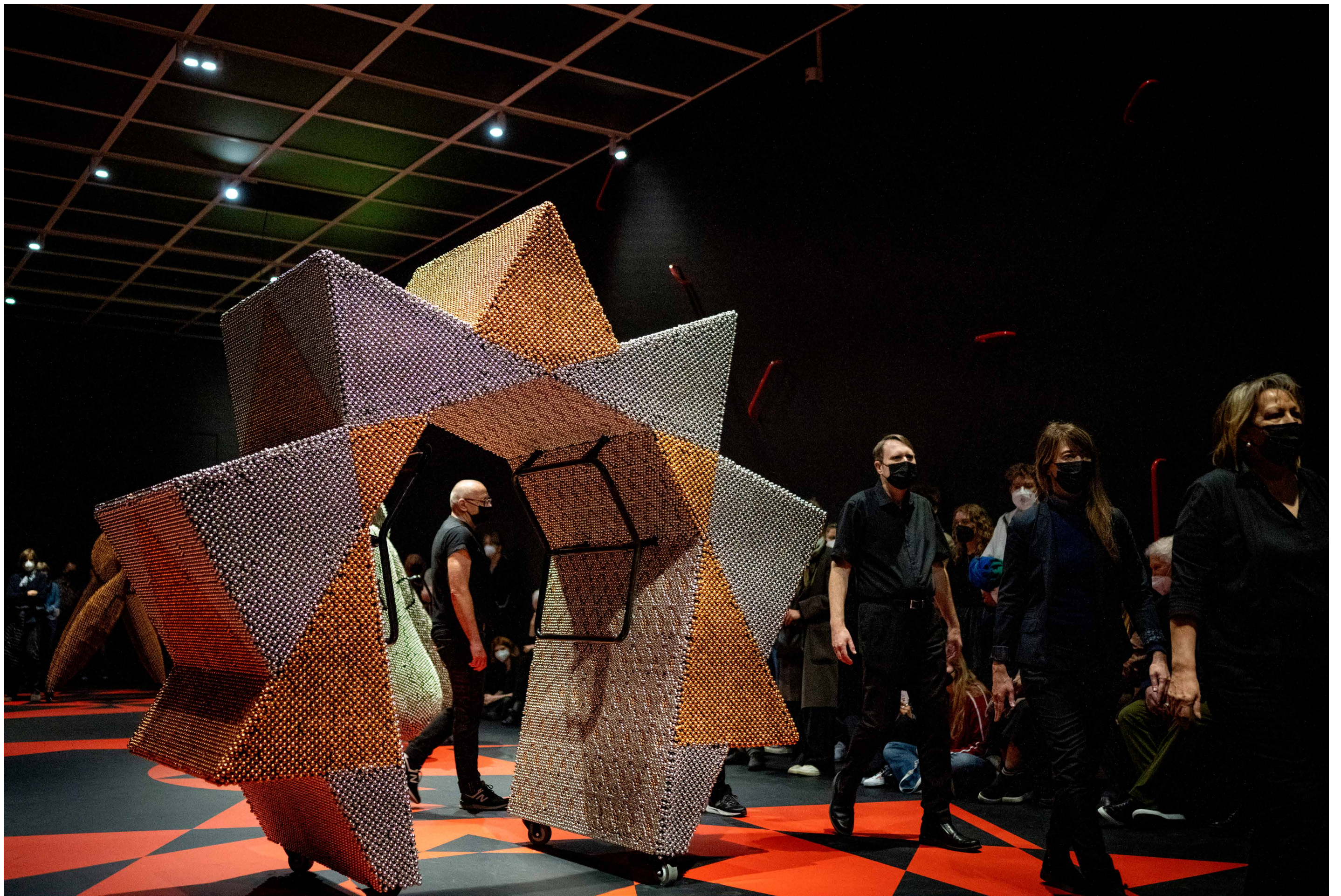
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Exhibited at / ausgestellt in:
Moved by Schlemmer. 100 Years of Triadic Ballet, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany / Deutschland
April 10 – October 9, 2022

On the first Sunday of each month, the sculptures in Haegue Yang’s installation are set in motion three times a day. Accompanied by the composition *Images* (1968) by Isang Yun, a quartet for flute, oboe, violin and violoncello, the activation highlights the performative aspects of *Handles*.

Activation dates of the installation »Handles« by Haegue Yang:

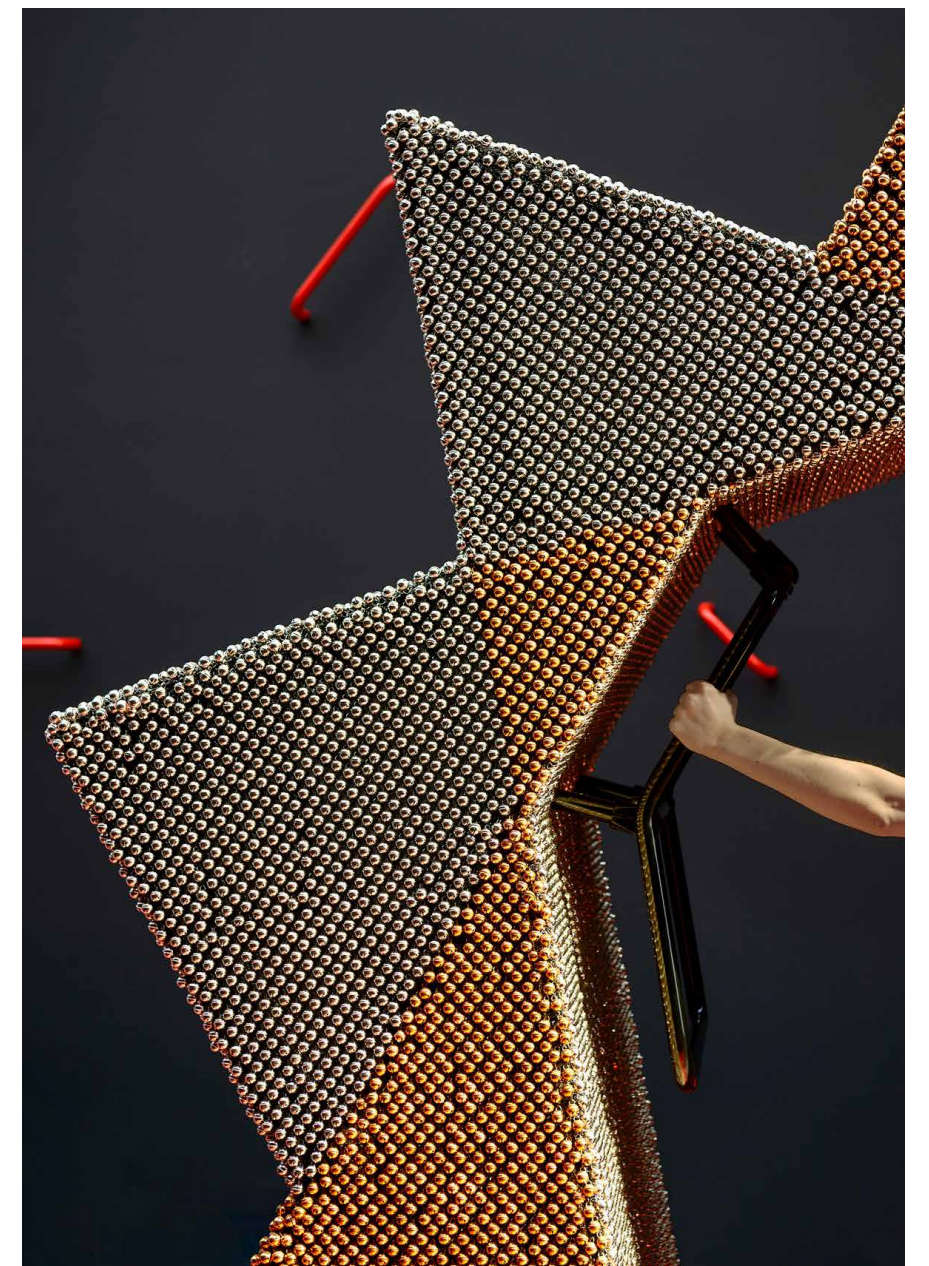
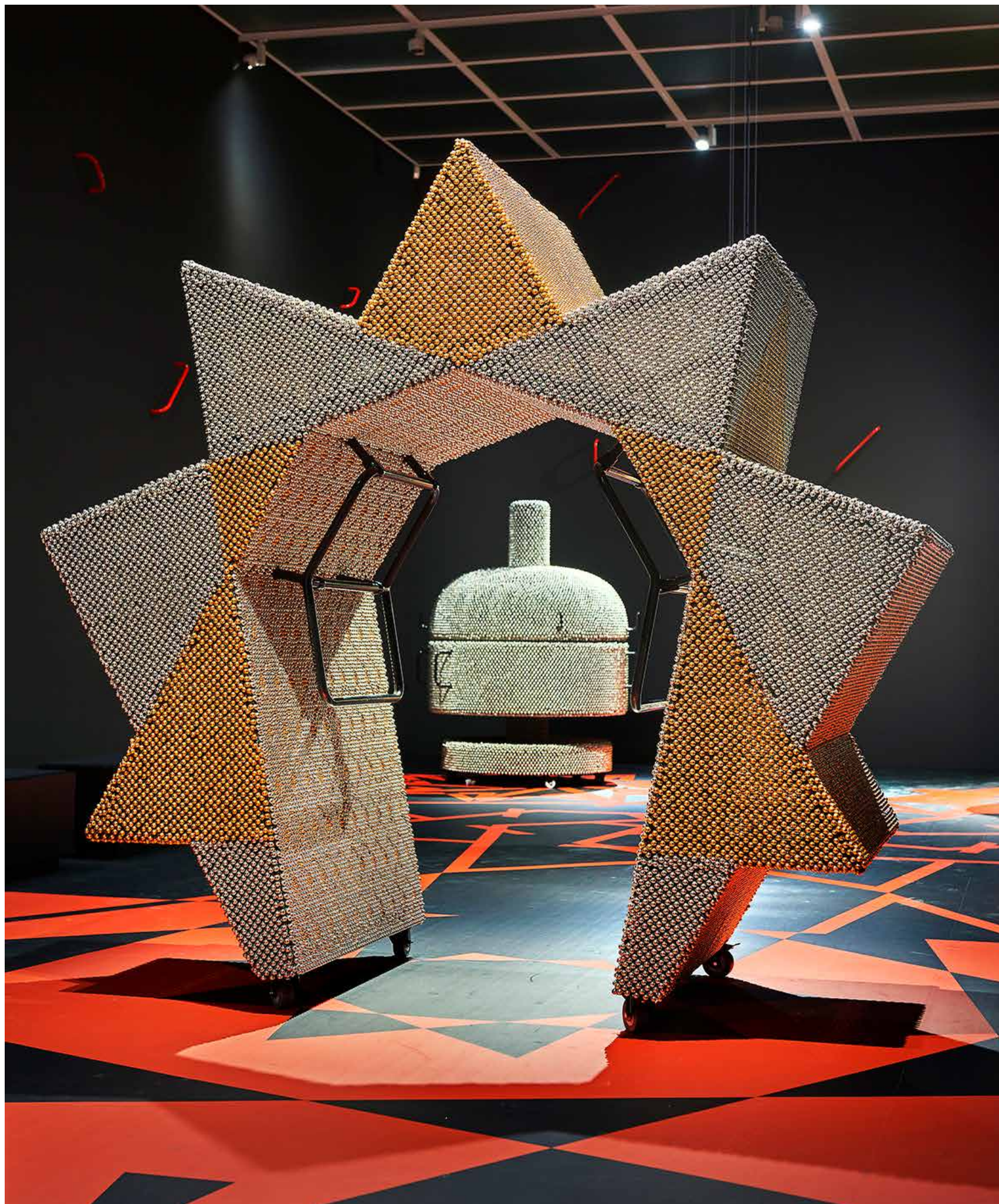
June 5, 2022	11 am, 1 pm, 4 pm
July 3, 2022	11 am, 1 pm, 4 pm
August 7, 2022	11 am, 1 pm, 4 pm
September 4, 2022	11 am, 1 pm, 4 pm
October 2, 2022	11 am, 1 pm, 4 pm



Handles
2019

Activation of the sculptures in the exhibition / Aktivierung der Skulpturen in der Ausstellung *Moved by Schlemmer. 100 Years of Triadic Ballet* at Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany, April 10 – October 9, 2022

<https://vimeo.com/711661229/ceb3828e19>



Detail

Handles

2019

Exhibition view of / Ausstellungsansicht von *Moved* by Schlemmer. 100 Years of Triadic Ballet at Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany, April 10 – October 9, 2022



Handles

2019

Activation of the sculptures in the exhibition / Aktivierung der Skulpturen in der Ausstellung *Moved by Schlemmer. 100 Years of Triadic Ballet* at Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany, April 10 – October 9, 2022

Galerie Barbara Wien

Schöneberger Ufer 65 10785 Berlin www.barbarawien.de

Haegue Yang and Stuart Comer *The Mystic Landscapes of Haegue Yang*, MoMA Magazine, October 25, 2019
<https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/167>



The Mystic Landscapes of Haegue Yang

The artist discusses her work, identity, and the inspiration behind her new commission, *Handles*, with curator Stuart Comer.

Haegue Yang, Stuart Comer
October 25, 2019

The artist Haegue Yang, creator of genre-defying multimedia installations, was commissioned to create a work for MoMA's Marron Atrium. The result, *Handles*, features six sculptures that are activated daily, dazzling geometries, and the play of light and sound—all creating an environment with both personal and political resonance.

Steel grab-bars are mounted on the walls amid an iridescent pattern, while others are put to functional use to move her sonic sculptures. The distinctive shapes of these monumental works are inspired by a range of sources: some by the work of early-20th-century figures such as artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp and mystic philosopher G. I. Gurdjieff, others by open-source designs for door handles that produce freestanding forms at once futuristic and prehistoric. Mounted on casters and covered in skins of bells, the sculptures make a subtle rattling sound when maneuvered by performers, recalling the use of bells in shamanistic rites. The noise of

birdsong, which can be heard throughout the space, was recorded at a tense political moment in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea during the historic summit in April 2018.

This summer, Stuart Comer, MoMA's Lonti Ebers Chief Curator of Media and Performance, sat down with Yang to discuss the many layers of reference in her work, and its particular resonance in our current moment.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Stuart Comer and Haegue Yang. Photo: Rose Liu

Stuart Comer: Haegue, welcome back to New York! One place to begin our conversation: When I first encountered your work, you used light, humidity, heat, or even scent to create art that addressed the senses. More recently, you've begun to use choreographies and sound in a more direct way. What motivated you to move in that direction?

Haegue Yang: It's true that offering a range of sensorial experiences has been and still is integral to my work. And somehow movement seemed inherent in those sensory perceptions: smells travel and then dissipate, steam or humidity „touches“ our skin, and any of these sensations can appeal to the mind if they trigger certain memories. So the introduction of movement in my work wasn't sudden, but arose from my other interests.

I had also addressed topics such as migration, which implies another type of movement, but I didn't really make work that was physically movable or interactive until 2008. The birth of the *Sonic Sculptures* in 2013 marked the real beginning of movable sculptures for me, meant to be either moved, worn, or rotated manually. However, at first, I was skeptical about physical movement, since I was concerned about a potential disruption of the audience's contemplative mode.

But then, gradually, you started to move toward slightly more anthropomorphic forms; for instance, the reference in your works such as *Boxing Ballet* (2013–15) to Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* (1922), in which costumed mechanical figures trace geometrical patterns. Schlemmer's investment in dance and in automatons and technology—were those some of the things that compelled you to become interested in that work?

It took me a while to be able to interact with the European avant-garde. As a sculptor, Schlemmer’s approach to performance captured my attention, with its strong focus on figuration but surprisingly little movement. What was at stake was the scenario of the Figurines’ placements on the stage—so movement was implied by placement. For *Boxing Ballet*, I intentionally used the term *boxing*, as an attempt to put time in a box—“bo-xing” the time-based performance in a space. Putting a body in a box means building a limitation so that only some restrained movements are allowed. And this was the way I read the stiff and mechanical movement of *Triadic Ballet*’s robotic bodies. Schlemmer’s stiff movement was in fact symptomatic of progress-oriented modernism, a kind that looked toward a utopia. *Movement* is an interesting word because it brings all different dimensions: physical, emotional, sociopolitical. And if I can approach movement without reducing these dimensions, I would consider my attempt successful.



In *Handles*, you invoke the natural world through the recording of common birdsong, but actually the sound derives from a very particular source that highlights the fraught conditions of our current moment, both politically across cultures and environmentally. The installation, for me, really champions non-binary models, more synthetic models that unite different forms, cultures, and situations. But it also highlights that we’re going in the opposite direction at the moment, politically.

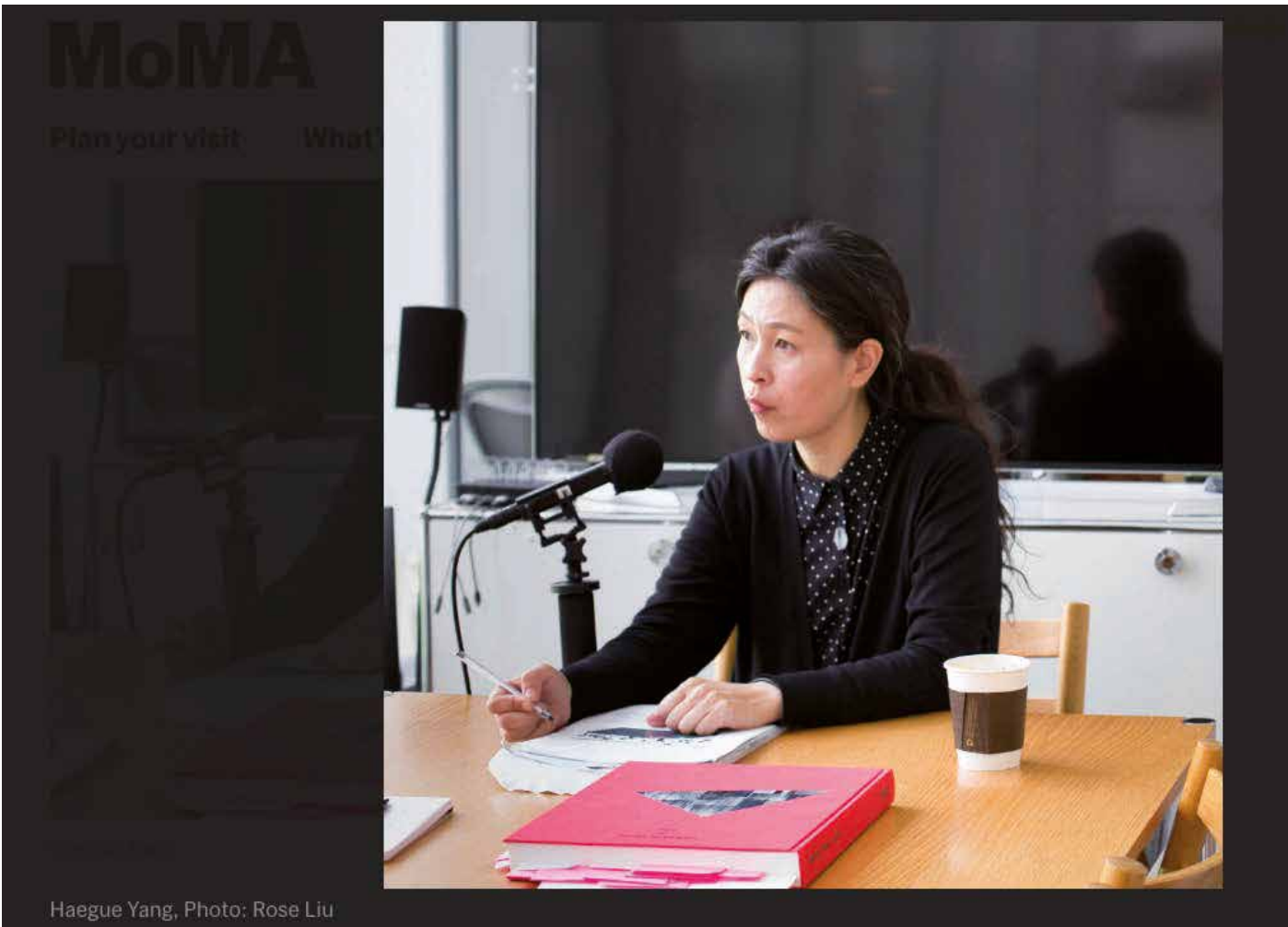
I am pleasantly surprised to hear the term “non-binary models” in your comment, because it is really on the mark.

For me, spiritualism can only be considered if it is solidly anchored in this world. So, for example, discussing pagan culture’s spiritual orientation in Europe is to contemplate a method to return to the contemporary parameters of the present and even be profoundly grounded. Realism is not an antonym of spiritualism to me; in fact, it seems to me that they feed into each other.

Talking about non-binaries as a social being as well as an artist, my interests seem to be schizophrenic, occurring in all directions. Schizophrenic in the sense of how I perceive the world, but also its perception of me.

For instance, I obviously appear European or even German as soon as I arrive in Korea. Outside of Korea, I present as Korean. I try not to be reactionary when I encounter those opposing and even random social perceptions. Rather, I need to maintain this reality as a truly empowering non-binary one.

I see your work as an open system, but it accepts that nothing is neutral, that there is cultural specificity, and that things happen when you bring different histories together in this choreography. You’re very precise when you do bring in a reference. You’re dealing with figures who were trying to engage multiple cultures—both East and West—whether it’s Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943), who was actively participating in the Dada movement, as well as spiritually oriented communal life in Monte Verita, or G.I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949), whose sacred dances knit together Eastern and Western philosophies; or the Korean composer Isang Yun (1917–1995), who was dealing with innovations in Western avant-garde musical form and was held as a political prisoner during the Cold War. *Handles* takes all of these references from different locales, cultures, periods, and histories and allows them to refract each other into a new kind of pattern. At what point did it make sense to bring Taeuber-Arp, Gurdjieff, and Yun together in this way?



These historical figures inhabit my head a bit like creatures in a mystic landscape. They are my tools to carve this landscape, finally becoming mountain peaks and rivers in my mind. I acknowledge or even embrace the weird and idiosyncratic way I bring those historical figures into that mystic “mindscape.” The more odd this mindscape becomes, the more successful I actually feel as an artist.

Taeuber-Arp was a figure of complexity for me. She was a dancer, painter, sculptor as well as weaver, architect, and educator. She was a spiritualist as much as a modernist, so she was acquainted with an international style, yet she treated the material in a vernacular way. The capacity she had for observing all these movements of her time makes her my focus, as a fascinating container—like her sculptures called *Coupe Dada* (1916/18), a calm container, which doesn’t open itself, a mysterious feminine container with enormous capacity.

As for Gurdjieff, he was once asked what on earth he is, and he answered that he was a teacher of dance. That anecdote describes what I was looking for—not dance as a genre but an expanded notion of movement. Maybe it's a celebration, a ritual, or a self-expression? When I started to look into his so-called *Sacred Dances* or *Sacred Movements*, there were some elements that puzzled me, since the movement seems much different than other types of movement devised as self-training, such as yoga and Eurythmy; first, it doesn't necessarily follow anatomy, meaning it's not naturalistic or organic, and second, it is meant to be practiced collectively.

Yun was someone who really believed in things in flux. So the logic of the Cold War being black or white was just simply not acceptable. And the same goes for the notion of home. Imagine how difficult it would have been for Yun to address the division of his native home country into Communism and Capitalism! I guess that the division of his legacy, both musically and politically, is no wonder. While he remains a musical phenomenon within the European avant-garde, he is also a political symbol of ideological division in the Korean Peninsula. And even though his musical and political practices question and resist such a border, he seems to be squeezed brutally into the history of the Cold War. He in fact believed in an elasticity inherent in the nature of things, so it is great to release his music in the landscape of *Handles*.



Somehow I want the handles to imply beings who are between borders or distinct belongingness.

Haegue Yang

You're very concerned about the way certain nation states are reinforcing themselves through patriotism and nationalism. Is this work a response to that political condition?

I developed a metaphor for a silent and discreet communication called condensation. We know the term condensation as a natural phenomenon in which air of differing temperatures is divided by a barrier, causing droplets to emerge on one dividing surface. Imagine a bottle of cold water in a warm space. The bottle would soon begin to sweat. That was a metaphor for me about how differences could be maintained, yet still allow people to communicate in a compelling way. In other words, without evening out their differences. If we could acknowledge and accept that division, we can acknowledge and exist in our differences. But there will be tears and sweat, you know. So condensation is a kind of model for communication, or a silent protest against intolerance in society.

Can you briefly explain the birdsongs in this work and how you came across them?

The birdsong could be the mysterious condensation created between the given fact and its hidden significance, because it conceals and reveals at the same time. The recording of this birdsong is cut from a live broadcast of the historical Inter-Korean Summit last April, which took place with a lot of expectations and great excitement in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea.

I was in one of the big crowds observing this live broadcast for over 20 hours, far away in Berlin. At one point, the two leaders wished to talk in private, so you could just hear the ambient sound. I separated the visuals from the audio, then extracted the audio down to these 30 minutes of secret talk. What remained was the seemingly ordinary sound of flourishing nature due to the scarce human presence in the highly militarized zone.

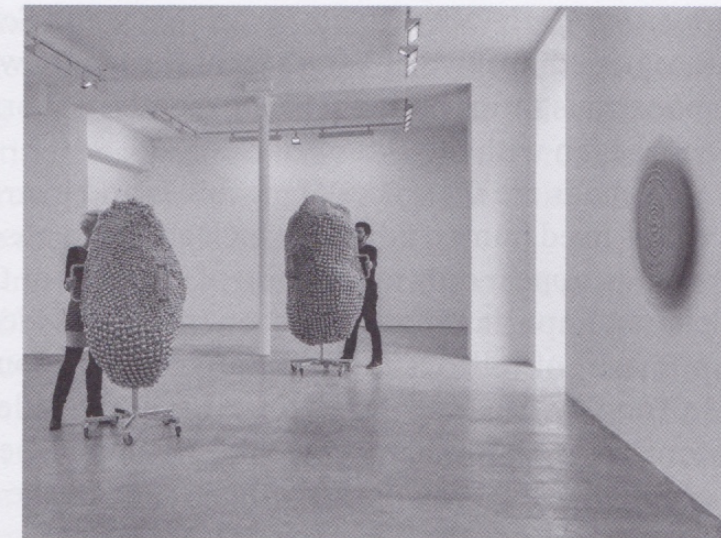
The one thing we have not talked about yet, which is maybe the most obvious, is your use of handles, which is the title of this commission.

When a person approaches or maneuvers a handle, there is a consequence. Handles turn things on and off or open and close something. They are fundamentally intermediary objects. It took me a couple of years to arrive at how crucial the handle is. Yet handles can be easily dismissed. Let's say there is a translator at a podium; but we don't really see them, right? We enjoy the service of the translator, but their presence isn't acknowledged. The handles share that kind of presence. Somehow I want the handles to imply beings who are between borders or distinct belongingness.

I myself have become one of the hybrids who move physically between places and consume news from all over the world. But when it comes down to the question of belonging, we are often too comfortable to challenge the classic idea of belongingness or given identity, instead of striving to become something, as a nationality is too easy to maintain, while citizenship is too difficult to obtain. When belongingness is given, it creates a tyranny of the host. So I suggest that we keep migrating, instead of acting as gatekeepers. We could constantly be arriving.

Haegue Yang
Artist

Stuart Comer
The Lonti Ebers Chief Curator
of Media and Performance



Sonic Dances and Sonic Rotating Oval – Nickel Plated #2, 2013

SOUND/VOICE/WRITING

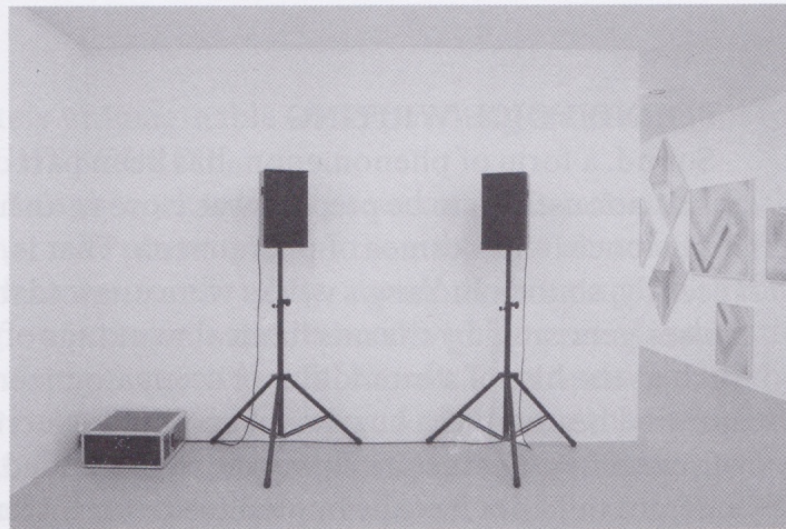
Sound, a form of phenomenon, has been part of Yang's installations, but, to be precise, was close to an accidental occurrence in its cosmos of phenomena. That is, until more recently, sounds in Yang's works were unavoidable or inherent noises generated by the mechanical workings of appliances used, such as the hiss of a humidifier or scent atomizer, the hum of an infrared heater or the buzzing of spotlights. A critical inclusion of sound in other instances was clearly intended, but what would emerge could not have been predicted—for instance, the drum kit wired to the moving lights inside the 2008 blind installation, *Yearning Melancholy Red*, and one that accompanied her *Dress Vehicles* at the Tanks at the Tate Modern in 2012. The use of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (The Rite of Spring, 1913) in the installation of the *Warrior Believer Lover* light sculpture group (2011) is one of the few instances, and the most prominent example of using recorded, unimprovised music.¹⁷ (See MOVEMENT.)

In the most recent sculptures, Yang uses bells, which are probably among the earliest musical instruments created by mankind. Possibly in virtue of this primal characteristic, bells also have religious connotations and are used in rituals. Her interest in bells regards their sound, which is “ambient and non-figurative, and describes nothing.” First introduced in the material composition of sculptures like *Female Native – Oratoricals* and then *Dress Vehicles*, bells became a way of compensating for the loss of a static form when incorporated into the *Sonic*

¹⁷ See note 6.

Rotating Ovals (2013). *Sonic Nickel Dance* and *Sonic Brass Dance* (2013), perhaps two of Yang's most surprising works, are almost monstrous forms born out of the mobile, performative sculptures that began with the *Dress Vehicles*.

If sounds are the voices of machines and instruments, real voices need human figures, which are often absent in Yang's work or appear only in the form of shadows or traces. Voices do play an important part, however, in Yang's videos, which consist primarily of collages of images and ambient sounds. The narrations in Yang's videos are always the artist's own reflections and confessions.¹⁸ It is hardly ever the artist that speaks, however, as she seeks, in using the voices of others, to erase the narratives to which



The Story of a Bear-Lady in a Sand Cave, 2009/2011

they refer.¹⁹ For, if each narrative is a life story, the voice is the embodiment of the life lived by the owner of that life. It is the same

belief that occasionally generated performative works in Yang's oeuvre, such as *Speaker's Corner* (2004) and *Unpacking Storage Piece* (2007), where various voices read the artist's scripts, all the way to *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – Shadowless Voice over Three* (2008), where microphones are installed as part of the work for viewers to use however they see fit.

While the scripts/narratives can be compromised, contaminated or even colonized by other voices, the text ultimately belongs to the

¹⁸ Particularly evident in the artist's *Video Trilogy – Unfolding Places* (2004), *Restrained Courage* (2004), and *Squandering Negative Spaces* (2006) – this continues in later videos like *Holiday Story* (2007) and *Doubles and Halves – Events with Nameless Neighbors* (2009).

¹⁹ The only exception is *Holiday Story* (2007), where Yang recorded her own voice because she could find no one to read the text in her place. She had in fact very little time to create the work and in a period corresponding to a Korean national holiday. (See HOLIDAYS.)

artist, who states that she adopted this process in order to overcome her shyness and let herself be “mercilessly talkative, not to censure anything embarrassingly pathetic.” If the writing here is the voice of the artist, those who actually voice the words must take the artist as a figure to be performed, while it is the artist who has determined the voice that performs in the first place.

What first appears to be an exception to the autobiographical nature of Yang's writing is *The Story of a Bear-Lady in a Sand Cave* (2009/11). It brings together two female figures from two incommensurable sources: a bear told to eat only garlic and mugwort for hundred days without leaving a cave in order to become a human being—then ultimately marries the son of the lord of heaven to produce the founder of the Korean nation; and a widow forced to constantly dig sand by fellow villagers in the striking film *The Woman in the Dunes* (1964) by Teshigahara Hiroshi, based on the 1962 novel of the same title by Abe Kōbō. At the heart of this founding myth of a nation as well as the avant-garde film and the novel is a woman forced to undergo injustice and cruelty without complaining in order to prove her worthiness to be part of a community, a civilization even. Far from seeing these figures as voiceless victims, Yang regards them as embodying certain fundamental moral principles upon which the social order is built. Through the combination of the two stories, the two women come in fact to form a single voice, an artistic voice. In the story as revised by Yang, the bear-lady clears the sand out of the cave and creates beautiful sandy undulations that convey an aesthetic message. The sand is no longer a building material, a source of profit, and the people outside, who cannot imagine its potential, are faced with the catastrophe that awaits them.

STAGE

A stage is a rarified, professionalized space that distinguishes itself from the audience. It is a space of skills, where trained performers can take on the almost shamanic capacity of self-imposed possession, for the sake of collective catharsis, and continues to be, in large part, a machine of illusions. While a gallery, also called a white cube, is also a stage, a rarified space, the differences are obvious. The opening hours of an exhibition venue are not limited like those of a performance and visiting an exhibition is not a collective or ritualistic experience, as going to the theater can be. The stage of an exhibition has, however, the advantage that the viewer can get a lot closer to the objects. A staged work must therefore make the most