

# Haegue Yang



Elephants, identity and abstraction:  
The winner of the 2018 Wolfgang Hahn Prize reveals the  
objects and ideas that have shaped her thinking

Vast Venetian blinds, exhaust fans on loop and clinking bells recur in Haegue Yang's sculptures, prints and installations: half-living talismans that solder industrial precision with the involvement of craft. Yang admires weaving as much for its touselled inefficiency as for its enjambment of the natural and the human-made. Artificial straw seems folkloric and totemic, but Yang uses it to probe questions of formatting and encoding: the ascription and sharing of values in communities, art historical and cultural traditions, for example; or the fraught fictions of abstraction and identification, east and west, social engagement and hermetic objection.

Always moving between these oppositions, Yang's abstractions are fricative. Yet, they dissemble a third layer, too, which is all the more inscrutable: difficult lives from art history, literature and politics in which the artist is steeped but which are rarely identifiable in the final work. They phrase questions that are all the more relevant today: can we separate the work from the figure? Can they ever be united? Yang's influences are doubly defiant: nearly restrained from legibility; these figures resurface still, like silent ghosts haunting stories untold.

I OFTEN RETURN to the agonizing, yet compelling, lives of artists whose biographies reveal an oscillation between their engagement in art and politics. As I see it, artists relate to their moment as though they are surfing a wave, up and down. Often, their engagement isolates them, though they might only realize this at the crest of the wave. Attention to their political achievements can lead to the simplification and reduction of their art; when their art is understood, their social or political work is obscured or diluted. While my own art does not contain traceable facets of such histories, an unlearning or blurring of these figures and their narratives has emerged over time, crafted and resolved into a dimension of abstraction.

Born in Sancheong, Korea, in 1917, the composer Isang Yun came to West Germany in 1957. Before his relocation, he lived through considerable political and ideological turmoil during the Japanese colonial period (1910–45), which saw the occupation of Korea, and the Korean War (1950–53). During this time, Yun was active in the Korean independence movement of armed resistance. He composed songs in Korean, which was forbidden at the time, leading to his arrest. He also founded and ran an institution for war orphans, contracting tuberculosis in the process.

In Europe, Yun quickly received recognition for his musical accomplishments. Yet here, too, he experienced another period of political turbulence. During the East Berlin Incident of 1967, he was kidnapped by the South Korean secret police and accused of spying for North Korea. His wife was arrested, together with hundreds of other Korean artists and intellectuals. As one of the most prominent among the accused, he was tortured, forced to confess and, following a suicide attempt, ultimately charged with the death penalty. After an international petition called for his release, Yun was freed and obtained German citizenship for his own security. He never returned to his homeland. In fact, Yun was only politically rehabilitated in Korea after his death. Now, public perception of Yun has changed: he is seen as a figure of political suppression and exile, and as a member of the resistance abroad against the country's military dictatorship.

OPPOSITE PAGE  
Haegue Yang,  
*The Intermediate –  
Running Firecracker*, 2016,  
artificial straw, steel  
stand, powder coating,  
casters, plastic twine,  
brass-plated bells,  
copper-plated bells,  
1.6 × 1.2 × 1.2 m.  
Courtesy: Galerie  
Barbara Wein, Berlin;  
photograph: Studio  
Haegue Yang

What remained overlooked was Yun's music. The end of the 1950s was a revolutionary period in contemporary music, with composers such as Béla Bartók, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Igor Stravinsky creating what we now refer to as *neue Musik* (new music). Arnold Schönberg's 12-tone technique gave music a completely new mathematical template for organizing Western musical tonality. Composers working after Schönberg had either to accept, question or reject the 12-tone technique. Having studied this approach, Yun returned to traditional Asian tonalities. Many of his instrumental methods were unusual and extremely difficult to play, such as his use of glissando, vibrato, portamento and pizzicato. Unlike in 12-tone composition, there are melodies in Yun's pieces; the way tones are performed is much more elastic – never a 'pure' G or F, but a sound that swells then recedes over a main note.

Most people cannot imagine what it means to be a non-Westerner working in contemporary art. In Korea, art was traditionally never separated from philosophy, scholarship or governance; 'contemporary art' is a modern affixation. Yun's musical trajectory did not recognize the ideologically drawn borders between North and South or East and West. He was geographically liberated via a detour that progressed toward *neue Musik* then returned to his lost tradition. Drawing on his experience as a Korean partially trained in Japan who migrated West, Yun integrated art and philosophy in a way that enabled him to return to the place from which he had been exiled. I find Yun's unfulfilled return incredibly significant, not just for the political implication of his resistance and the yearning for democracy in South Korea, but also for the possible connection with silences and isolations in the lives of other historical figures.

As a result of the postwar partitioning of both Germany and Korea, interesting political parallels can be drawn between these two seemingly different cultures. It was after travelling to North Korea in 1963, to realize his long-standing desire to see the Gangseo royal tomb murals of the Goguryeo Dynasty (37 BCE–668 CE), that Yun was accused of espionage. Composed during his imprisonment, 'Images for flute, oboe, violin and violoncello' (1968) was based on the paintings of four animals on the tomb walls: the white tiger, blue dragon, black tortoise and



THIS PAGE  
East and west wall  
murals from the main  
chamber of the Goguryeo  
Tombs, depicting a blue  
dragon and white tiger,  
5th century CE.  
Courtesy: Sakyejul  
Publishing Ltd.

red phoenix. Each animal represents a cardinal direction, but the funny thing is that they closely resemble one another. I admire Yun's vision and spirit to 'feel' these mystical animals, simultaneously distinctive yet similar, not unlike his divided homelands.

Historical narratives overlap with personal ones in the most unlikely of ways. When the oil crisis hit Korea in 1973, many Koreans who had operated as mercenaries alongside US forces in Vietnam looked to the Middle East and North Africa for construction jobs. The Korean government was eager to accumulate foreign reserves to help rebuild the country after the severe destruction caused by Japanese imperialism and the Korean War, as well as to secure energy supplies. Consequently, many of my generation grew up deprived of any contact with our fathers and uncles, who were working abroad.

This process isolated people from their families and caused entire generations to fall into silence. These social forces were dissimulated: played off as 'personal' decisions. In the regions to which they emigrated, these many husbands, brothers, uncles and fathers left few officially documented traces. But the massive infrastructure resulting from their labours endures: vast ports, factories, highways, hospitals and schools built from concrete. In this way, regions are unexpectedly connected yet remain disconnected, since this history is rarely discussed or disputed.

I remember my own father's absence. He worked as a journalist for the *Dong-a Ilbo* newspaper. When reporters occupied the company in 1974 to publish a newspaper free of censorship, it developed into a movement for freedom of speech, with those involved consequently fired and imprisoned. If you were arrested or imprisoned during the military dictatorship in Korea, you received a 'red line' on your ID, which disadvantaged you and your entire family; you couldn't get a job and no one was allowed to help you. To support our family, my father left for the Middle East and Africa and stayed for a long time. It was only after the June Struggle of 1987 that South Korea turned to democracy, finally electing a president in 1992. When the men came back to Seoul after the Middle Eastern boom, their experiences remained unspoken, as they had after the Vietnam War. Subsequent social developments created a lasting silence: even without systematic suppression, some narratives remain untold or unacknowledged.

When I went to Sharjah in 2015, I met other such fathers and uncles – no longer Korean but Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Filipino and Indian. Most of the workers I spoke to hadn't seen their families for years. Labour migration is a known fact but infrequently discussed. Instead of asking my father why he stayed so long, even after Korea's democratization, I studied the period to gain my own understanding of it. This was my personal effort to honour not only my father's silence but that of all the men who migrated for work. I wanted their silence to reach a dimension of opacity: a right to remain unknown. My project for the Sharjah Biennial, *An Opaque Wind* (2015), was an attempt to render this silence as dignified. This silence and isolation is an act of obscuring and resisting liberal ideas of transparency and mere equivalence.

THIS PAGE  
Haegue Yang, *Dry Spell*  
at *Villeperdue*, 2016, straw  
basket, wooden tripod,  
iron stove, artificial  
plants, mahogany  
seedpods, lotus seedpods,  
suicide tree seeds, pine  
cones, 225 x 103 x 91 cm.  
Courtesy: Galerie Barbara  
Wien, Berlin

OPPOSITE PAGE  
Haegue Yang, *Lingering Nour*,  
2016, installation view at  
Centre Pompidou, Paris.  
Courtesy: Centre Pompidou,  
Paris; photograph:  
Florian Kleinfenn



“Most people cannot imagine what it means to be a non-Westerner working in contemporary art.”

Abstraction enables me to work through individual and collective narratives across history in a non-linear or elastic manner. Coming across elephants in various sources over time helped me to establish the animal as a metaphor for that abstraction. For instance, according to one theory, the Chinese character for 'elephant' (象) derives from the shape of the animal's bones. Yet, it is probable that few people had ever even seen an elephant, particularly given that their existence in China has been contested. In modern Chinese, when you combine the symbol for 'person' (人) with that for 'elephant' (象), the resulting character signifies 'image' or 'motif' (像). The symbol seems to describe, then, a human imagining an animal they've never seen. It's come to represent, for me, this discrepancy between seen and unseen.

In his essay 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936), George Orwell describes his days in Burma as a British policeman. It includes a moment of identification in which the narrator, Orwell, feels within him the pain of an elephant he is forced to kill to prove his status in front of a gathered crowd. The hostile power struggle between humans is articulated by the act of killing an animal that has no relationship to the humans concerned. The creature's irrelevance, or independence, represents artistic or individual consciousness. The elephant stands between the colonizer and the colonized: a figure of isolation that must be killed to define the distance between both parties. Yet the Westerner, affected





*“Abstraction is not a reductionist or simplified way of thinking: it’s a leap.”*

ABOVE  
Romain Gary, 1953.  
Courtesy:  
Magnum Photos;  
photograph:  
Philippe Halsman

by colonial history, reaches the point where they have to kill their own elephant: the defiant autonomy of abstraction.

Though of Lithuanian descent, Romain Gary, who lived roughly contemporaneously to Yun, is the only French writer to have won the Prix Goncourt twice: once under his own name and once under the pseudonym Émile Ajar, which he adopted in 1975. His dual identity was only discovered through the note he left when he committed suicide in 1980. The letter also stated that his death was unrelated to that of his wife, the American actress Jean Seberg, who had been found dead – most likely having also committed suicide – a year before. Toward the end of his life, the whole world was seeking to discover Ajar’s true identity while Gary himself was regarded as little more than a has-been.

Gary had served as an aviator in the French Air Force, as secretary of the French Delegation to the UN, and as a diplomat in Los Angeles in 1956, representing France as a consul general. He was an extremely glamorous figure but also an intensely mysterious and lonely man, who seemingly never found his true home. In his semi-autobiographical book, *La Promesse de l’aube* (Promise at Dawn, 1960), Gary describes his upbringing and how his identity as a French writer was the realization of his mother’s great ambitions, although her immense love for him was almost suffocating. In addition to appropriating the pseudonym Ajar, he revealed that his childhood surname had not, in fact, been Gary but Kacew, which was his stepfather’s name. (He had never known his biological father.) His continual rebellion against the identity given to him confirms, for me, that we view names as a way to evaluate and classify someone in society. Even literature is limited in its grasp of the existential struggle of identity.

Returning to the topic of the elephant: in Gary’s *Les Racines du ciel* (The Roots of Heaven, 1956), the book’s protagonist, Morel, appears out of the blue in French Equatorial Africa during the civil war: a period of violence in which the indigenous people fought for their independence from the colonizers, yet also fought among themselves. Elephants were killed to raise money for arms. As in Orwell’s story, the elephant was a sacrifice for human hostility.

The most poignant episode in the book describes Morel’s experience in a concentration camp prior to his arrival in Africa. Exposed to inhumane conditions, a fellow internee proposes that they play a game – imagining a woman is incarcerated with them – in order to stay sane. The fictional presence of the woman encourages them to maintain their dignity and, consequently, to survive. A German officer discovers their ruse, however, and orders the prisoners to imagine killing the woman, thereby ending the game. Morel then devises a new survival strategy, imagining not a woman but a herd of stampeding elephants sweeping away the inhumanity. He vows that, if he survives, he will devote his life to these animals. This reference feeds into the first: elephants may save humans, but humans do not save elephants. In this moment of existential crisis, the action of the imagination becomes amplified. For me, this power of amplification is abstraction. Abstraction is not a reductionist or simplified way of thinking: it’s a leap – a leap into a dimension that cannot otherwise be understood ●

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HAEGUE YANG is an artist based in Berlin, Germany, and Seoul, South Korea. She is professor of fine arts at the Städelschule, Frankfurt, Germany; and recipient of the 2018 Wolfgang Hahn Prize. Her solo exhibitions include: Kunsthhaus Graz, Austria (until 2 April); KINDL Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin (until 13 May); kurimanzutto, Mexico City, Mexico; and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France (both 2017). ‘ETA’, a comprehensive survey of her work, opens at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, on 18 April. Yang will participate in the Biennale of Sydney, Australia, in March and the Liverpool Biennial, UK, in July.