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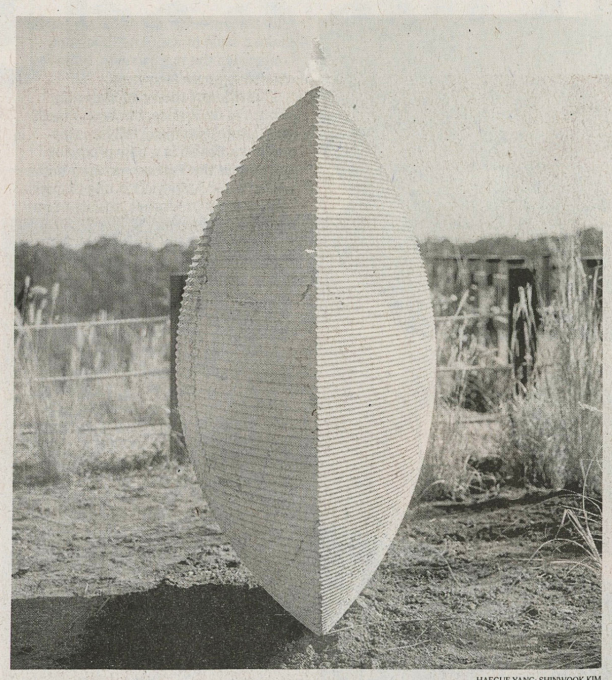
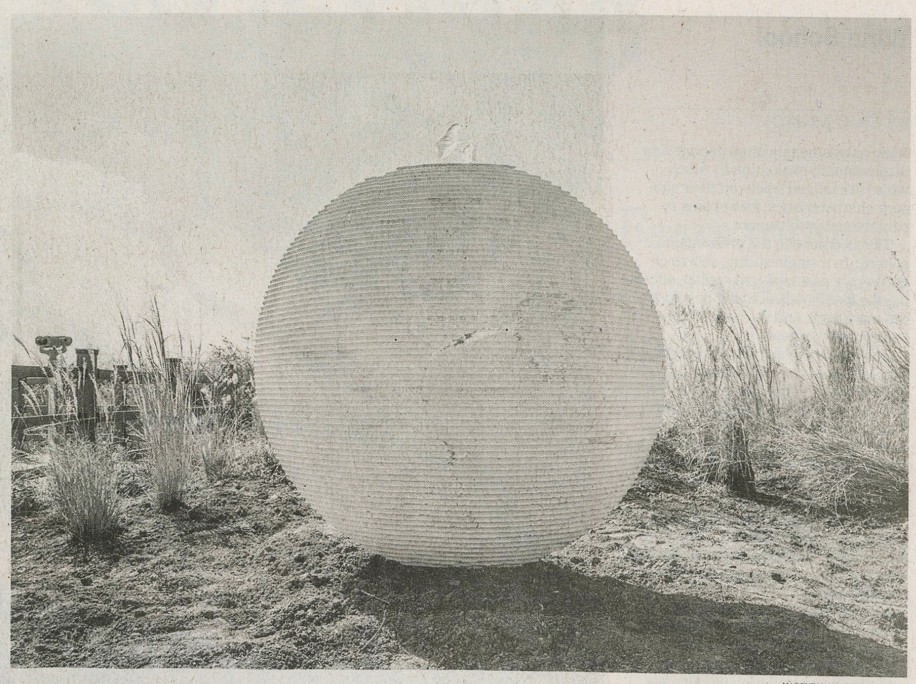
# Radical art of obscure delights

**SEOUL**

## In Haegue Yang's hands, ordinary items turn into metaphor generators

BY ANDREW RUSSETH





HAEGUE YANG; SHINWOOK KIM

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**Above, views of Haegue Yang's sculpture in the Korean Demilitarized Zone in the show "2021 DMZ Art & Peace Platform." It is a lens-like shape, and the bird is a pale thrush, 3D-printed in resin.**

When the South Korean artist Haegue Yang went to see one of her sculptures while it was installed outdoors last year, she was required to strap on a bullet-proof vest and a helmet, pass through military checkpoints and leave her phone behind. Finally, just a mile south of North Korea's border in the Korean Demilitarized Zone, she reached her piece, a roughly five-foot-tall block of gray soapstone with a translucent bird perched atop it.

It is a deceptive artwork. From some angles, the stone resembles a sphere, but it is actually a thinner, lens-like shape, and the bird — a pale thrush, 3-D printed in resin — has been separated from its center, though that, too, can be understood from only certain perspectives. "I knew from the beginning that almost nobody would see it in person, and I think it will be more surveilled than visited," Yang said, recalling her trip during a video interview here one morning this month. "I wanted to make something that is hard to believe but became a fact."

Alluding to Korea's 1945 partition, the desolate DMZ's unusual natural habitat and its 24-hour monitoring, the work is a characteristically intricate Yang production. Now 50, she has become one of the most celebrated artists of her generation by linking disparate histories, biographies and cultures at oblique angles and through unusual materials. In her hands, quotidian items like strings of lights, racks for drying clothes, IV stands and artificial straw have become components of dazzling, uncanny and occasionally obscure metaphor-generating machines.

In Yang's important 2008 installation, "Yearning Melancholy Red," which recently went on view in a group show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, heaters and fans generate "a tropical wind," said Eungie Joo, the curator of contemporary art at SFMOMA. Meanwhile, spotlights move about scattered Venetian blinds, manipulating people's sightlines and sense of space. The piece emerged from Yang's fascination with the novelist Marguerite Duras and her "childhood naïveté towards the colonialism that she lived through" in French Indochina, said Joo, who met Yang in 2004. "I could already see that she was fully formed as an artist," she said, and since then, "it's just a matter of us watching it unfold."

Yang is exacting in her approach. She bars all but collaborators and close friends from her studios, in Berlin and Seoul, because her team members "are very precious, and I want to protect them, because we really have a life there," she said. (She also claimed, deadpan, "I'm a bit lazy, and if someone comes, then we need more chairs, we need maybe better cups.")

She had carefully considered her participation in the government-sanctioned DMZ show. Putting art there "became a huge trend, but it's also a political project, where art is mobilized," she said. "I'm the kind of art person who doesn't like that hegemonial approach." The attraction of this effort was that South Korea's Ministry of Unification was in charge, and it would permit her to work where a guard post had stood, before being dismantled in a 2018 agreement between the Koreas. "I really wanted to penetrate physically all the way to that spot," she said, explaining that by marking it with a sculpture, "We recover that place for civil society from the military."

The presentation was part of a group show, "2021 DMZ Art & Peace Platform," organized by the art historian Yeon Shim Chung in various parts of the area, including a new venue called Unimaru. Yang could have shown there, she said, "but, you know, that is not an *action*. I don't need another exhibition."

Yang is never short of those. In March, she opened a major survey at the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen; this month she staged sculptures with a performance element in a three-woman show at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in Germany, and on Friday, she will unveil, at the Barbara Wien gallery in Berlin, beguiling new collages made by cutting hanji, traditional handmade paper. They may augur an intriguing shift in a career that has already seen many of them.

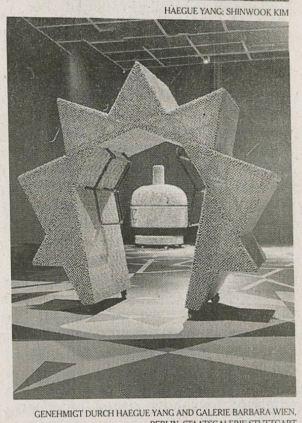
The pandemic helped bring them to fruition. In early 2020, when so much ground to a halt, Yang was in Seoul on the regular trip she makes during breaks at Frankfurt's Städelschule, where she teaches. For the first time since 1994 — when she left to attend graduate school there, speaking little German — she spent "all four seasons in Korea," she said.

Yang had long been interested in rituals in which some Korean shamans decorate ritual sites and interact with spirits. Now she had time to meet practitioners and study their process. Her resulting paper collages, which debuted at the Kukje Gallery in Seoul last year, suggest otherworldly Rorschach tests: angular, kaleidoscopic fields that can appear to harbor ghostly beings. They are jaw-droppingly elegant, but dealing with the sturdy paper, made from the inner bark of mulberry trees, can be torturous. "You have to fold really well, you have to hold it well, and you have to press it," Yang said, enacting how she uses her body to hold it in place so that it can be cut with a knife. Early on, her hands, and those of her assistants, bled.

Shamanism has been marginalized and regarded as "anti-modern" in Korea, Yang said, and she had no relationship with it growing up in Seoul, but it has become a key source for her art. She links it with pagan practices in Europe as "something very vital, something fundamentally decentralized and kind of anti-authoritarian but that has still survived over a long time." Bells, figuring in both shaman rituals in Korea and pagan traditions in the Black Forest in Germany, ornament many of her sculptures, which can take the form of soaring vines or wily abstracted bodies.

MUSTAFAH ABDULAZIZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

HAEGUE YANG/VISDA: ANDERS SUNE BERG



GENEHMIGT DURCH HAEGUE YANG AND GALERIE BARBARA WIEN, BERLIN; STAATSGALERIE STUTTGART

**Left, Yang in Berlin. Above left, her "Sonic Intermediate — Six-Fingered Wayfarer After Arke," from 2021, and right, pieces from her installation "Handles," part of "Moved by Schlemmer: 100 Years of Triadic Ballet" at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in Germany.**

For her show in Denmark, Yang made a bell-adorned sculpture dedicated to Pia Arke (1958-2007), an artist whose work examining her Danish and Kalaaleq (Greenlandic Inuit) identity sometimes involved maps. Nearly seven feet tall, "Sonic Intermediate — Six-Fingered Wayfarer After Arke" (2021) features a globe that incorporates a 17th-century Korean map cradled by six-fingered hands, inspired by a twin-thumbed Inuit mitten Yang saw in the museum's collection.

"As I see it, she really strongly believes in hybridity," Marianne Torp, the show's curator, said, "and she really strongly believes that we have to communicate, that we have to exchange, that we have to consider objects and ideas from different cultures together to proceed and to have a dialogue." Torp sees Yang dealing with "issues of transculturalism and transnationality, of dealing with her own experiences of migrating from Asia to Europe — the diaspora experience."

With unrelenting élan, Yang forges artworks that are strange brews of ever-evolving references. "There is something very, very old — historic — and you feel that, and on the other hand, you feel that it is very contemporary," said Susanne Kaufmann-Valet, who is co-organizing the Stuttgart show, which toasts the centennial of "The Triadic Ballet," a storied Gesamtkunstwerk by the Bauhaus artist and choreographer Oskar Schlemmer. The six tall sculptures that Yang sent draw on the polymathic artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp and the mystic G. I. Gurdjieff. Goofy, charming and vaguely anthropomorphic, they are bedecked with bells and sit on wheels, at once sculptures and props. After alighting in New York at the Museum of Modern Art in 2019, they now respond to the ballet's third act in a black-walled gallery, with the museum's guards moving them in performances.

Yang has made work directly inspired by "The Triadic Ballet" in the past, and she said that one appealing aspect of Schlemmer's avant-garde classic was that many details about it are missing. "It is actually a lost piece, it is an enigma, but it is his most beloved piece. So I thought, OK, there are enough unknown parts that I can project myself."

She also seems to relish mysteries in her own work — and herself. While producing new cut-paper works last month for her Berlin show, Yang realized that she was making "figurative motifs, faces, hands, sea animals," the stuff of "very old-fashioned fairy tale books." Her reaction was: "Oh, my God, these are too concrete! I was freaking out." But then she stopped herself, and thought, "No, you always try not to get trapped under any label." In any case, she said, "I should not know what I am doing."

With the Städelschule holding in-person classes again and border rules easing, Yang has resumed traveling. This year, she made her usual stop in Seoul in March, right on schedule. "I think there was kind of, unconsciously, a deep hope or speculation or hidden desire in my mind and heart about the big chapter of return to Korea," she said. But after her extended pandemic stay, "I think that fantasy kind of revealed, and also died," she said.

"The idea of the self is so very deceiving," Yang went on. "You normally think that you know what you want, but there are so many hidden desires."

One might say something similar of her many-layered art, which is as eye-grabbing as it is elusive, and which shifts in appearance, and meaning, as you look at it from different angles.

"I sometimes say that I *are*," Yang said. "I am not singular. Definitely not."