

# Galerie Barbara Wien

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**BURLINGTON**  
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Installation view of *Haegue Yang: Tracing Movement* at the South London Gallery, 2019. (Photograph Andy Stagg).

## Haegue Yang

by Sarah Bolwell

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The first ‘infiltration tunnel’ dug by North Korea underneath the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into South Korea was discovered in Yeoncheon, Gyeonggi Province, in 1974. From Japanese occupation (1910–45), through partition and the resulting Korean War of 1950–53, to the military coups and assassinations of the 1960s and 1970s, the political and social situation on the Korean peninsula was volatile for much of the twentieth century. And yet clashes between the countries north and south of the 38th parallel were always peppered by efforts at peaceful coexistence. The DMZ was instigated at the end of the Korean War as a buffer zone between the two opposing forces; within it the Joint Security Area was set up as a space where North and South Korean military could meet amicably. The discovery of the tunnels compromised this peace. Two years later, in 1976, the murder of two United States Army officers by North Korean soldiers – known as the ‘Panmunjom Axe Murder Incident’ – led to the complete shutdown of movement between North and South Korea.

*Tracing Movement*, an exhibition of predominantly new work by the Seoul-born artist Haegue Yang at the South London Gallery (SLG), frames narratives of movement, both personal and political. In the middle of the room two large structures comprised of venetian blinds and many tiny bells are wheeled around intermittently by performers **FIG. 1**. The gentle turns of these ‘mobile costumes’ are un-choreographed – operators are free to make whatever motions they please, limiting and activating the space as they do so. These large structures are examples from Yang’s ongoing *Dress Vehicles* (2011) series, in which movement can be read in terms of migration (this is implied by the title of one of the included sculptures *Bulky Birdy*, suggesting a

bird's impeded movement). The combination of abstract forms and human bodies suggests how human movement is hindered by external politics and realities. The bells recall shamanic Korean rituals, while their angular architecture could be seen as a nod to the Bauhaus and brutalism – in 1994, Yang moved from South Korea to Berlin, to a nation that had only recently reunified, and where she has lived and worked ever since. We can therefore read these performative sculptures as a tribute to Yang's own migratory narrative and dual nationality.

Until now, Yang's work has tended not to address politics explicitly, and relied instead upon reinterpreting the narratives of others. At SLG, however, she takes her own politically inflected narrative as her subject, in particular in one of two sound installations. An audio recording of birdsong plays through ceiling-mounted speakers and is activated when audience members walk across the central area of the room. The soundtrack was recorded in April 2018, when Moon Jae-In, the South Korean President, and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un met in the Joint Security Area of the DMZ for an inter-Korean summit. Although nothing concrete came of the conversation it was a historic moment because it was the first time in eleven years that leaders from the two countries had met, and the first time a North Korean leader had entered South Korean territory since the war. The meeting was broadcast live on television in South Korea and was therefore tightly choreographed, but at one point the two leaders got up and walked to the end of a wooden jetty to speak in private. The audio Yang presents in the exhibition was recorded during this event, a no-mans-land, a suspended sense of time, the repetitive birdsong occasionally punctuated by the click of a camera shutter.

Yang effortlessly juxtaposes this momentous moments with the quotidian. Walter Benjamin's observation that 'to dwell means to leave traces',<sup>1</sup> referring affectionately to the detritus of daily life, chimes with a number of Yang's smaller wall-based works that include items from her studio. A new series, *Blade Notation – Discordant Step* (2019), **FIG. 2** presents cutting blades from her studio submerged in lacquer. Their latent violence is reminiscent of the works of Mona Hatoum. In her sculpture *Grater Divide* (a three-sided cheese grater enlarged to the proportions of a screen for separating rooms), Hatoum presents household objects as at once threatening and funny. Yang neutralises her blades with a similarly tongue-in-cheek reversal of function, as the threat of cutting is muffled by the blades' encasement, acting as a buffer, perhaps another nod to precarious political relations in Korea.

A number of Yang's collages are included in the exhibition. Two works from *Hardware Store Collage* series **FIG. 3** belie Yang's concern with the formal. Images of Samsung televisions and remote controls are not particularly enigmatic, but their reduced scale and grid-like placement affords these black-and-white works on paper an architectural quality, tying them in to the bulky bell structures roaming the gallery floor.

In this exhibition tracing is presented as the act of giving form to something intangible. The simple noises that ring around the room – the tinkling bells and the birdsong – are at once silly and slightly eerie, and allow for the tracing of movement aurally. In the geometric forms that adorn the walls, from her ongoing *Trustworthies* series (2010) furthermore, Yang provides a visual framework **FIG. 4**. Movement of people can only be traced on a map or through the narratives of the people in a state of flux. Yang's graphic prints and patterns, cut and pasted onto the grey gallery walls, provide an ordered mathematical structure through which to consider the chaos and irregularity of migration in such a way that is neither topographical nor epistolary. The works address the movement of people: the series was first inspired by patterns Yang found on the inside of envelopes. Her bold angular arrangement of these fragments seems directional, instructive almost, the forms seeming to point up, down and across the wall.

Yang's *Carsick Drawings* (2016) more directly interpret the exhibition's subtitle **FIG. 5**. Horizontal lines judder down the page. From a distance they look like a page from a notebook, hurried notations or shorthand only legible to its writer. And yet there is no transcription at play: Yang made these on car journeys during an artist's residency in Japan, and the lines record the terrain of the road beneath the wheels of the car. Effecting only the touch of her pen to the paper, the lines are devoid of agency, they are topographical tracings. Yang only broke the connection of her pen at the end of a line, or ultimately when her motion sickness became too much for her to continue. They are funny and universally nostalgic, playfully harking back to childhood journeys spent scribbling in the back seat.

The exhibition fills just one large room, but the diversity of Yang's practice is eloquently conveyed. The show comes at an interesting juncture: the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, staged a mid-career survey of her work last year and Tate has recently announced a solo presentation of her work in 2020. Yang considers motion, whether it be a mass diaspora of people or a small jolt as one drives over a bump in the road, a balance of the intimate and the public, and here indeed presents a nuanced approach, one both political and personal.

## Details

[Haegue Yang: Tracing Movement](#)

South London Gallery

8th March–26th May 2019

## About the author

Sarah Bolwell is Assistant Articles Editor at the Burlington Magazine.

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## Footnotes

- 1 W. Benjamin: 'Paris: capital of the nineteenth century', in Jennings, ed.: *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings vol.3 1935–1938*, Cambridge MA 2002, p.39.
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