

MoMA



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
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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.



Stuart Comer and Haegue Yang. Photo: Rose Liu

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—"boxing" 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?



Haegue Yang, Photo: Rose Liu

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*.



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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.