When Heman met Haegue

On the occasion of their having almost simultaneous solo institutional exhibitions in Seoul, *ArtReview Asia* couldn’t resist inviting the two friends to catch up and interrogate each other about their respective shows.
Part One

Haeue Yang discusses her current solo exhibition at the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul

Heman Chong: Your exhibition has a curious title…

Haeue Yang: Shooting the Elephant & Thinking the Elephant contains a Chinese character, 中国, which is a chimerical entity. I found it fascinating to imagine the origin of this character, since the elephant doesn’t inhabit any region in which Chinese was or is used. The same goes for another metaphor of the exhibition, which is a Lion Dance, a folk dance that’s widespread across the whole of Asia, a region that’s not inhabited by lions. You won’t find an elephant or a lion in the show either. They served as a metaphor of living – a living that was only imagined, yet which was territorialised as a part of folk culture so that it could be even claimed as ‘ours’ and understood as something ‘familiar’. Another reference in the title comes from literature, George Orwell’s short story Shooting the Elephant and Romain Gary’s novel The Elephant’s Foot. Orwell, about an environmentalist in French Equatorial Africa who sets out to preserve elephants from extinction; in the first, the elephant appears as an unapproachable, yet innocent animal (or cipher for nature), killed by the irrelevant human-centric power system of colonialism. Orwell (who is recounting his experience as a police officer in colonial Burma) was pressured by that system and eventually had to shoot the elephant when he was surrounded by thousands of Burmese expecting to witness the existence of their coloniser. In the other work, the elephant shows its power as well as weakness: on the one hand it provides a most unlikely source of hope to liberate the lights from their functional existence in this completely open space. Three right-angle triangle-shaped bulks in walls, hung upside-down from the ceiling, have been treated so that each side is distinctly different from the other: the outer surface has an ordinary finish while the inner side is rough and grungy like sandpaper. Also I’ve allowed the grid of the panels on this inner side to be revealed. Over the course of the exhibition, there will be some staines from people touching this side of the walls, this contact and the sensation of texture, as well as the collective trace of visitors, will be significant.

HC: Let’s talk about Storage Piece! [you] It is a work that has been discussed greatly within the context of your practice. Why did you choose to exhibit it now, among the other works in the show?

HY: Storage Piece is located in the middle of the exhibition, it’s a work originally made for a show while I was on a Delfina Foundation residency in London. It is often said that Storage Piece marks an important turning point in my practice. The background to it was that there was an offer of a commercial gallery space for an exhibition but I had no ability to make the show, either financially or physically. And parallel to this offer, there were numerous requests that should pick up works, returning from other exhibitions for which I couldn’t afford any storage space. So I proposed to use the exhibition budget to bring all those works – which were always accompanied by a speech – to a new exhibition, as ‘Cabinet of Packaging’. storage piece, everything would be fiercely unpacked in the exhibition, as ‘Unpacking the Storage Piece’. So ever since then, Storage Piece has been unpacked many times, sometimes as it is. The piece emerge, so the modification is necessary . The speech describes a couple of pieces that I encountered; one should not hold on to the physicality of the work. Overall, this oscillation itself reinforces the potential and the ecology behind the work. It reflects a kind of timed negation of the ‘fetish’ of conceptualism inherent in Storage Piece, there is a kind of concern and doubt that remains and that is contained within it. Personally, I’m very pleased to have Storage Piece on view here, a work that a lot of people have heard about many times, yet not so many people have encountered; it is important that people face the work in person.

Storage Piece is always accompanied by a speech that will be given at the opening of the exhibition by someone other than myself. The script for this speech has been modified slightly each time it has been delivered, reflecting the changed circumstances and the ways in which my own reaction to the work cumulatively changes over time. The crisis born out of a simple, pure circumstance disappears, while new challenges and problems emerge, so the modification is necessary. The speech describes a couple of pieces that were found within the work that people cannot see, because everything is wrapped up. Very much a monologue, which fluctuates from being super-confident on the one hand – suggesting that there is a great solution, even a brilliant one, given the challenge of the circumstances – but at the same time being filled with doubt, based on a belief in concept and idea – that one should not hold on to the physicality of the work. Overall, this oscillation itself reinforces the potential and the ecology behind the work. It reflects a kind of timed negation of the ‘fetish’ of conceptualism inherent in Storage Piece, there is a kind of concern and doubt that remains and that is contained within it. Personally, I’m very pleased to have Storage Piece on view here, a work that a lot of people have heard about many times, yet not so many people have encountered; it is important that people face the work in person.

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Seoul is full of people who are ‘sick’: in a way you’re building characters. The daily life in Seoul is just tough, you come up with ideas to survive – taking vitamins or medicating against cancer, for diabetes, it’s just crazy. They’re all functioning, but at the same time they’re not functioning at all. There is no border anymore between healthy and sick. These two things build a parallel, and in this you still have to keep going. For example, these objects I use, these small objects for managing your body, it’s once humorous and pitiful. You only can spend a small amount of money with such a big hope that it will make you feel better. These items I discovered while I was shopping, or ‘hunting’ for material. I think this shopping process in the city was crucial.

By critically reexamining the notion of ‘folk’, I realised that the use of natural straw would only conform to the given narrow idea of ‘folk art’, confirming the notion of ‘us’, which is often a race, nation, religious or language group, etc. each bulb to under 25 – efficient enough. The light sculptures inherited the technique as a metaphor, rather than simply emulating the notion of ‘folk’, I realised that the use of natural straw would only conform to the given narrow idea of ‘folk art’, confirming the notion of ‘us’, which is often a race, nation, religious or language group, etc.

ArtReview Asia
Heman Chong talks about his current solo exhibition, at Artonje Center, Seoul

Part Two

HAEGUE YANG: Are there any new works in the show?
HEMAN CHONG: The banner, Welcome! (Boiling Point), is a new work, as are the poster, Past, Live (Art Range 2008–2015), the extinguishers, Safety Measure, the boiling water, Boiling Point, the email painting, Emails from Stengers (Zara) and the smoking corner, Someone Gets In (Your Eye) (all 2015). The abstract paintings from the series, Things That Reware Downstairs, I consider old pieces, since they’re a part of a series I started in 2009. And this video is an intervention that was originally produced in 2009.

HY: Why do you call it an intervention?
HC: The work is called Until the End of the World (Paused) [2008] and it really relies on a very direct intervention of the first member of the audience that comes into the space: the film is played until the person comes in view of it and is then paused. The paused image is the object that will be shown throughout that day.

HC: You can also say that it is a performance.
HY: I think the terms are very problematic. Terms usually don’t stick around very long for me. In fact, given a choice, I would like to define every single work I make as an object. The word ‘object’ is very beautiful because it is a generic term that can encapsulate everything.

HY: And do you consider this show a typical show of yours? Or is there a difficulty in defining what ‘typical’ is anyway?
HC: I think that people keep think of you as an artist who has affiliations with literature and writing, which is not always the same thing. When you consider it, there’s a very relevant relation between the short story and your productions. And, how does that function in relation to our time here and now?

HY: That’s a very good question. I think it’s actually encrypted in how I write. The writing itself is about surrendering oneself to details, rather than trying to explain the circumstances of the story.

HC: You are trying to get rid of that idea of the grand narrative.
HY: Yes. To get rid of a master plan.

HC: For instance, the two pots on hotplates in the exhibition, there is hardly any fabrication process. It is a typical example of how smal l things can be made for an exhibition, and it’s very close to what we’ve seen around in our contemporary society, full of commodities and related services. Somewhere that piece seems like a laboratory experiment for demonstrating the self and smooth circulation of goods and services, not high science. Did you mean for it to be an expression of these economies as well as solitude, along the lines of parables?

HC: Not actually. The piece is called Boiling Point, and for me it has a cinematic quality to it. When I’m in a relationship with someone, I often spend a lot of time negotiating the relationship through cooking. I also find myself watching things boil, watching things transform into other things. For me, there’s a certain relation with transformation of this state of things in relation to the daily process of cooking – you know, transforming material into food. I think the work talks about that for me. I thought it would also be beautiful to initiate a process that suggests a certain transformation, which is to boil some water. It is also a sound piece where you hear the water boiling, and a thermostopic piece in that you can feel heat emanating off the work. There’s something about moisture that appeals to me also that something that is not dry, unfinished. Something that exists in the space where it becomes difficult to talk about.

HY: The work is rather far from social commentary with its cynical appropriation. Isn’t it actually quite the opposite.
HC: When I started thinking about the work, it came across as a very short process. That’s really about having a look in the space that works without a recording. So it’s something that happens over and over again. Which can easily become social commentary when you wrap it around certain contexts.

HY: Over and over again? Or constantly feeling?
HC: Over and over again. Because the water boils and the pots have to be refilled. There is a step in between the boils.

HY: Is it bipolarmal?
HC: It’s about waiting, this sense of waiting for something to happen.

HY: Waiting for something to boil down.

HC: Exactly. And I always tell people that the ideas of the biography is unavoidable. You can resist and refrain from expressing it, but it’s hard to say it’s not a part of you. At the same time, I don’t think we have to consistently inhabit this mode. This balance is important.
What if someone collects the work?

The space that connects the three works is there. It's always there.

I think it's also important for me that it's also there when you see it. So, it's always there for me.

I think in this round, what I did was to surrender to the extinguisher. And it's something that writers do as a technique, even filmmakers: when they cannot finish a story, they surrender, and the last paragraph ends the story on a different tangent; rather like a strange, misplaced punctuation.

Every time I have an exhibition in Seoul, either myself or the curators would go into a panic about how to hide the extinguisher. I think in this round, what I did was to surrender to the extinguisher. And it's something that writers do as a technique, even filmmakers: when they cannot finish a story, they surrender, and the last paragraph ends the story on a different tangent; rather like a strange, misplaced punctuation.

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I think it refers to a kind of senseless accumulation within the space. In this situation, it made more sense to talk about the notion of influence. You smell the scent in the air and you see the pots of cigarette butts, and somehow it's on show at the Leeum, which is the smoking corner, it makes sense not to have someone store away piles of cigarette butts.

The importance of these punctuations, as the gaps in a story, is something to do with the sentimental and the sensory. Metaphorically, they somehow build a form of drama, something to do with the sentimental and the sensory.

For me, the cigarette smell has nothing to do with the fire extinguishers, every time I have an exhibition in Seoul, either myself or the curators would go into a panic about how to hide the extinguisher. And it's something that writers do as a technique, even filmmakers: when they cannot finish a story, they surrender, and the last paragraph ends the story on a different tangent; rather like a strange, misplaced punctuation.

The biographical aspect is also related to where I live. In Singapore, you really find the moisture in the air. I thought it would be an interesting sculptural moment to talk about this humidity.

One of the works is on show at Artsonje Center, Seoul, Is this a principle of every work in the show?

For me, the cigarette smell has nothing to do with the fire extinguishers, every time I have an exhibition in Seoul, either myself or the curators would go into a panic about how to hide the extinguisher. And it's something that writers do as a technique, even filmmakers: when they cannot finish a story, they surrender, and the last paragraph ends the story on a different tangent; rather like a strange, misplaced punctuation.

To a certain extent. For example, with the fire extinguishers, every time I have an exhibition in Seoul, either myself or the curators would go into a panic about how to hide the extinguisher. I think in this round, what I did was to surrender to the extinguisher. And it's something that writers do as a technique, even filmmakers: when they cannot finish a story, they surrender, and the last paragraph ends the story on a different tangent; rather like a strange, misplaced punctuation.

In a sense I get it, but I think that it's too general: it's like smoking is on show at the Leeum, which is the smoking corner, for example, it's something to do with the sentimental and the sensory. Metaphorically, they somehow build a form of drama, something to do with the sentimental and the sensory.

It's somehow there, you don't really know what to do with it on certain days; on other days, it's very apparent how you must encounter the instruction.

HC HY smoke Gets In (Your Eyes); an instruction. I've chosen to push that as a subplot to the story. It's a very existential question for me and there was even some point in my life when I thought: I don't want to do exhibitions any more; I'm just going to focus on writing.

However, with this show I found it interesting again to construct these objects, simply because there is still a potential within each object that opens up an intimacy with the audience. For me, writing has a lot to do with describing, with the notion of making a list, in order to make a connection to the described. It's very close to sitting beside a person, about companionship. A description accompanies the reader also to suggest that the short story is written without any drafts, that it's mostly improvised. I'm not trying to bring you somewhere, but to propose that you have to go there on your own terms.

I've never read it, but I think that it's natural; which you don't accompany an audience?

It's rather unanswerable for me too, but that's true.