



COS magazine
Autumn & Winter 2014

The (quiet) City

This 15th issue of COS magazine celebrates the nature of the city. The urban environment, with its streets, parks, pavements and alleyways, is a fitting locale for this season's vital fashions and discussions.

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The distinctive pavements of SEOUL, BERLIN, PARIS and SHANGHAI
are featured on pages 19, 47, 71 and 89 respectively.



The Han River winds among Seoul's 37 mountains and countless hills. The city's climate is humid, with an average annual rainfall of 1.45 metres.

The sprawling capital of South Korea is the exotic tomorrowland of pop culture and high technology. It also happens to be the new home of Haegue Yang. The artist is reconnecting with Seoul after decades of study and success in Germany, the base from which she treated the world to grand sculptural works that have something of the Bauhaus's mechanised ballets and the colour palette of Sol LeWitt about them. Today we meet at Kukje, the gallery that has helped shape Yang's stellar career. Established in 1982, Kukje has made a business of bringing Western artists to Korea, and Korean artists to its New York gallery and art fairs everywhere. Nowadays it occupies its own little campus in Samcheong-dong, amid the shops, the galleries and the sparkling new National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art.

Interview by Caroline Roux
Photography by Nina Ahn

Haegue YANG

Caroline: I've just come from the Leeum museum, where they have an impressive work of yours – a seven-piece sculpture, where each structure is made of different types of things, from brushes to light bulbs.

Haegue: Yes, it's called *Seoul Guts*. I made it for a solo show here in Seoul in 2010.

C: What are your memories of making *Seoul Guts*?

H: Well, I brought all the materials over from Berlin. It was based on my outsider perspective on Korea, so it made sense to bring the components with me from Europe. I was preparing my first institutional exhibition and I really wanted to show something significant. In group exhibitions you can only show one aspect of your work. For a solo show you can do something more complex and complete.

C: It must be terrifying doing your first solo show.

H: The word 'guts' explains the attitude I needed back then to work in this city. I feel more grounded in Seoul today than in 2009. Back then, I really felt like a visitor, and I had to struggle and fight to establish my position.

C: Do you live near here?

H: Not so far away, in an area called Buam-dong, north of here but still in the centre. It's a peaceful neighbourhood, just below Mount Inwang, so there are amazing views. I really like it. It's calm and very green.

C: This part of Seoul where we are walking now seems to be an interesting mix of old and new.

H: It is. That palace you probably passed on the way here is Gyeongbokgung. There's been a palace there for 600 years, rebuilt many times. Then the Japanese really destroyed it badly at the beginning of the 20th century, and it's still being reconstructed. South of the palace's Gwanghwamun gate is where demonstrations take place, and there are governmental buildings and high-rise flats. So we're in the old city centre, but with a mixture of the mainstream and the marginalised in contemporary Seoul.

C: How do you divide your time between here and Berlin?

H: This year, I'm trying to be more based in Seoul and only go back to Europe whenever I need to.

Officially I'm on a sabbatical and not producing anything new. It's my own celebration. I left Korea 20 years ago, so this homecoming is a present to myself. I've been so busy for the last few years and I wanted to stop being tied into a crazy schedule. The idea was to be here and enjoy it, to think about a new chapter, a new challenge.

C: How does being in Korea help that?

H: I'm thinking about the whole region of Asia. I'm currently interested in what 'Asia' means. What is this region which has no collective identity? The Japanese and the Chinese both think they are at the centre of Asia and don't know much about south-east Asia, where the countries are much more multicultural. China, Japan and Korea are all very monocultural.

C: So will you go exploring around Asia from here?

H: Yes, because I'm interested in the whole territory – from Beijing to Istanbul, the Gulf, India, central Asia, all of which used to have a fluid relationship. In order to make art, I have to think in a broad way. I'm interested in mobility, in the way we all move around so much. It's helping the world become more decentralised. And I'm no exception. For me, it's natural to go to Mumbai to see what's going on. Or to the Middle East.

C: When are you off to Mumbai?

H: I'm travelling to Shanghai and Hong Kong next. I've never been to China before. I doubt I'll find much on my first visit. My expectations are low. But it's really about a longer-term preparation, and eventually I'll get something worthwhile from the people and the place. I'm studying China in every sense. Contemporary art is about the here and now. How can I work seriously without investigating the time I live in?

C: What's this beautiful little building? It's like a concrete pavilion clad in a chain-link outer layer.

H: It's Kukje's newest gallery space; we call it K3. It's got a fantastically high ceiling. I'm starting to imagine what I could do in there. It's the sort of architecture that invites experimentation.

C: Does 'Kukje' mean anything, or is it just a name?

H: It means 'international' in Korean. It sort of fits the gallery.

C: And is this part of Kukje too?

H: This building is K2. There's a Damián Ortega show on in there at the moment. But let's go to the original one, K1, because it has a really nice café, and we can talk in there.

C: On the web you come up as Heike Jung. How is Berlin Heike Jung different from Seoul Haegue Yang?

H: There isn't really a Heike – it's a joke! The domain name heikejung.de was given to me by some friends for Christmas in 1999. Did you think I had that much of a sense of humour? (laughs)

C: But do you feel a bit German by now?

H: I've been in Germany for 20 years and in Berlin for nine, but I don't believe that I'm a Berliner, or even a Berlin-based artist. No, thank you. I am definitely not part of the Berlin hype. I hardly know what's going on there, though I do know what's happening in politics and so on, from what I read in the newspaper.

C: Where do you live in Berlin?

H: My studio is in Kreuzberg – that part of Berlin has changed so much since I've been there. But so has Seoul, and Korea in general. So now I can be reconnected with my mother tongue and culture. I went to Germany when I was 23, so I was already an adult, but there is something very unfamiliar for me here. I guess society has changed a lot. Korea is a typical Asian country in the way that it has such a condensed history. Three years here feels like ten years somewhere else. There's always been a lot of catching up to do every time I've come back.

C: Were you born here in Seoul?

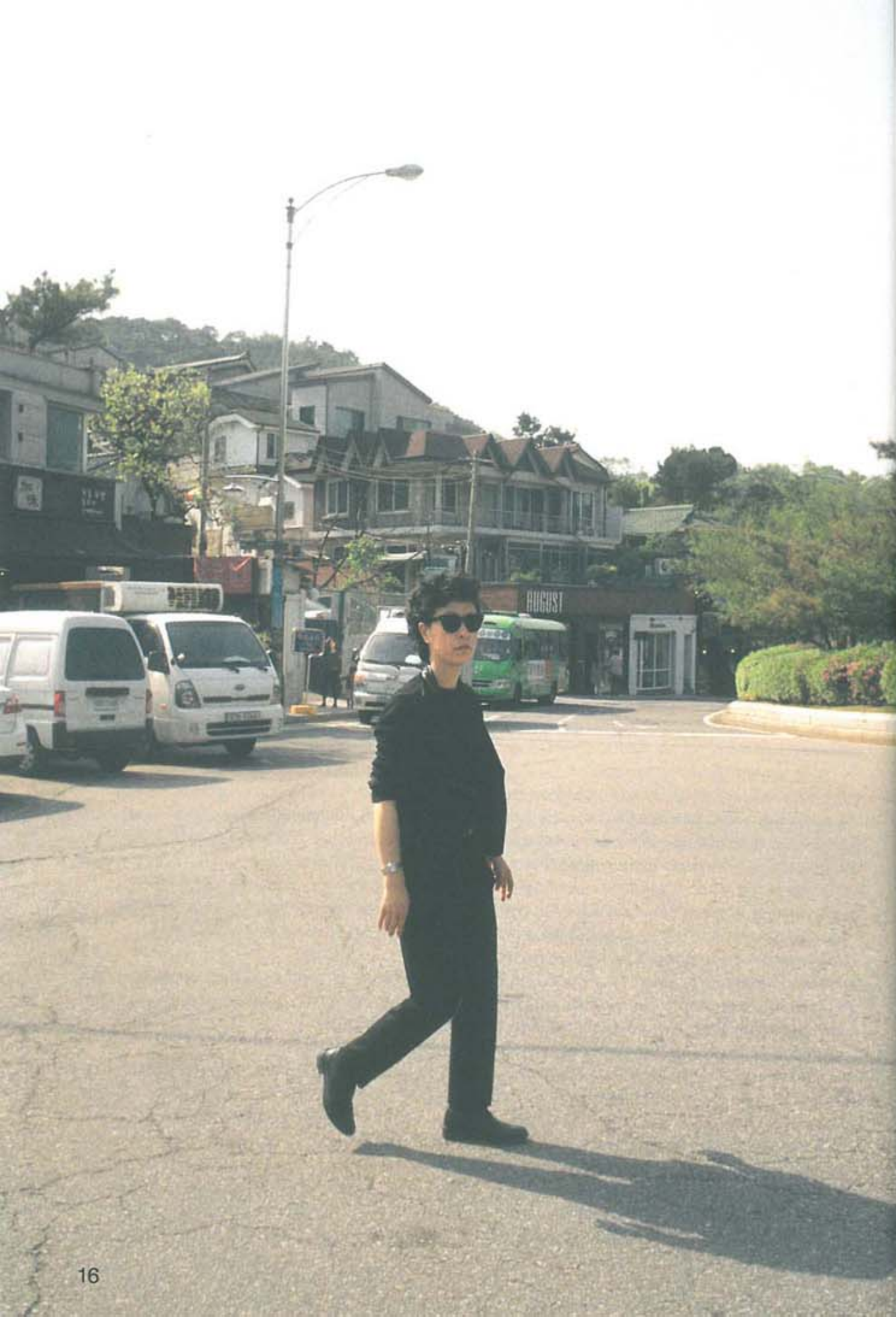
H: Yes, I'm a typical Seoul girl.

C: What's that?

H: It depends on the generation, but let's say I'm the beginning of the X generation that came after the 389 generation.

C: 389?

H: They're the ones who fought for democratisation. The X generation are the ones who enjoyed the results of what the 389 generation achieved. There had been so much unrest, but when I went to university, there were hardly any demonstrations any more, and people started to go back to the library and study hard. We were rather tame; I think that we really wanted to be. And Seoul was



expanding. Now Seoul stands for sophisticated living, Gangnam style. Sometimes you really need to get out of the city.

C: The art world's spotlight will be on South Korea, I guess, when the Gwangju Biennale is on this autumn.

H: Sure. The biennale is a big deal. And Gwangju is only a few hours away. People usually plan on coming to Seoul as well, and we have a big event called Mediacity Seoul that begins in August at the Seoul Museum of Art. It's like our own biennale.

C: Isn't the director a filmmaker?

H: He's with Kukje, too. His name is Chang Yang Park. He makes videos and films, and he's an excellent writer and thinker. I think it's quite an artistic sacrifice for him to direct the biennale – it's taking time away from his own work. But I know that he's very interested in the modern history of Korea, and the Cold War, and our very particular political situation of a country divided into two.

C: Did he call you as soon as he knew he was directing the event?

H: No! He didn't even consider me. But then we were in a group show together in Istanbul. Not that we met – I was at the vernissage and he went to the finissage. But he saw my piece and realised my work resonated with his ideas, so he asked me at a very late stage. That's why I'm still working on the piece.

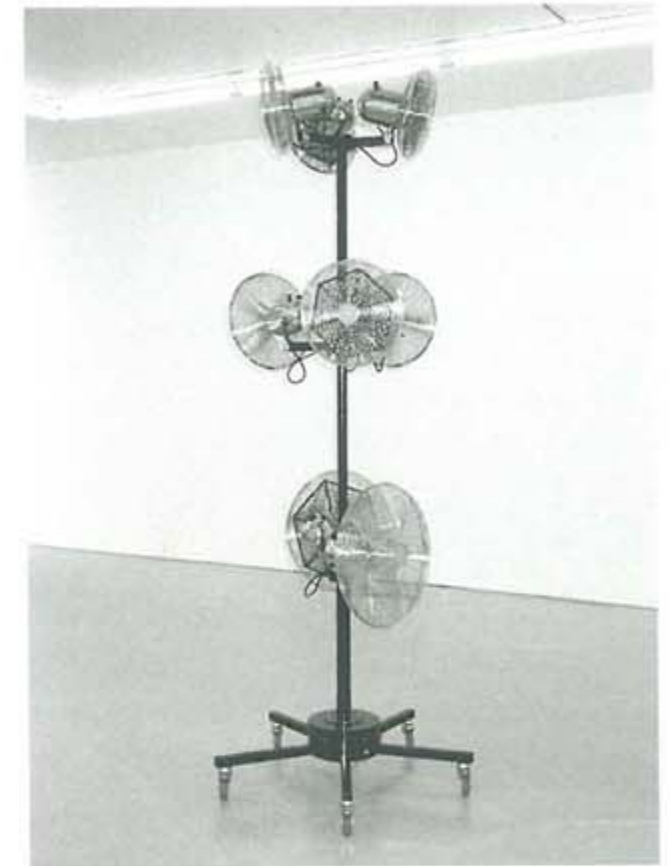
C: Does Mediacity Seoul have an overall theme, then, in the way that most art biennales have a theme?

H: There are chapters rather than one theme. One is grandmothers, another is the North Korean spy, then there's the shaman. I think I'm in grandmothers. I'm an ancient spirit in a young body. I think Park looked through me and saw that I'm a vampire, an old woman.

C: Can you tell me what your piece will be like?

H: It's made of bells that rotate inside a fan, the kind of fan you'd use at home, so there's sound and there's movement. Bells are a big part of shamanism, which has always been a big influence in this country.

C: You'll have Koreans looking at your work again – they'll understand the bells in a way your Western audiences probably don't.



Windy Orbit (2013), from a series by Haegue Yang, featuring fans and brass- and nickel-plated bells, 238 x 90 x 90cm.

H: Yes, and my expectations are growing. I felt defensive at the beginning. But now I'm really happy that he persuaded me. It's a pleasure. I came back so I could engage with my colleagues here properly, in person. It's worth breaking my sabbatical rule for this.

C: Where do you feel most comfortable when you're here?

H: At home. Although according to feng shui, you should build your house with the river in front of you and the mountain to your back for protection, I'm the wrong way round. If there's yin and yang, it's all yin and no yang. But maybe it's because I'm Yang... (laughs)

C: How did you support yourself after graduating from college, when you moved from Frankfurt to Berlin?

H: Waitressing, being a guard in a gallery, working in the Korean consulate. The last one was frustrating. The official way of working isn't really about efficiency, but as an artist I do everything with passion and conviction. I think the consulate staff thought I was overdoing things a bit, taking it all too seriously. It caused a bit of friction. I didn't really understand that I shouldn't be doing things that well.

C: When were you finally able to stop doing these jobs?

H: In terms of artistic development, I turned a corner in 2006, and then the Barbara Wien gallery took my work to Art Basel in 2008. It was a kind of liberation, though it was such a busy time, I didn't have any space for reflection. I was running to keep up. Now I'm more reflective.

C: Since then you've been incredibly successful. You represented Korea at the Venice Biennale in 2009. You were in Documenta – the art show that happens every five years in Kassel, Germany – in 2013. You had an installation in the Tanks at Tate Modern. Does it all get bigger and brighter as you go?

H: Actually, I think I might like to go underground again now, do a project that's a bit inaccessible but a big self-challenge, rather than total exposure. I'm already assuming that getting bigger and bigger is not the way to go. Only going in one direction is limiting. Sometimes you have to prune in order to grow.