

INTERVIEW

Haegue Yang

Korean artist Haegue Yang discusses her installation *Sonic Planetarium – Dripping Lunar Sextet*, her apprehension of large-scale events, the role of mathematics in creativity and the importance of sonic materials in her work.

What was your response when Tarek Abou El Fetouh first approached you?

Haegue Yang: I've always been curious about the Middle East, so it was interesting to participate in Expo 2020's Public Art Programme in Dubai. However, it is definitely crucial to be guided by a curator like Tarek for this kind of project, which sits within the framework of a large-scale event, where artworks could be misplaced. Tarek encouraged me to overcome my fear and scepticism about engaging in public art and to develop *Sonic Planetarium – Dripping Lunar Sextet*.

How did the curatorial process start?

Receiving a sort of *carte blanche* is not always the easiest offer to deal with. Fortunately when Tarek approached me, he already knew what role I could potentially play within his project. He was aware of my engagement with 'sonic materials', the bells, as well as my interest

in geometry. The Public Art Programme is based on the historical figure Ibn al-Haytham (c.965–c.1040 CE), a scientist who made significant contributions in mathematics, astronomy, optics and other physical sciences. From previous projects, I was also conscious that modern mathematics was introduced to the world through Arab scholars and thinkers. In his book *The Model of the Motions of Each of the Seven Planets* al-Haytham describes the theory of planetary motion using a geometry-based planetary model. Archaic mathematics endeavoured to calculate planetary orbits, and mathematics was a tool to understand the cosmos. The project took off from there, thinking about how we might articulate this idea in the context of a public art project.

Which particular challenges did you face?

Generally speaking, the huge responsibility of working in the public sphere rather



Portrait of Hageue Yang, 2016.
Photography by Danh Vo



Haegue Yang. *Sonic Planetarium – Dripping Lunar Sextet*. © Haegue Yang 2021. Commissioned by and Collection of Expo 2020 Dubai. Photography by Roman Mensing

scares me, and I had to face this alongside my own difficulty with working on a much larger scale than I normally operate within. However, I found meaning in this art project, which goes beyond national representation within the traditional context of an Expo. I realised that I could be a part of an international project offering an alternative mapping of the world. We might demonstrate how different models of the world coexist

simultaneously, right next to the still-existing nation-state representation. I wanted to be part of this inclusive matrix of artistic mapping through my contribution.

Can you tell us more about the bells and materials used in the work?

Bells have featured in my work from early on, but as a partial element of the piece or as substitutes for concrete

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Haegue Yang.
Sonic Planetarium
– Dripping Lunar
Sextet. Detail.
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messages such as language, information and narrative. However, from around 2013 they became a principal component for my Sonic Sculptures. We are often confronted by artworks that narrate a message, didactics or other information. In the Sonic Sculptures, the acoustics of the bells stand for the process of unlearning what is concrete, and that process is replaced with resonating rattling sounds.

Across civilisations in history, the bell frequently appears as a material symbol for a connection to the immaterial. In the case of Korean shamanism, the metallic bell is a primary tool for shamans' dances and rituals. Lots of different cultures wear items made of bells, either as an anklet or as an instrument to hold in the hand, so that when the body moves the rattling sound of the bells amplifies their physical movement. The alignment between body and sound reminds me of the relationship between the particle and the wave. As the sound of bells does not build harmony or melody, the alignment between movement and sound takes centre stage.

Where does mathematics come in?

I was interested in the notion of movement, whether social, emotional or physical. The evidence of movement

in the usage of bells through my Sonic Sculptures was a magical discovery in itself, but the question about the form and shape remained. This inquiry on form was answered by the geometry of a circle in combination with rotational movement, which I conceived as a wall-mounted sculpture of an oval disk with numerous bells attached. When you set it in motion manually, it creates a temporary illusion of a circle, before becoming an oval again as the rotation ceases. The circle is often regarded as a symbol of perfect geometry or of infinity, as well as that of seasonal change and the movement of the moon.

The mesmerising patterns of the Islamic arts depart from a division or are developed through its division by a certain number. Sonic Planetarium – Dripping Lunar Sextet was made by a division of six, so it has six arms and each point of division, including the central axis, is occupied by seven spherical bodies. The conversation between Tarek and I extended into the realm of orbit calculation, and I started to look into various ancient experimental planetary models. This was revealing, as they are often created using simple forms of mechanics that allow you to adapt the abstract models and demonstrate imaginary scenarios.