

Storylines

by Simone Krug

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Haegue Yang's *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Voice and Wind* (2009) is an installation encompassing hovering multicolored Venetian blinds, whirring industrial electric fans, and various scent emitters. The work is part of "Storylines," the Guggenheim's powerful group show of over 100 recent contemporary acquisitions that examine narrative in myriad forms. While Yang's work comments on homelessness, other works explore class, race, memory, and global politics. The exhibition deftly extends beyond the realm of visual art—pairing sculpture, photography, film, performance, etc. with writers' responses that encompass short form essay and poetry. These writings appear in wall text, gallery booklets, and online. Novelist Jeanette Winterson responds to, and ultimately avows, the sociopolitical undertones of Yang's piece:

"When I look at this installation I remember that many / people do not have a home of their own but live in / temporary shelters moving from place to place. I remember / that being bombed out or foreclosed or sleeping under a tarpaulin or on cardboard or in a car, happens to millions, / not a few. / On the way to the museum today how many homeless / people did you see?"



Haegue Yang, *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Voice and Wind*, 2009.

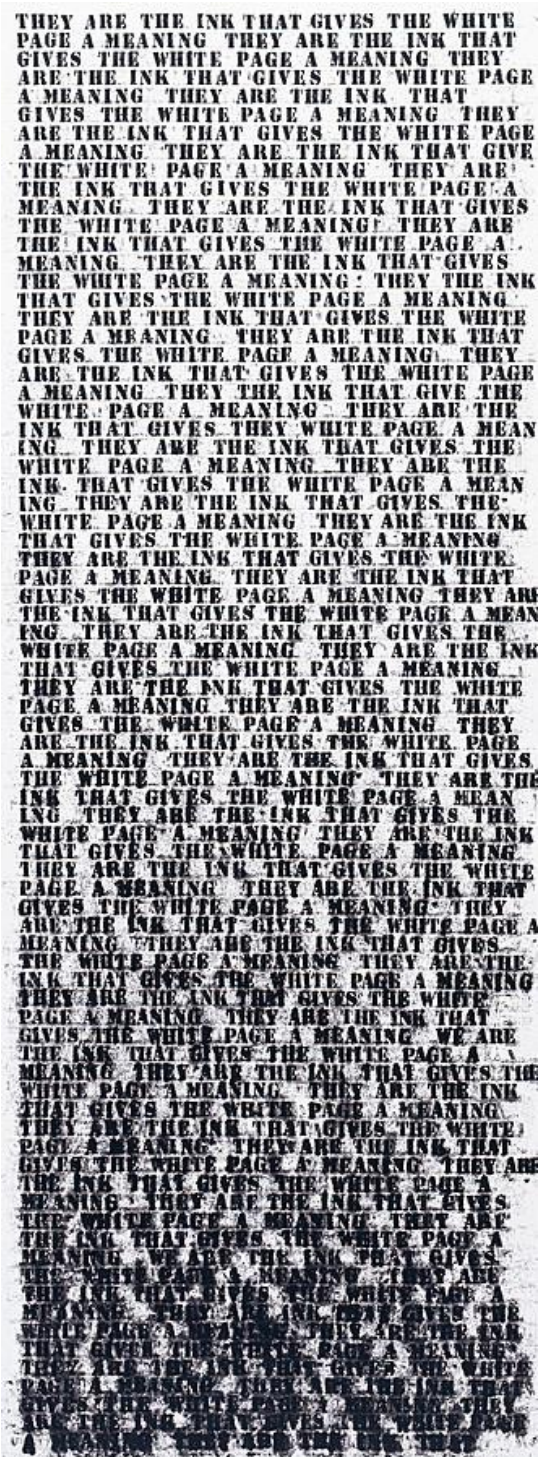
Winterson's political reaction to the precarity of shelter in

Yang's work reveal a latent narrative about homelessness, exposing viewers to new layers of interpretation. The inclusion of text in an exhibition on storytelling is apt. The theme, too, connotes movement from beginning to end, guiding viewers up and down, backwards and forwards, through Frank Lloyd Wright's winding rotundas, like the diverse narratives that unfold throughout its galleries.

The shimmering gold bead disco curtains of Félix González-Torres's *"Untitled" (Golden)* (1995) divide the Guggenheim space by occluding the alcoves on each floor. A tactile piece, visitors are encouraged to pass between the hanging strands, activating the work with their bodies in addition to their gaze. Unlike González-Torres's earlier white and red disco bead works such as *"Untitled" (Chemo)* (1991) and *"Untitled" (Blood)* (1992), which more overtly signify AIDS, death, and the fallibility of the body, for writer John Banville, González-Torres's gold strands evoke the other-worldly. He writes, "[...] González-Torres gilds, engoldens, the very air. Come, step through, into the shining light." Viewers are confronted with the notion of an unknown waiting beyond the curtain. In his lifetime, González-Torres masterfully examined presence and absence, health and illness, life and death. The repetition of his piece multiple times throughout the exhibition alludes to its significance not simply within the Guggenheim's collection, but as a narrative worth telling and retelling. Within the show as a whole, in its repetition, *"Untitled" (Golden)* acts as the punctuation between stories—clarifying, solidifying, and supporting other voices.

Several narrative artworks employ text as a visual component, and, of these, many rely on its obfuscation. Simryn Gill's *Full Moon* (2012) presents a series of yellowed book pages torn from her grandfather's library. The text and photographed illustrations are adorned with arresting white, blue, and black inky pen and painted astral forms. Gill's marks render the words illegible, blotting out sections of books including John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* and Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture*. This erasure rejects the bound, published narratives. Gill carefully deconstructs both form and content. Her pages are no longer fragments of greater narratives, but canvases coopted for meticulous abstract studies.

Glenn Ligon likewise obscures text in his works of black paint on white backgrounds. His looming paintings *Prisoner of Love #1, #2, and #3* (all 1992) address race in America. The works form a triptych that repeats slight variations on the phrase "THEY ARE THE INK THAT GIVES A WHITE PAGE MEANING," extracted from a passage on African Americans from French writer Jean Genet's posthumous 1986 autobiography *Prisoner of Love*. Each panel presents the message in varying levels of legibility. Ligon condenses the pigment in certain sentences, blurring the letters. His black ink generates abstract marks on the white canvas. These smudges convey meaning more potently than words or images. Complicating Genet's words, Ligon demonstrates how African American narratives can be abstract.



Glenn Ligon, *Prisoner of Love #3*, 1992.

Other works playfully interrogate the rote narratives we internalize everyday through popular culture. In *Safe Travels* (2013), Nate Lowman re-paints cartoon scenes from airline safety cards depicting dangling oxygen masks and life-vest-clad survivors in a series of nine panel paintings of airplane emergency protocol imagery. He recreates these familiar images, but strips them from their familiar contexts. Isolated in separate panels, Lowman's oversized, flat characters become odd, eerie, even sexualized.

While Lowman's works appropriate existing narratives to ironic effect, the duo Gerard & Kelly's commanding performance work, *Timelining*(2014), expands the borders of narrative form. Two performers who know one another intimately (ex-lovers, mother and daughter, siblings, etc.) traverse the Guggenheim's lobby, reciting and repeating brief sets of unscripted personal association. Anecdotes range from first kisses to travel memories, pop song lyrics to ruminations in the bath. Performers order these memories by inserting the



Simryn Gill, *Full Moon*, 2012.

words "in front of" between each statement. The narrative unfolds as a slideshow of intimate moments. Present in the lobby, viewers become active participants who share in the reminiscing. Recollections of collective events, such as September 11th or the search for weapons of mass destruction, lead viewers to recall their own associations. Writer Chris Kraus responds by imagining a hypothetical performance of the piece in 2031. She extends the timeline into futurity by telling her own imagined story.

"Storylines" is inclusive; its definition of narrative so elastic it at times becomes unwieldy. Yet this cacophony of disparate themes converge when one recalls that all the works on view are samples from the Guggenheim's recent acquisitions. Pieces mirror one another, drawing lines between history, memory, and the personal. The writers' responses, interspersed throughout the rotundas, invite viewers to do the same. In response to Simryn Gill's *Full Moon*, writer Shelley Jackson dwells on that possibility: "This unwinking orb, I suddenly realized, was an eye. It seemed to be looking directly at me. And I was another eye, looking back."

URL : <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/07/artseen/storylines>