

**Seung-Taek LEE's Avant-Garde Works:
For Whom and about What?
Centered on Lee's Solo Exhibitions in the 1970s and 1980s**

Chang-Sub LIM (Art Critic)

Seung-Taek Lee has been hailed as one of the undisputed pioneers of the Korean avant-garde movement since 2000. Some even claim that he made a lasting mark on the history of the contemporary Western art. This is probably one of the reasons why the Changwon Sculpture Biennale 2020 has chosen "Seung-Taek Lee – Korean Non-Sculpture" as the theme for this academic conference.

According to the media, Lee's first solo exhibition (Nov. 28–Dec. 2, 1971, Exhibition Hall 3, Public Information Office) featured 45 artworks in total including 10 *oji* (traditional Korean earthenware) installations and 11 3D pieces. An interview by Jeong-Gwon Cho (Former Editor of SPACE) and a SPACE magazine article (July 1981) covering Lee's works are considered two crucial documents that most accurately describe his early works. In addition, Lee's essay titled "The Origin of My Non-Sculpture" was featured in a special article published by SPACE in the preceding year. The artist was honored with two of the most prestigious awards in 1977 and 1978. In 1978, Lee was selected as the first winner of the DongA Art Award by Dong-A Ilbo for his sculpture, *Back of Torso*. In 1977, he was named as the winner of the Grand Prize of the Second Space Art Competition Award by SPACE. The artist introduces his works under the title, *I want to tie up everything*.

Based on Lee's descriptions about his works in his 1980 and 1981 SPACE essays, it is assumed that the artist was referring to the wire piece with the U-shaped body currently owned by the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art and the piece where *oji* is tied to metal chains covered in the SPACE article (July 1987). Further research on *3D Vinyl* is needed since the name, date and location of the exhibition differ across journals and documentations.

The Second AG Competition (Dec. 6-20, 1971) was held a few days after the 1971 solo exhibition following a local exhibition (Apr.7-12, 1971) at the Yechong Gallery featuring São Paulo and Paris Biennale submissions by Korean artists. According to art brochures of the 1970 and 1971 AG competition, Lee submitted a drawing in 1970 and a *Wind* piece in 1971 which was spread along the wall of the exhibition hall. In 1981, the artist held his second solo exhibition (Jun. 5-11) at the Gwanhun Gallery. In 1982, he held the next solo exhibition (Sept. 29-Oct. 5, 1982) at the Gwanhun Gallery and another solo exhibition at the Hu Gallery according to the documents on Lee. Furthermore, an article on his solo exhibition held at the Gwanhun Gallery until May 31, 1988 features a photograph of the artist standing in front of his work which is believed to be the piece currently held by the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art.

In 1989, Lee introduced nine pieces of the *Earth* series (Mar.2-15, Noksaek Gallery), and conducted experimental *Self-Burning Performance* in fall (Oct 20-30, Total Museum, Jangheung) through which he created one artwork each day of the exhibition period and later burned the works at the exhibition hall.

Based on an in-depth research on the artist, Lee's works can be broadly summarized as follows: *Oji* series in the 1960s, *Wind* series (1970-1971) in the early 1970s and *Tying* series throughout the 1970s, and *Earth* series in the 1980s.

Drawings by wind

Sun-Young LEE (Art Critic)

Born in Gowon, Hamgyeongnamdo, North Korea in 1932, Seung-Taek Lee is one of the most respected veteran sculptors who is soon to turn 90-year-old but whose work is still young and full of energy. Lee's legacy left an unforgettable imprint on the modern history of Korean sculpture and experimental art. Maybe it was only natural that the artist let his imagination run wild based on absence rather than presence in the war-torn period following the Korean War. One needs to bear mind that thesis and antithesis can be adopted by the same artist. Monumental sculptures based on human body and non-sculptures were products by the generation who had no other choice but to embrace contrasting ideas. Non-sculptural works include sculptures, and the basic form of a sculpture is a human. The language of non-sculpture or negation instead of affirmation is practically the process of deconstruction. If a sculpture is defined as something (*le même*), a non-sculpture can represent more than that (*l'autre*). In contemporary philosophy including post-structuralism, other objects or surrounding elements are foregrounded instead of key or essential things. Then, what does deconstruction of art, especially sculptures mean? It refers to the fundamental transformation of anthropomorphic forms which constitute the basis of sculptures.

The concept of Lee's wind-inspired sculptures since 1957 is the quintessence of his non-sculptural works. His works shifted the focus from human to nature. Lee's immaterial, elemental arts originate from drawings. The fundamental characteristics of drawings are also found in the 3D space. In this context, the *Wind* series can be said as drawings on the space with fabric. In the 1969 *Wind*, Lee wrapped strips of red fabric around shriveled trees. The optimal scene that brought out the artist's true intention was created when the strong wind fully fluttered and unfolded the strips horizontally. Here, not only the artist's intention but also the nature's will were at play. The artist's *Wind* performances starting from the end of the 1950s looked as if they were a red line (and a plane) that splits the space by a sweeping brush stroke. Ever-changing strokes created in an open space by a long strip of fabric over 1,000m kept changing the shape in the wind. Lee's innovative attempts are in

line with Baggat (open air) Art of Daesungri or Yattoo of Gongju (nature art) which represent small but significant art movements in the 1980s.

Strips of red or white fabric wrapped around the trunks of living trees meet with wind to create a horizontal movement that is opposite to the vertical movement. When the fabric strips are not draped down the trunks, they themselves become trees facing wind blowing from every possible direction. When the 1,000m long strips create moving strokes in the air, humans simply play the role of a support. The artist's *Wind* series is connected to minimalism as it utilizes natural objects and ready-made objects (fabric), decentralizes the location of a unit structure, and eventually expands into a space. As rendered by minimalism, Lee's artworks without forms place an emphasis on body sensations that change every minute in the theater-like space. Wind is a weather phenomenon created by the difference in pressure or temperature and hard to predict with perfect accuracy just like all other climate phenomena. Lee's *Wind* reveals the place of infinite play characterized by the movement of *différance* (Jacques Derrida). Deconstruction means eternal movements rather than simple negation, coinciding with avant-garde practices. The *Wind* series is understood as the movement to fling open the closed doors of art with its speed and variability.

Seung-Taek LEE's Non-Sculpture

- Difference between photographic records and photo-pictures

Ihn-Bum LEE (Art Critic)

Non-sculpture is the concept championed by sculptor Seung-Taek Lee (1932~) since the 1980s. Evaluations on his works so far have revolved around such concept. Placing Lee's works at the center of the Changwon Sculpture Biennale 2020 does not mean that it rejects the foundation of its existence. Rather, it is probably the process of dialectical self-negation of *auf-hebung* of sculptures. Otherwise, all attempts to promote the concept of non-sculpture or anti-sculpture at the sculpture festival would simply be in vain.

I was asked to deliver my presentation on the topic, "From digital archives to Seung-Taek Lee's non-sculptures from the perspective of art history." The topic is befitting as my work centers around archiving Lee's artworks. To fully cover the topic, I need to first identify how and in which process I archived Lee's works and how much the work has progressed. Due to the limited space, I will cover the details during the presentation. I will narrow the focus down to public discussions on evaluations or interpretations on the artist and his works to show how important archiving is in understanding the artist. In this context, this summary is not free from the hot topic called non-sculpture or the fundamental question asking what non-sculpture/sculpture is in Lee's world.

Archiving usually consists of small and big tasks and it is not easy to discover the historical truth from the epistemological perspective since it requires considerable level of expertise. Literatures or photographic documents show their true value only after being under meticulous verification. How is it possible to rely on evaluations and interpretations based on literatures without resolving inconsistencies? The same can be said about Lee's works. It is all the more so when there is an ample amount of inconsistencies in a thick and extensive document such as a catalogue of "Non-materialization – Seung-Taek Lee's Drawings that Cannot be Drawn" entitled "Lee Seung-Taek: Non-Material Works (ICAS, 2004)."

In this talk, I will not discuss the challenges related to literature and documents such as catalogues; instead, I will focus on photographic records. As you know

well, the primary source of Lee's experimental anti-sculpture or non-sculpture works is photographs. In this context, it is extremely significant that we shed light on photographic records at this session on archiving. Regrettably, it is difficult to find a case where the emphasis is placed on Lee's photographs themselves since photographs are usually seen as a trail of the past or a medium of communication, which are mostly out of the public's interest. Surprisingly, the reality suggests otherwise. Since most of Lee's photographs are covered in colors or reconstructed as a collage or montage, we need to reconsider whether they should be treated as simple trails or records of past events, or primary data which form the basis of aesthetic judgements and interpretations. If they are intentional and orchestrated reconstructions to help the artist's drawings, they should be duly treated as photographs rather than substitutes for non-sculptures or records.

With this in mind, where do Lee's photographs stand between records and pictures? As an archivist, this is more than a question out of curiosity. It is a must-solve dilemma and a must-do homework. This explains why I suggest that we refer to Lee's photographs as photo-picture to distinguish them from simple photographic records of events. What meaning does it have if we turn a blind eye to the ambiguity of the photo-picture – whether it is records of a series of events or a method to create a new image – when studying how non-sculpture is defined by the artist? Shouldn't we start from asking what photographs as a medium are to Lee before defining what non-sculpture is at least from the artist's eighth exhibition held in 1988 where photographs started to constitute the primary form of his works?

Aesthetics of Phonetic Flexibility

Byoung-Soo KIM (Art Critic)

Seung-Taek Lee's works are easier to understand than his words on non-sculpture. As a renowned sculptor and artist, Lee has continued to develop different narratives about art. The artist even attempts to make casual jokes about art and life in Korean language. His words are the sobering products of self-reflection through a variety of modalities such as self-mockery. Lee keeps talking about his artistic word, but he seems to deny self-understanding. He desires to remain an artist, yet he continues to reject the artistic world that he belongs to by responding with negative words. Ironically, his responses seem not too surprising.

Then, where is this world that Lee is describing? What is his view of his own artistic world which is revealed through neglect and ignorance? What is he trying to say through his works? What did he find in the 'South Korean' art scene? We need to think about Lee's forgotten irrationalism. It is natural for an artist to respond ironically to deal with the world that is not acceptable. People did not ask questions about the world that rarely speaks. The artist responds to the world with a sense of ignorance and quirky humor. He freely crosses the boundaries of the Western aesthetics. He keeps walking on eggshells. Ironically, he leaves his sculptures in the world of non-sculptures.

Lee then toys with the idea of linguistic and phonetic amusement as part of conceptual art. One cannot simply say that his conceptual art shows that process is not less important than results since the artist keeps showing interest in the aesthetics of art. Lee does not respond in any peculiar way to the position of the contemporary art circle. Art theories and creative practices are often considered two means of development. Practitioners in the radical transformation period assume that emerging theories are left in the ruins to help them discover all their meanings in the later period.

In Lee's essay, "55 Years of My Experimental Art: The Process of Adventure – Emerging Art Starts with the Concept of None and Material Development," the artist says "Irony in the concept of none: One day, hard warp weights seemed to look soft. From there I thought of the irony in the concept of none. Warp

weights tied with ropes: I started tying objects starting with warp weights. Once objects are tied and wrapped around, their physical properties completely change. Tied stones: I tied stones with wires. Canvas frames were wrapped around with a lump of paper and a piece of fabric." Similarly, Lee's profile in his art brochure is chronological and solidifies his identity, but he strategically makes himself to keep sliding down. It overlaps with his profile in the next page, thereby shredding himself.

In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist during the 2017 exhibition at the Lévy Gorvy Gallery, Lee mentioned about the cultural difference while talking about his *Wind* series of the 1970s (In the interview, Lee said Obrist seemed not to understand what he was saying. His remark cannot be disregarded. What Lee told me later does not differ much, but somehow it felt different). He transforms it into a question (or inquiry or curiosity) and an answer (or response). This way, the artist replaces a dichotomic view of what 'traditional' or 'Korean' is and what 'modern' or the 'Western' is into inquiries and artistic explorations.

Lee does not believe that something is defined by art. Then, what should we respond or react in that kind of situation? One should distinguish what is plausible and what is not. The artist keeps expressing his opinion on the artistic continuance. Maybe the aesthetics of Lee's art lies in how he keeps the difference or slides down while keeping his balance.

Space Design for Special Exhibition 1 – Seung-Taek LEE, Non-sculpture of Korea

Sung-Ho KIM

(Artistic Director, Changwon Sculpture Biennale 2020)

This year, the Changwon Sculpture Biennale presents Seung-Taek Lee's solo exhibition as part of its special exhibition programs under the main theme of "Non-Sculpture – Light or Flexible." Lee's special exhibition sheds light on discussions on non-sculpture as the artist clearly identified his own works as non-sculptures in his 1980 essay, "The Origin of My Non-Sculpture."

The artist rejects traditional sculpture materials and instead tracks invisible elements such as wind and scents, which explains why Lee's non-sculptural works are made of trivial objects such as strings, fabrics, traditional Korean paper, white porcelains, bills or pebbles as well as 2D materials including canvases, panels and photo collages. Through his non-sculptural art, Lee delves into a couple of profound themes: relatedness, ontological questions and primarily neutralization, taking into account that the main theme of the Changwon Sculpture Biennale 2020, non-sculpture, is largely in line with the concept of neuter or neutralization introduced in Rosalind Krauss' essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field (1970)."

If Krauss' notion of neutralization is a semiologic interpretation of the decategorization trend of modern sculpture, Lee's concept of neutralization in his works is a way to resist syntactical rules of the mainstream contemporary sculpture and explore a unique sculptural language of his own. To Lee, neutralization is his way of creating artworks through which he freely interacts with and relates to other things while self-contradicting conventional sculpture methods. It is also a concept of reconciliation and communication with all other things that are different from himself. The artist relates his no-sculptural works to everyday space, traditional handicrafts, or shamanism. Exploration into non-sculpture materials, cultural anthropological reflection and aesthetics of non-sculpture in the East and Korea elaborate Lee's concept of neutralization.

The Changwon Sculpture Biennale 2020 needed a place of neutralization to

display Lee's artworks. Against this backdrop, the newly renovated space at the Seongsan Art Hall containing the trails of a buffet restaurant was the perfect place to realize the concept of neutralization, since not only an everyday space was transformed into an exhibition hall but also large-size mirrors of a former wedding hall and glass walls of a former buffet restaurant create the effects of reflection and projection.

This presentation explores the characteristics of the exhibition space in the order of Space of Conflict, Space of Osmosis and Space of Neutralization. The last space is analyzed and curated with the pocket model where closing and opening as well as contraction and expansion occur simultaneously. This model is in sync with Gilles Deleuze's concept of *pli* (fold), a theoretical metaphor. The *pli* demonstrates the existence and movement of plasmodium which simultaneously practices the act of folding/unfolding and wrapping/unwrapping. Lee's artworks centered around red fabric strip installations titled "Wind", trivial objects and archives are displayed in these three spaces decorated with (translucent) renovated walls, remaining (transparent) glass walls and large-scale (translucent) mirrors to visualize Deleuze's aesthetic concept of *pli*.

The space of *pli* is not only a space of gap which bridges multiple movements of folding and unfolding but also a space of mixture which mediates inside and outside worlds like Walter Benjamin's notion of passage or *schwelle*. Our intention was to create a space in-between (/) or space of throwing out and emptiness that is not as extensive or spacious like a separated space between vertical and horizontal planes, namely an in-between space that clearly separates A from B. The space of slash (/) only requires an area for emptiness to grow into and move as *pli*. Lee's 2D sculptures are softly placed in the space of slash (/) between the X and Y axes along the walls. The artist's non-sculptures are dispersed from the walls just like flat artworks. Such a space provides a breathing room to low-rise 3D installations on the axis of the plane or non-sculptural sculptures which are folded and unfolded or knotted and unknotted.