

CANAL PROJECTS

SEUNG-TAEK LEE

THINGS  
UNSTABLE

*2/3-5/22/23*

## SEUNG-TAEK LEE:

### THINGS UNSTABLE

*"My art questions stereotypical notions of materials. I work by looking at the world upside down."*

– Seung-taek Lee

*Things Unstable* reflects on the pioneering work of the post-war Korean avant-garde artist Seung-taek Lee (b. 1932). Lee gained his reputation from his groundbreaking multidisciplinary practice, which includes ephemeral performances, site-specific works, installations, photographic interventions, appropriated canvases, and sculptures. Throughout his prolific career, Lee has incorporated Korean shamanic traditions, folk objects, and materials to question the values of art and art history. Known for his relentless humor, Lee continues to push the boundaries by inciting vocabularies that subvert conventional ideas of art (Rawlings 2010, p. 74).

Since the 1960s, Lee has actively produced experimental works, paying attention to everyday materials such as vinyl, glass, earthenware, and stone. Tying objects with rope has become exemplary of the artist's practice. This is especially evident in works like *Tied Stone* (1969), *Untitled* (Soft Rock, 1974), and *Untitled* (installation, 1982) at the center of the exhibition. Performative and conceptual actions like tying and binding have allowed Seung-taek Lee to modify the perception of quotidian objects. As the artist has articulated, these actions reveal the inner vitality and energy of the object, bringing to bear its otherwise unnoticed poetic and artistic potential.

In her acclaimed essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss famously noted that "surprising things

have come to be called sculpture." An adequate observation of the deep transformations occurring worldwide to the traditions of sculpture in the 1970s (Krauss 1979, p. 30). Lee's investment in expanding the possibilities of sculpture led him to further experiment with ephemeral elements like wind, fire, and smoke. Lee named these "non-sculptures" in reference to the ways in which unconventional objects, inorganic and even formless in nature, would invoke sculptural forms (Kee 2013, p. 115).

In the rise of site-specificity, installation, and performance art, Seung-taek Lee developed a fascination with appropriated sites, landscapes, buildings, and even geopolitical borders. For *Things Unstable*, Lee has transformed the facade of 351 Canal Street, New York, drawing on the surface of our institution. The drawing will be brought to life during opening week as an artistic intervention using red fabric evocative of his 1970s Wind performances.

Based on the artist's pioneering trajectory in performance art and ecology, we have highlighted his creative deployment of the natural elements. Lee's multimedia performances expanded the lexicon of the 1970s' turn toward environmental aesthetics making him an early proponent of eco-art. Photographic interventions such *Natural Protection* (1970), *Wind-Folk Amusement* (1971), and *The Earth Performance*, (1989-1996) delineate the artist's long-standing concern with environmental destruction.

Inspired by the satellite images of Earth taken from outer space in the 1970s, which were foundational to the rise of global environmental movements, Lee painted a likeness of our planet on a PVC balloon. Lee used the oversized balloon to communicate environmental issues at a time when agendas of urbanization and industrialization in post-war Korea took precedence. The artist has playfully toured this work through Korea, China, Germany, the United Kingdom, and now New York City. As participatory artworks completed through audience interaction, Lee's live and photographic performances are also environmental campaigns that urge the public to become aware of the fragility of our planet.

In celebration of Lee's pioneering performative practice, Canal Projects is hosting re-enactments of *Wind-Folk Amusement* and *The Earth Performance*. Documentation and re-enactments will contextualize Lee's practice amidst today's most pressing ecological concerns while also drawing back to the global environmental movements of the 1970s.

Please refer to the expanded online version of this booklet for more information at [www.canalprojects.org](http://www.canalprojects.org)

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Special thanks to the artist, Jungsook Lee, and Gallery Hyundai.

**Seung-taek Lee** (b. 1932) lives and works in Seoul. Lee was born in Gowon-eup, in the Northeastern part of the Korean peninsula. He migrated to South Korea as a young adult where he joined the military. After the end of the Korean war in 1953, the artist enrolled in the sculpture department of Hongik University. Working with stone and sculpture mostly for public monuments, Lee has maintained an artistic practice that critically challenges mainstream ideas of art through his observations on the qualities of matter, space, and the environment.

In the course of his prolific career, Lee has been an active member of a number of artistic organizations like the Korean Contemporary Sculpture Association (1969), New Image Associations (1962) and most prominently, the Korean Avant-Garde Association (1970). He has taught at Dankook University's Faculty of Architecture at the School of Engineering and at the Ewha Women's University's Faculty of Sculpture at Department of Art. Besides participating in countless individual and group shows, Lee has also represented Korea at the Paris Biennale (1969), the 11th São Paulo Biennale (1971), the Busan Biennale (2002), and the Gwangju Biennale (2010).

Seung-taek Lee has been the recipient of a number of awards including the Grand Prize at the 2nd Space Art Award Exhibition (1977), the DongA Arts Award (1978), the Nam June Paik Art Center International Art Award (2009), and the Eunkwan Award from the Korean Ministry of Culture in 2014. Lee's works are in numerous collections including Tate Modern, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul (MMCA), Seoul Museum of Art, Rachofsky Collection, the Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney, and the Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin.

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