

SEUNG-TAEK LEE'S ECOAESTHETICS IN DEVELOPMENTALIST SOUTH KOREA

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Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the avant-garde artist Seung-taek Lee (b. 1932) situated much of his practice at gas pipelines, oil furnaces, landfills, and military dump sites. His artistic and material experimentations came to light in tandem with a developmentalist state which by accelerating industrialization, modernization, and mass production, simultaneously occasioned exponential environmental degradation. Traversing various mediums including drawing, painting, photo collage, installation, and performance art, Lee's works address the rapid transformations happening across South Korea's natural and built environments. To Lee, aesthetic and material experimentation during the time was tightly knitted with South Korea's project of industrial development, prompting the artist to modulate the tension between environmental ethics and aesthetics. Through this commitment to ecoaesthetics, Lee has taken a unique position in the history of environmental art in South Korea and beyond.

In closely reading Lee's ecoaesthetics, it is important to trace the emergence of the term "environmental art" in South Korea during the 1970s.¹ Environmental Art (*hwangyeongmisul*) gained traction in the late 1960s as a genre that forged intimate relationships not with nature itself but with newly transforming notions of space,

landscape, and architecture. Advocates of the genre like the critic Lee Yil and the artists Ha Chong-Hyun, Kim Kulim, and Lee Seungjio – all members of the Korean Avant Garde Association (*Hangugabanggareudeuhyeopoe*, for short A.G.) – expanded the scope of environmental art from the realm of objects to their direct engagement with the surrounding environment. Technological development was perceived as a precondition for that shift, bringing with it a renewed sense of time, space, and their durational unfolding in works of art.² During this time, various Seoul-based art groups including A.G. and Space and Time Group (S.T. active from 1971 to 1981) incorporated natural elements like water, fire, ice, air, land, and other matter for this spatio-temporal venture. Entering the 1980s, the genre also found resonance in non-metropolitan regions outside Seoul, in particular by artist collectives including Yatoo Outdoor Field Art Research Association (*Yatoo Yaoehyeonjangmisulyeonguhoe*) and Baggat Art Association (*Baggatmisulhoe*), which took sculptural objects to outdoor spaces and engaged with rural and natural landscapes.

As an active member of A.G., Seung-taek Lee participated in the emergent discourse of *hwangyeongmisul* by expanding conventional notions of medium and materiality. His earlier works made at the beginning of the 1970s, such as *Smoke* (1970) and *Wind* (1971), demonstrate the rigor of such material experimentation. Mobilizing the word "immateriality" – by which he meant the "energy and motion embedded in materiality" or the "vitality in inanimate, immobile objects" – the

artist would either make hard materials such as pebbles, steel, polyester, or glass, pliable or put formless matter in motion. Reminiscing these earlier material experiments, Lee articulated how the smoke coming from Saudi Arabia's oil-burning furnaces shaped his thoughts about the formlessness of matter:

As I began to think about immateriality [around 1957 and 1958], I saw smoke gushing out of a chimney in the news. It was about Saudi Arabia's oil-burning furnace, and during that time the image of "burning oil" was a symbol of wealth in South Korea. After seeing that scene, it became clear to me how the "formless work" would look, and this formlessness laid the groundwork for my later immaterial and ethereal works made of fire, water, wind, smoke, clouds, and fog.⁴

From the early 1960s, as the former president and army general Park Chung-hee (1962-1979) took office, South Korea underwent a large-scale transformation from an agricultural to an export-based industrial economy. In the course of two Five-Year Economic Development Plans (1962-1966 and 1967-1971), over thirty major steel plants were built in addition to container ports, sewage systems, dams, pipelines, highways, and railways. The industrialization program later known as "developmental dictatorship" not only interlocked narratives of economic progress but also legitimated political oppression and environmental degradation.⁵

Seung-taek Lee's artworks of this period, however, can yield paradoxical interpretations. In the gouache painting entitled *Smoke* (1960, fig. 1), an oil furnace emits smoke whose color,



Fig.1 Seung-taek Lee, *Smoke*, ca. 1960s, gouache, watercolor on paper, 34.5 x 43 cm.

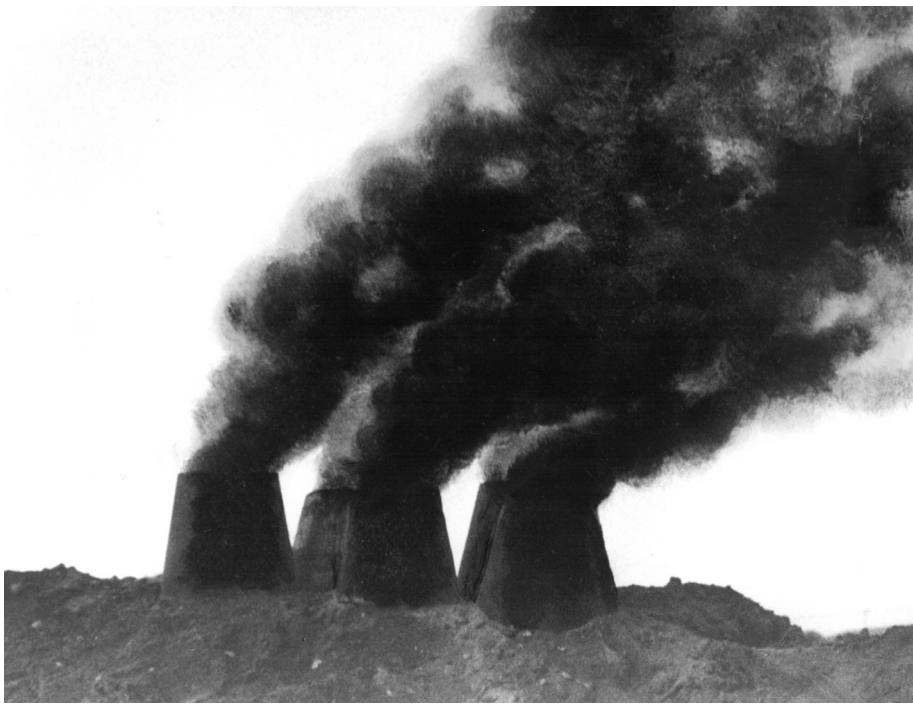


Fig. 2 Seung-taek Lee, *Smoke*, ca. 1960s, gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 cm.

density, and three-dimensionality contrasts with that of the referenced photograph (fig. 2). The resplendent white palette of the smoke, coupled with its pronounced contour in dark gray, isolates the emitted matter from the dull and opaque background. What results from these formal choices is a depiction of smoke as sublime matter, divorced from its surrounding environment and enclosed in its autonomous zone. The depiction ultimately oscillates between the stylization and critique of industrial development, evoking the tension of the “toxic sublime” that, according to art historian Jennifer Peeples, “arises from recognizing the toxicity of a place [...] while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence, and ability to inspire awe.”⁶ To a similar effect, Lee’s own engagement with the smokestacks presents an ecoaesthetic in which environmental ethics and aesthetics coexist in dissonance.

Lee’s later work, a photo collage entitled *Smoking Construction* (1973, fig. 3), presents an analogous double bind. The scene depicts gas pipelines newly installed on the banks of the Han River in Seoul. Rapidly diminishing into a single-point perspective and aided by a dramatic foreshortening, the pipelines penetrate the still waterfront forming a giant monolith. The gravity of their magnitude and momentum is further complicated by three faint streaks of black smoke. The atmospheric rendering of the contour, along with the slow gradient from black to white, outlines the unequivocal visual mark of carbon-based fuel while simultaneously instilling an alarming poeticism. By hand-painting the smoke over the photograph, Lee similarly potentialized the formlessness of the toxic fuel. What comes into our view is a landscape of scenic stillness where smoke, albeit melting into air, portrays the carbon fuel industry as a



Fig. 3 Seung-taek Lee, *Smoking Construction*, 1973, oil on C-print.

a profit-driven, state-led economy that puts monetary gain above all else.

It is precisely this ecoaesthetic tension that illuminates Lee's environmentalism which, through both form and practice, pushed developmental infrastructures beyond merely being the agent of art's dematerialization. I further argue that this sustained fascination with industrial development sets Lee's experimentation apart from other environmental acts including outdoor installations and performances happening in the 1980s, which revolved around discourses on nature, wilderness, and the rural.⁷ When Yatoo Outdoor Field Art Research Association and Baggat Art Association took their objects to the still and serene riverfront outside Seoul – in Gongju and Daeseong-ri respectively – Lee turned to Nanji-do, a landfill that was reclaimed in 1977 to accommodate a spiking amount of garbage in Seoul. Many artists of A.G. and S.T. including Kim Kulim and Lee Kun Yong championed the concept of outdoor space as synonymous with venturing outside the mediums of painting and sculpture and their conventional exhibition venues. Lee, however, often remained in his studio. The photo collage entitled *An Artist Planting Moss* (1979, fig. 4) emerged from this decision to stay indoors, painting moss and collaging ranging poles onto a photograph of the landfill in lieu of making a physical installation. The work is thus a scene of development in which giant patches of moss continue to propagate in green, unencumbered by the measuring devices' attempts at regulation and control, yet only existing in the form of fiction.

Amidst the rise of *hwangyeongmisul* that prioritized art's spatial and

interactive potential, Lee's choice to fabricate depictions of landscape through collage and overlay may seem idiosyncratic. This fiction is fully intentional, however: for him, it "produces results that cannot be achieved in reality" and "compensates for the indiscernible scale of the original action."⁸ Furthermore, it testifies to his "search for methods that are creative yet put no damage on the environment."⁹ While discussing the dominant sculptural practices from the late 1980s to the early 1990s that were "overflowed with objects and outmoded, cacophonous installations,"¹⁰ he remarked:

I saw how exhibitions generated an overwhelming amount of waste that only added to the pollution caused by indiscriminate development and human-centered opportunism. I would use photography to capture a certain theme and add my point of view with layers of paint. This way, I could express my intentions without leaving behind massive material waste in the real world.¹¹

According to the artist, mobilizing matter, albeit fictionally, is a method that minimizes our carbon footprint since realizing "large scale installations and performances would be environmentally destructive in reality."¹² Through this practice, the artist aestheticizes the scene of development while simultaneously fabulating its alternative. Here, it is the moss – an ungovernable form of life – that overtakes a site symptomatic of state-led development in its hyperbolic, synthetic, yet wasteless green.

While taking the sites of industrial development and environmental

hazard as an aesthetic playground, Lee rewires aesthetics into not only an anti-developmental imagination but also an environmentalist practice. I consider this artistic strategy, which borders a certain activist mind, as foretelling of a more sustained and complex take on environmental issues. This is most visible in *The Earth Performance* series (1989-1996) in which the artist painted a satellite image of Earth on a five-meter-long PVC balloon and activated it as an object of participatory art. Despite the work's singular focus on the Earth-shaped object, it is the anthropogenic intervention that provides multiple interpretive registers. The act of tying up the Earth on the back of a bicycle and carrying it around would have distorted its spherical shape, causing it to lose resilience over time. Left outdoors, the balloon is often

touched, pushed, and stomped on by the common passerby. While being subject to contamination and deflation, the Earth also becomes the subject of play and care.

The ecoaesthetics in Seung-taek Lee's artworks continue to be complex, if not contradictory. His works echo the aesthetic experiments of *hwangyeongmisul*, yet they break away from the group's well-known interest in phenomenology by projecting and potentializing his art into sites of industrialization. His sustained engagement with the environment at risk challenges the common mystification that nature is absolute and limitless, hence inviolable. Yet Lee still dreams of the wilderness: four decades after painting the moss on a photograph of landfill,



Fig. 4 Partial view of Seung-taek Lee, *An Artist Planting Moss*, 1979, moss spores, fertilizer, and watercolor on paper, 1800 x 7000 x 900 cm.

he remarked in 2020 that the *Green Campaign* series (1976-1991) arose out of his hope that the ravaged land, torn-down hills, and percolated mountains would recover through a blanket of plants.¹³ Might it be ironic that Lee's ecoaesthetics were able to demystify environmental art and still produce another kind of myth that valorized nature as one suffused with green? After all, Lee was seeking to navigate a developmentalist system rife with ironies, and it might have been between the rifts of ongoing paradoxes that he could find an interstitial environmentalist imagination.

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Notes:

¹ The use of term "ecoaesthetics" in this essay is informed by the ongoing philosophical attempt to connect environmental aesthetics and ethics, or more precisely, to gauge the potential for aesthetics to serve as an adequate foundation for environmental ethics. Multiple approaches currently comprise this emergent concept, but my thoughts are particularly guided by the artist and theorist Rasheed Araeen who formulated the concept as an artistic imagination which is "not only creatively productive but posits a progressive idea towards the solution of the [ecological and political] problem the world will continue to face throughout the twenty-first century." For one of the key theorizations of ecoaesthetics, see Holmes Rolston III, "From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics" in Arnold Berleant, ed., *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics* (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2002), 127-141. Also see Rasheed Araeen, "Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century," *Third Text* 23 (5) (2009): 679-684.

² For a theoretical discussion of hwangyeongmisul in the context of contemporary South Korean art, see Lee Yil, "*Jeonwimisullon*" (Theory of the Avant

Garde), *A.G.* 1 (September 1969): 9.

³ Lee Seung-taek in Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Lee Seung Taek," August 2020, *Lee Seung Taek's Non Art: The Inversive Act* (Seoul: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, 2021) exh. cat., 449.

⁴ Lee Seung-taek in Hans Ulrich Obrist, "A Conversation with Seung-taek Lee," 97; my translation.

⁵ For a detailed explanation on the workings of developmental dictatorship, see Lee Byeong-cheon, "The Political Economy of Developmental Dictatorship," Lee ed., Eungsoo Kim and Jaehyun Cho trans., *Developmental Dictatorship and the Park Chung-hee Era* (Paramus, NJ: Homa & Sekey Books, 2006), 3-48.

⁶ Jennifer Peebles, "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes," *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 4 (December 2011): 375.

⁷ Various called Outdoor Field Art (*yaoehyeonjangmisul*) and Nature Art (*jayeonmisul*) by Yatoo and Baggat, this genre of outdoor installations and performances bears a certain resonance with Land Art, a loose group of artistic interventions that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s North America and Europe and engaged with the natural environment and landscape. While there were sporadic mentions of Land Art (*daejimisul*) by artists including Kim Kulim, primarily to describe their works' exploration of the outdoor space and nature, I argue that it is difficult to conceive it as a meaningful development in South Korean contemporary art as opposed to other analogous, more deeply explored terms. For an account of Kim's discussion of *daejimisul*, see Sooran Choi, "Manifestations of a Zombie Avant-garde: South Korean Performance and Conceptual Art in the 1970s," *re•bus* 9 (Spring 2020): 84-87. For a book-length study of Outdoor Field Art and Nature Art, see Kim Gyeong-seo, *Gamchugi deureonaegi itge hagi* (1981-2006): *Hanguk jayeonseolchimisurui sae jangeul yeon Bakkanmisul 26nyeonsa* (Concealing, Revealing, and Becoming [1981-2006]: The 26 Years of History of the Outdoor Art that Opened a New Chapter of Korean Nature Art) (Seoul: Dabinchi, 2006).

⁸ "Interview with Lee Seung Taek," August 2020, *Lee Seung Taek's Non Art: The Inversive Act*, exh. cat., 448-451.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Lee Seung-taek, "Ipche, pyeongmyeon, hyungchaeopneun gongganeuro" (To the space without three dimensionality, two dimenality, and material presence), *Misulsegye* (July 1987): 32-4.

¹¹ "Interview with Lee Seung Taek," 454; my translation.

¹² See *ibid.*, 451.

¹³ *ibid.*