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THINGS UNSTABLE
SEUNG-TAEK LEE

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 the closing 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

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



Seung-taek Lee (b. 1932)



Seung-taek Lee, *Natural Protection*, 1970s (reprinted 1990s). Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Hyundai

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.







Charting the (un)finished

Sooyoung Leam

*How can a finish be charted?
What if finishing is endlessly incomplete,
with resonances circulating, like orature,
in a complex network of cross-live,
cross-temporal, cross-reference?*

— Rebecca Schneider, “What Happened; or, Finishing Live,” 2016¹

The belated critical reception of Seung-taek Lee and his subversive activities occurred in the late 1990s when the urgent call for a re-reading (*tasi ilkki*) of Korean art historical canon coincided with the need to historicize “the recent rise of Korea’s postmodern art.”² Lee, whose sculptural experiments begun by appropriating, binding and wrapping everyday objects, in opposition to traditional modes of carving or modeling three-dimensional structures in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–1953), quickly came to embody the role of a pioneer, a vanguard artist and a key protagonist in these newly emerging narratives. Nearly two decades on, his non-sculptures are increasingly discussed in contexts as diverse as the history of sculpture, performance studies, Environmental art, and global conceptualism, among others. In this essay, I attend to such cross-referential and cross-temporal aspects of Seung-taek Lee’s sculptural experiments, and explore the strategies deployed by the artist to defer a conclusive state. I use the term “sculptural” despite the artist’s – by now well-known – conceptualization of *pijogak* or “non-sculpture.”³



Fig. 1 Lee Seung-taek, *Soft Rocks*, 1974. Granite and string. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Hyundai.

Broadly referring to the artist's oeuvre spanning several decades, the term signals processes of undoing sculpture – whether in terms of its materiality, mode of production, or viewership – rather than a definitive negation of the medium. In practice, this process included appropriation of quotidian objects; performative use of transient elements of nature; and temporary interventions into the existing urban and natural environment. Among them, the structural alterations of appropriated materials or objects merit attention, for their seeming malleability connotes the possibility of transformation and, therefore, incompleteness.

This can be glimpsed from the sculptural treatment of *Untitled (Soft Rock)* (1974). It belongs to a series of *mukkum chogak* (tied sculptures), which broadly refers to either crafted or found materials bound with tools as diverse as ropes, twines, cords, and threads (Fig. 1). Although the subject of appropriation varies, ranging from quarried rocks to domestic utensils, books, and cultural artifacts, they are typically structured around the competing forces of fragmentation and wholeness, constriction and expansion, solid materiality and illusory softness. It is worth reminding that these effects are achieved through an intricate interplay between visual imagination and technical precision. The grooves are carved out and bifurcated with a grinder or sharpeners to create a compelling illusion of swelling and compression caused by the pressures of harnessing rope. In other words, they result from compulsive scarring, followed by restorative binding. Writing in the Spring of 1980, Lee goes as far

as to claim that “what began as a form of sculptural appropriation became by then one of the most powerful visual and conceptual methods of reimagining the surrounding world and subverting its status quo.”⁴ According to the artist, objects gain “vitality” when bound, because it twists and unsettles not only inert substances, but established notions, learned perceptions, and conventional social customs.

In many ways, it is telling that *Untitled (Soft Rock)* takes a block of granite as the subject of destabilization, partly because it implicitly comments on the artist's relationship to sculpture-making. Since he was a student at Hongik University in the late 1950s, Lee continued to fabricate over 130 state- and corporate-commissioned monuments, mainly to finance his experimental, unmarketable practice.⁵ Around the time when *Untitled (Soft Rock)* (1974) was completed, for instance, the statue of An Chang-ho was unveiled at Dosan Park, Seoul. Tough and ubiquitous granite stones came to be frequently used as pedestals for such kinds of outdoor statues in Korea throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Whether in the process of erecting, commemorating, or even dismantling a monument, pedestals remain a vital component, especially for demarcating the statue from its surroundings in spatial and symbolic terms. They serve as a marker of significance and autonomy by elevating and celebrating the figure.⁶ The deceptive softness of the bound rock thus transpires questions about the conventional association between masculinity and hard, resilient stones: The practice of

harking at a block of boulder or battling with large bronze-cast sculpture has long been understood as an exclusively masculine activity, and such connections were being strongly endorsed by Park Chung-hee's postwar cultural policies (1961–1979). Lee's treatment of the material – involving both the laborious work of incising and evocative enactment of binding – prompts multiple readings and associations, precisely by undermining the fixed connotations.

Canal Project's installation of *Untitled* (1982–2022) features palm-sized granite stones, but this time, they are suspended above the gallery ground. The rope that once harnessed a block of stone similarly reappears in the exhibition, by rhythmically connecting the granite weights across the room. The piece recalls Seung-taek Lee's 1981 solo exhibition held at Kwanhoon Gallery, whereby the sinuous and versatile

quality of the ropes punctuated with black knots ran through the corners and walls of the building, highlighting its architectural features (Fig. 2). While the ropes consisting *Untitled* translate into lines and demarcations in space, they also render visible the forces of nature; the gravitational pull. Taking full advantage of the material's versatility and portability, Lee would stage countless variations of site-responsive (and, for that matter, equally site-less) installations in empty, abandoned buildings from early stages of his career, and explore their potential to renew their relevance.

It is noteworthy that Lee's radical reconceptualization of sculptural practice did not emerge *ex nihilo*. His internationally resonant vanguard experiments unfolded in close dialogue with developments taking place locally and internationally.⁷ Importantly, the



Fig. 2 Reproduction of *Lee Seung-taek*, exhibition leaflet, 1982. Courtesy of the artist and Kwanhoon Gallery.

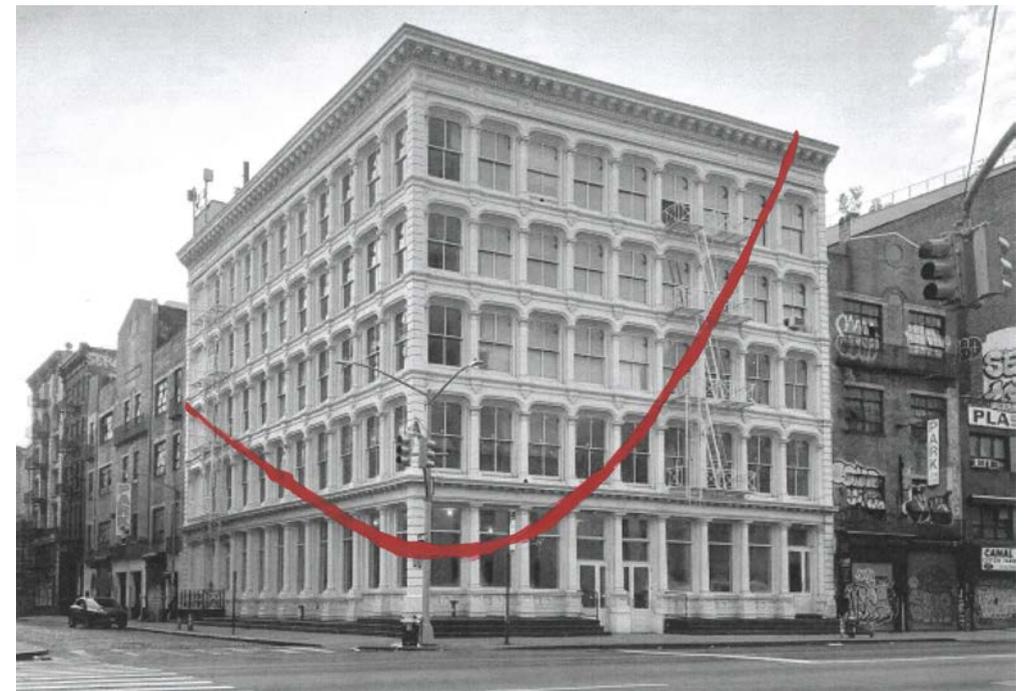


Fig. 3 Seung-taek Lee, *Drawing for Wind Performance* (2022). Watercolor on paper. 11.02 x 13.39 in. Courtesy of the artist.

1990s revisionist readings granted renewed attention to numerous short-lived, polyvocal collectives of the 1960s and 1970s that had been previously regarded as "failed" vanguard initiatives as such.⁸ Although they might have lacked widespread recognition and collective cohesiveness at the time, the artist groups introduced diversity and plurality to the stagnant art world, questioning the traditional modes of art-making and the systems governing them. Notably, self-organized collectives such as the Original Form Association (1964–1968) and the Avant-Garde Association (1969–1975), commonly known as A.G., began to be critically re-evaluated. Seung-taek Lee's involvement with these collectives was cursory, but they remain important reference groups for the artist, who has persistently

resisted associations with a particular collective or a movement.

As demonstrated by the pencil and gouache drawings on paper prefiguring and reimagining the 1971 performance, a video recording of a blown-up photographic reproduction of the reenacted performance from 2001, *Wind-Folk Amusement* has generated a complex web of cross-references and temporalities (Fig. 3, 4).⁹ The iconic performance materialized as the artist sought to incorporate transient elements of nature into the non-sculptures. His interest partly stemmed from a shared interest in "non-artificiality" deeply rooted in East Asian philosophies and tradition, yet the work's unmediated interaction with elements and laws of nature first and foremost liberated



Fig. 4 Canal Projects Reenactment of Seung-taek Lee's *Wind Folk-Amusement* (1971), led by Ayoung Yu & Nicholas Oh. February 25, 2023, on Hudson River Park's Pier 45. Image courtesy of YP Lee.

sculpture from its solid and inert material properties.¹⁰ Unlike others, *Wind-Folk Amusement* leveraged on a collaborative performance when it was unfurled across the barren Nanji Island by the Han River in 1971, prior to its conversion into a landfill. With one of the four participants holding one end of the strip, the tensile fabric drew large arcs as it rose with the wind, vibrantly swirling, fluttering, and billowing in the sky. Without physically altering the given space they occupy, the fleeting pulsation of the red strip could be witnessed by whoever happened to be passing by the scene at the time. Depending on the force, directional movement, and speed or intensity of the air current, the performance could be enacted in numerous ways, as it

has been the case with Canal Project's activation of the piece with Ayoung Yu and Nicholas Oh by the Hudson River. Rather than defining one as the original live performance, and others as documentary records, altering variations of *Wind-Folk Amusement* drift between both ends of the spectrum, inviting more associations to emerge.

In fact, depending on the method of display or the site of the exhibition, an identical work by Lee can bear different titles. At the eleventh São Paulo Biennial in 1970, for instance, an outdoor installation composed of strips of flags reminiscent of garlands used in folk festivals or traditional Korean shamanistic rituals, was entitled "Love and Peace." However on other



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Life and Death*, 1973. Gelatin silver print. 124.5 x 193 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Hyundai.

occasions it was called "Life and Death," or simply referred to as "Wind" or "Wind works" (Fig. 5). At times, untitled pieces later gained elaborate titles, or vice versa. The flexibility with which Lee titled his works is revealing, as they highlight divergent ways he perceived and engaged with them. In a similar vein, retrospective visitations and configurations of photographs, especially those of outdoor interventions and ephemeral performances, indicate the artist's changing attitude towards his non-sculptures, while simultaneously aligning and re-aligning his relationship with the society. The impact of photographic manipulations is, however, far-reaching because of the medium's documentary value. The post-production editorial techniques favored by the

artist not only multiplies, but refracts referential and temporal associations between the works.

In thinking about the relationship between performing live art and its documentation, performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider prompts to imagine a finishing as caught in endless incompleteness. Her provocation is particularly helpful when we attempt to situate South Korean avant-garde artist Seung-taek Lee's porous and sprawling body of work within established art historical contexts and discourses. As discussed, Lee's non-sculptures characteristically resist completion, by periodically re-appropriating, mutating, and reviving earlier works, motifs, or concepts, whether in part or in their

entirety. *Earth Play* (1989–1996), a painted inflatable globe installed at one corner of the Canal Project's gallery overlooking the bustling streets of New York City is an example *par excellence*. Since it was first conceived as an interactive piece for children at the inaugural outdoor festival organized by Communication Art Group in the city of Suwon in 1991, the globe has been on the move, literally and metaphorically (Fig. 6).¹¹ At times the monumental inflatable, measuring five meters in diameter, would be attached to a bike and dragged along the busy streets of Beijing (1994), rolled over the stream of Cheonggyecheon and deserted wastelands (2000s), or stationed on the grounds of London's Regents Park to gradually deflate, evoking a powerful image of the sagging Blue Marble (2015). Within the context of *Things Unstable* exhibition alone, the piece simultaneously exists as an installation, an activated performance at Governors Island, and a series of fabricated photographs. Various entitled "Resting Earth," "The Earth Performance," and "The Earth Touring Beijing," the painted reproductions refer to the previous iterations of the work, yet fail to complete their role as reliable indexes of the past.

When considering the non-sculptures in their deferred state of completion, it becomes apparent that Seung-taek Lee's strategies of negation not only break away from the conventions, but simultaneously suggest ways to navigate one's position in a rapidly changing world. Perpetually in between and among, the non-sculptures drift across totalizing forms of categorization or historicization. Although their fluid state might render any attempt at critically locating and charting them futile, it is also that which enables multiple networks and histories to emerge.



Fig. 6 Seung-taek Lee, *Earth Play*, 1991 Paint on C-print, 118 x 112 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Hyundai.

Notes

¹ Rebecca Schneider, "What Happened; or, Finishing Live," *Representations*, no. 136 (Fall 2016), pp. 96-111.

² See *Han'guk hyōndae misul tasi ilkki* (Re-reading contemporary Korean art) series published by the Institute of Contemporary Art of Seoul (ICAS).

³ Lee Seung-taek, "Nae pijogak ūi kūnwōn" (The origin of my non-sculpture), *Space*, vol. 155 (May 1980), pp. 38-39. Although the term "non-sculpture" has now become a semantic notion for defining the artist's practice, recurrently appearing in writings as nouns and adjectives, titles of the artworks and exhibitions, there are conflicting interpretations as to what exactly it denotes.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The figure is based on the artist's unpublished, unpaginated, hand-written record of all the statues and monuments Lee produced between 1957 and 2012.

⁶ For the generation of sculptors working in postwar Korea, participation in the monument industry was common and considered inevitable. As critic Yun U-hak notes, "the duality of Lee Seung-taek's practice might be criticized by some, but the [poor] cultural infrastructure of the time makes such criticisms meaningless. He used the technique of realism to maintain his life, and utilized the technique of abstraction to proof his existence as an artist." However, the lack of recognition given to official statuary as "proper" art meant the issues they posed received little attention as a subject for critical examination. Yun U-hak, "Tasi chōmgōmhago toedora poayaman hal Yi Sūng-t'aek ūi kkūnjilgin tojōn ūi ūiji" (The undefeated challenge of Lee Seung-taek) in *Experimental arts 50 years: Lee Seung-taek invitational exhibition*, exh. cat. (Seoul: Arko, 1997), unpaginated.

⁷ Too often, Lee has been branded as a figure whose radical attack on the traditional notion of sculpture emerged in isolation. On the contrary, Lee's prolific output of essays and works reveal his critical engagement with discourses and practices

prevailing at home and abroad.

⁸ Kim Mi-kyung, *Han'guk ūi sirhōm misul* (Experimental art in Korea) (Seoul: Sigongsa, 2003).

⁹ *Wind-Folk Amusement* has been staged multiple times at various locations since its initial conception in 1971. As part of the re-reading Korean art history project, Lee's performance restaged by the Han riverside in 2001 was video recorded and exhibited at *The New Phase: Contemporaneity of Contemporary Korean Art* (4–13 December, 2001, Hwanwon Art Museum). Subsequently it was staged in 2007, at an open plaza of Yoyido, as part of *Yoyido Public Art Project*, and again at Nature Park as part of the exhibition *Lines in Space* (27 February–29 April, Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art) the same year. In 2010, it took place by Mipo seaside, Busan, as part of the exhibition *Nomadic Party* (Arko, 2010). I would like to thank archivist Pak Sang-ae from Nam June Paik Art Centre for sharing the video documentation of the performance enacted in 2007.

¹⁰ Oh Kwang-su, "70-yōndae han'guk misul ūi pimuljilhwa kyōnghyang," (The non-material tendencies of 1970s Korean art), *Han'guk hyōndaemisul ūi miūsik* (The aesthetic awareness of contemporary Korean Art) (Seoul: Chaewōn, 1995), p. 71.

¹¹ Communications Art Group (1990–1996) was a self-organized, multidisciplinary collective whose activities were based in the city of Suwon. They are known for the organization of large-scale outdoor performance festivals.

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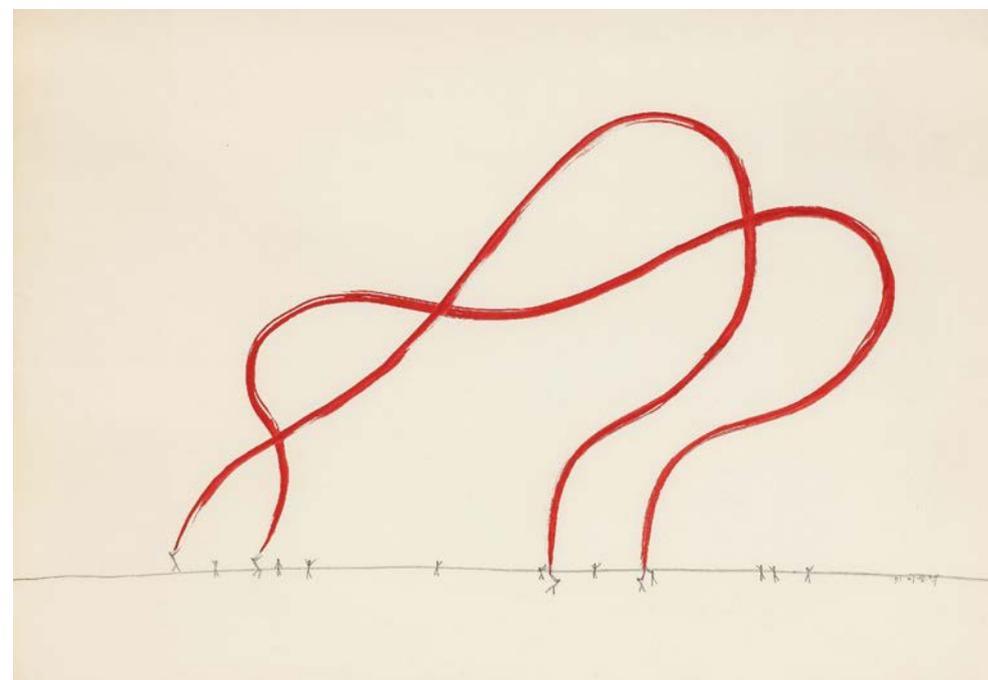
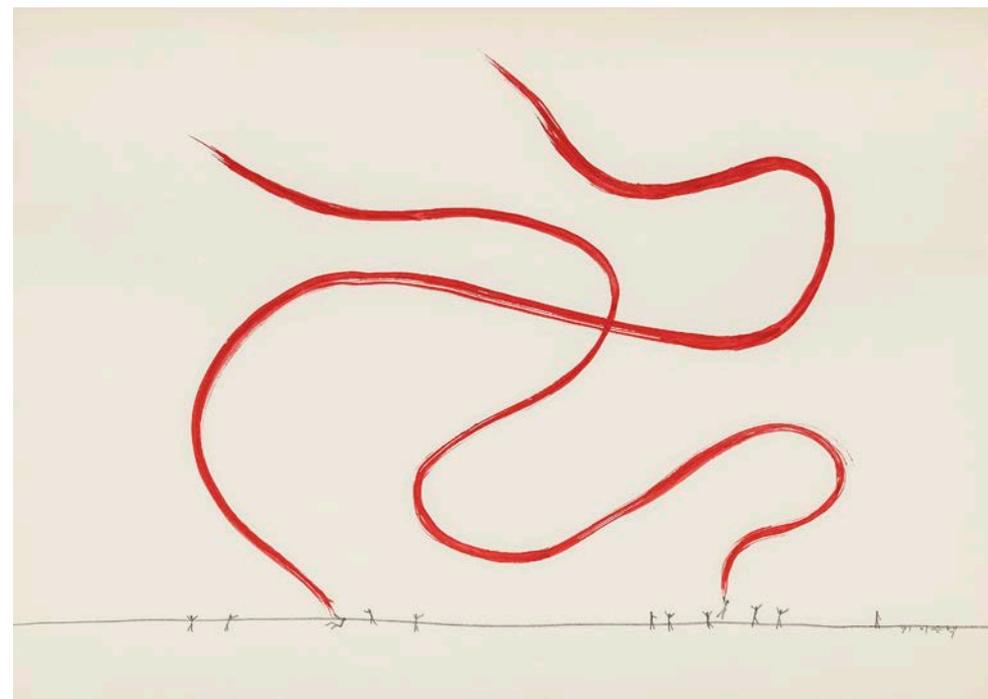
Wind-Folk Amusement

Reenactment

On an overcast, windy afternoon in the fall of 1971, Seung-taek Lee and a group of friends ventured out onto Nanji Island on the Han River in Seoul and unfurled three giant strips of scarlet cloth. With one person holding each end, the pieces of cloth rose with the wind, gradually unraveling to their full 80-meter length as three enormous red arcs, billowing, swaying and whipping in the sky. Titled *Wind – Folk Amusement*, this performance is one of many large-scale outdoor works through which Lee gives form to transient elements of nature.

This performance's attributes serve to reveal the meaning of natural and spiritual phenomena while also presenting a new mode of artistic existence. Through the artist's engagement with air, cloth, and time, wind can be visualized through space. New artistic expression can be found with the complete unification of existence, nature, and material, manifested in a form other than painting or sculpture.

On February 25, 2023, Canal Projects hosted the first US reenactment of Lee's *Wind-Folk Amusement* on Pier 45 in partnership with Hudson River Park. Led by the Korean-American artists Ayoung Yu and Nicholas Oh, with collaborators including Mudang Jenn, Luyan Li, Jenny Suh and Megumi Yamada.



Seung-taek Lee, *Drawing*, 1971, Pencil, gouache on paper. Image courtesy of Gallery Hyundai





Visiting Seung-taek Lee's Studio

April 2023

Interview by Sara Garzón, translated by Jinhee Park



Seung-taek Lee in his studio, April 2023. Courtesy of April Bang

Sara Garzón: First of all, on behalf of Canal Projects, I want to thank you for working with us in the exhibition *Things Unstable*. We have been honored to learn more about your practice and have come to admire how radical you have been all these years, your irreverence towards the institutions of art, and your humor.

Things Unstable has provided us the opportunity to explore your artistic practice in two different and yet related lines. On the one hand, we focused on your avant-garde spirit, delineating for the general public the many ways in which you challenge the conventions of art generating new understandings of the ways in which unexpected objects and quotidian materials can carry unperceived aesthetic value. On the other hand, we focused on positioning you as an early proponent of environmental art. We were drawn to how consistent you have been in your environmental campaigns, drawing attention to the urgent need to care for our planet, but observed, still, that in your incessant need to break away and challenge the institutions of art, you were asking very different questions about industrialization, waste, and pollution. These are subjects that only until now have gained prominence in contemporary art discourses.

We have been intrigued by many elements of your work, but first, I wanted to ask about how you feel about having this exhibition in New York. You have shown in very prominent museums and venues throughout the years, what has the show at Canal Projects meant for you?

Seung-taek Lee: First of all, thank you so much for the exhibition *Things Unstable*. The title and its focus on my work illustrates that artists can make possible things that are usually considered impossible. Even though an artist fails to succeed to realize an idea, the action, trying, is still valuable. From that action, the world can change. Many of the works that you selected for this exhibition express my many attempts at pushing the boundaries of art by turning quotidian objects into works of art, objects of aesthetic value that I believe can transform the way we see the world.

SG: Since the 1970s, you have demonstrated a sustained commitment to ecological issues. Can you tell us more about what *hwangyeongmisul* (Environmental art) meant to you?

SL: About nature, the environment. The rules of nature are hard for humans to mimic. Even if a man tries hard and puts effort into making something similar to nature, it is almost impossible. So nature is something that is unconditional, absolute. For example, in Japanese art, they always try to be within the boundaries of nature. They don't want to position themselves opposite to nature. So when the Japanese audience first saw my works, they questioned my unique use of the natural elements.

SG: Your *Wind-Folk Amusement* performance and other wind works have become characteristic of your avant-garde practice. Can you tell us how you initiated your collaboration with the natural elements? Was this interest in wind and fire related to international



ideas associated with the Land Art Movement or the Korean art groups working during the early 1970s around similar concerns?

SL: With the wind works, I felt that there was a solid barrier that I have to overcome as a Korean artist in the international art scene, and these works made me overcome the barrier. I envisioned the work as a performance even though in Korea there was very little familiarity with the concept of Performance Art or Land Art for that matter, at least as we know them today. We did, however, have an interest in sculptural installations, working outdoors, and engaging the landscape. But at the time, we all lacked the specific language for talking

about it. I had no idea about some international trends of art back then, but I did it anyway; understanding that to perform with the environment also had to do with engaging with the rapid industrialization and the modernization of the landscape.

When I was focusing on wind series, I tried to find philosophical meanings from my own work. So, the wind, you cannot see the materiality of it, but while remaining imperceptible to the eye, it exists through its movement in space and time. This drew me to the concept of form-less art.

I connected dots by myself and it ended up as the wind series. Art should have a shape, a figure, a form. That was

what I learned. However, I kept asking myself if art can exist without form. Sometimes I felt I was insane for asking these questions and felt like I was doing something wrong. But at the same time I could not stop thinking about this concept of form-less art. Then, I watched the news and saw factories and smoke stacks in Saudi Arabia, people burning carbon fuel and stuff. This made me realize that “okay, this is the form-less art that I am looking for.” It was natural to come up with wind after the fire and smoke.

SG: Your incessant need to think outside the traditions and convention of art led you to this recurrent gesture in your work of tying and binding objects. Tying, as we see it, is a transformative force with which you imbued quotidian, everyday, and unexpected objects with sensibilities of contemporary art. I’m referring here to works in the exhibition such as *Tied Stone* (1969), *Untitled (Soft Rock)*, 1974) and *Untitled* (Installation, 1982), among others, in which tying changes the harsh and inorganic nature of the stone into seemingly soft and organic structures. Can you tell me more about where this idea of tying comes from? What drew you to this action?

SL: In the late 1950s when I was in university, I was into philosophy. I started to read a lot, especially French philosophy, and Nietzsche in particular. And what I found as a core question was *why*. Philosophy keeps asking *why* and at the core of philosophy was a dialectical method which helped me to think conversely. I also began to think about negation, before deeply studying and later teaching art history.

From my understanding, western art history flows through trends in a linear way. That is why I knew that I had to try something that was not already in the art history books. This notion brought me to Korean traditional materials, traditional objects.

I think string is something extraordinary. I think rope and string are concept art themselves. I used them as a tool for my conceptual art practice. String is a basic tool that we first use when we start a sculpture, especially for modeling clay.

You use string to keep clay on the frame. Put clay on the frame, tying clay to make it solid. So string, tying, changes the materiality of any object. When you tie a string around a pebble, somehow a pebble looks soft, yet you know a pebble is hard. Also, when you tie a human body, somehow the body, which is soft, looks firm.

String can be a wire too. I used wire in works like *Tied Stone* (1969), which you have on view in *Things Unstable*.

SG: Through the course of this exhibition, we’ve heard just how inspiring you are for many artists and curators who think of your work as an important referent of not only Korean but also global contemporary art. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us and taking us through some of the most striking elements in your practice.

Special thanks to Young Kwon, Gallery Hyundai, April Bang and James Kim for their support in making this interview possible.



The artist's studio. Courtesy of April Bang

SEUNG-TAEK LEE'S ECOAESTHETICS IN DEVELOPMENTALIST SOUTH KOREA

SOYOON RYU

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 Yattoo 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 rewrites 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.

Soyoon Ryu (she/her) is a PhD candidate in the History of Art at the University of Michigan. Her interests include intersections of visual culture and land-based politics in East and Southeast Asia, artistic collectivization, decolonial thought, ecocriticism, and the issue of form in socially-engaged and participatory practices. As a practicing artist, writer, and member of the artist collective Rice Brewing Sisters Club, she has organized projects that take fermentation as a poetic and temporal form. Soyoon received her B.A. in History of Art and Government from Cornell University and her M.A. in Contemporary Art from SOAS, University of London.

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.*

The Earth Performance

Reenactment

To deliver the message that the global community must collectively take care of our planet, Seung-taek Lee created performances like *Earth Play* (1989), *Earth Performance* (1990), and *Resting Earth* (1991). These reflected the artist's interest in communicating environmental issues with the larger public—issues deliberately pushed aside by the agendas of urbanization and industrialization.

While these performances are relational artworks completed through audience interaction, they are also environmental campaigns that urge people to take action in the preservation of the Earth's various ecosystems. Seung-taek Lee's *Earth Performance* has been used in outdoor art festivals and staged performances that involved rolling and playing with participants. Torn and scraped, the Earth balloon gradually loses air, shriveling up and falling flat into an unrecognizable heap, at times only in a matter of hours.

On April 22, 2023, Canal Projects was thrilled to present a reenactment of Lee's *The Earth Performance*, led by Ayoung Yu and Nicholas Oh with Luyan Li and co-produced with Governors Island Arts as part of Earth Day on Governor's Island. This day long celebration of collective climate action and resiliency featured the activation of Lee's Earth Balloon against the backdrop of the New York skyline, inviting audiences to engage with, witness, and reflect on our shared vulnerabilities on the planet we call home.



top: Seung-taek Lee, *The Earth Performance*, 2000s, Performing with a balloon near Paju, Korea. Image courtesy of Gallery Hyundai; bottom: Seung-taek Lee, *The Earth Performance*, 1991. Image courtesy of Gallery Hyundai.











Bios

A young Yu (b. 1990) received her MFA from Columbia University. She has exhibited at venues including: Cantor Art Center, Museum of Art and Design, Christie's Inc., Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, LeRoy Neiman Gallery, Time Square Space, Jewish Museum. She was also awarded the Artist In the Market (AIM) Fellowship by the Bronx Museum of Arts, the Individual Artist Fellowship by the MidAtlantic Foundation of Arts, and Gold Prize by the AHL Foundation.

Nicholas Oh (b. 1985) received his MFA from Rhode Island School of Design. He has exhibited at venues including: RISD Museum, Smithsonian, Cantor Art Center, Museum of Art and Design, Christie's Inc., Spring/Break Art Show. He has also participated in artist residencies including: Pioneer Works, Anderson Ranch, Sculpture Space, Dongguk University, and is currently teaching at Brooklyn College and Rhode Island School of Design.

Mudang Jenn (Jennifer Kim, 신수 보살) is an internationally known and respected teaching artist, practicing mudang, and consultant on Muism— Korea's ancient and enduring indigenous religion.

Luyan Li is a NYC based artist from Beijing, graduated with a BFA dance degree from Ohio State University in 2017.

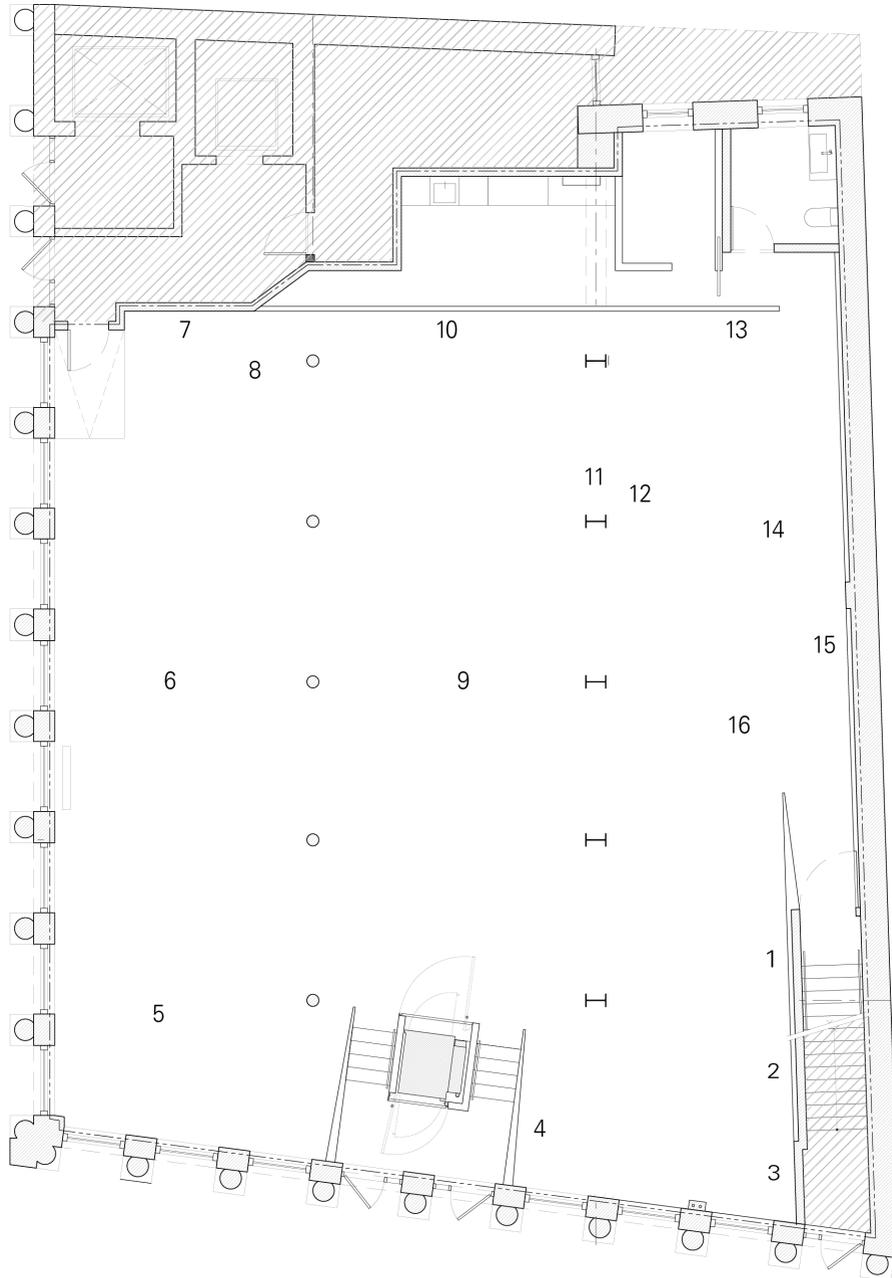
Jenny Suh (she/her) is a South Korean artist now residing in NYC. She is an E-29 FDNY certified fire performer, choreographer, and dancer with over eight years of experience performing at music festivals, large-scale parties, fashion shows, and private events.

Megumi Yamada was born in Kyoto, Japan. She is an aerialist, stilt-walker, fire performer and dancer based in NYC with over 15 years of experience onstage in theater, festival, dance, and circus.



Facade Intervention, Canal Projects. May 19, 2023.

Seung-taek Lee: *Things Unstable*
Checklist



1. *The Earth Touring Beijing*, 1994.
 Paint on C-print, 35.83 x 44.88 in.

2. *Resting Earth*, 1991.
 Paint on C-print, 32.08 x 44.88 in.

3. *The Earth Performance*, 1989.
 Oil on photomontage, 42.52 x 34.25 in.

4. *The Earth Performance*, ca. 1990s.
 C-print, 32.68 x 44.09 in.

5. *Earth Play*, 1989-1996.
 Oil on vinyl balloon, 21 ft diameter

6. *Untitled*, 1980.
 Glass, wood, rope, latex glove,
 Dimensions variable

7. *With Skeleton*, ca. 1990s.
 Paint on C-Print, 31.46 x 46.38 in.

8. *Tied Stone*, 1969.
 Stone, wire, 11.42 x 11.22 x 11.42 in.

9. *Untitled*, 1982-2022.
 Stone, rope. Dimensions variable.

10. *Wind Drawings*, 1971.
 Pencil, gouache on paper, 21.65 x 31.1
 in.

11. *Wind-Folk Amusement*, 2001.
 Performance. Color video
 documentation, audio, 5mins.

12. *Performance Art of Burning*
 (excerpts), 1989.
 Performance, Total Museum of
 Contemporary Art, Nanji Island.
 Color video documentation, audio.

13. *Smoke*, ca. 1990.
 Paint on gelatin silver print, 32.87 x
 47.44 in.

14. *Untitled (Soft Rock)*, 1974.
 Stone, rope, 11.42 x 13.78 x 12.60 in.

15. *Natural Protection*, 1970s (Reprinted
 in 1990s)
 Paint on C-print, 41.34 x 31.9 in.

16. *Untitled*, 1983.
 Paper, wooden frame, dimensions
 variable.

Seung-taek Lee: *Things Unstable*
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Cover Image: Seung-taek Lee, *The Earth Touring Beiing*, 1994. Paint on c-print, 35.83 x 44.88 in. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Hyundai.

Installation views by Izzy Leung

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



Wind-Folk Amusement: Reenactment presented in partnership with Hudson River Park



The Earth Performance: Reenactment co-produced with Governors Island Arts



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