

LEE, Yong Deok in Conversation with Biljana Ciric
Behind the Shadow

Biljana Ciric : From the end of the eighties, the works you produced like Farewell, Olympics are works you produced during your studies in Seoul. Can you talk about the background of those works, the issues that you tried to raise and their relation to the art scene in Korea at the time and the art environment in Seoul?

LEE, Yong Deok : My days on the university campus were in a era when people went protesting every single day against the autarchy of military authority. The whole society was in chaos, everybody was yearning for a better future, and objecting to the political ideal of sacrificing realism, but at the same time assimilated by it. When I look back at those days, the only thing I saw was “oppressed and destroyed, the critical condition,” and silence overwhelmed as the solution was submission inmost.

Since the beginning of 1980, artists who participated in realistic social reform through their works had emerged though not primarily, and they criticized the injustice, the irrationality and the improprieties of the government.

I still have doubts on the nature of humankind and the cause of such contradiction, though I did agree with their actions. That is why I avoided criticizing the real world directly, but picked up a philosophical notion of “if the life experience of the human race is confined in itself, and the way of life is conquering in the mind.” The theme had been my saying for a long time. Thus, the life of ordinary people was the center of my works, and they were always in the shape of harsh disconnection, or attached weightily, and I considered it a rather obvious way of metaphor. I could not get peace of my mind from the stirring ideas at that time, and I felt painful to be confined by narration and a definite way of presentation in my creation. The pain could be provoked by the so-called mainstream minimal art and abstract art in the fine art of Korea. My works were focused as a result of this. I would like hiking on a walk between the mountains rather than driving on a safe highway, for I think it would be much more meaningful, and that is the reason why I never wandered.

Biljana Ciric : In the 90’s, you spent some time studying in Germany. How did the new environment influence your work?

LEE, Yong Deok : I felt tired and vacant from the continuing creation of works, which were like serial conceptual slogans. I felt the failure when the meaning of my works was understood by spectators, because it made me feel that the work was just a method to deliver meaning and sensibility. I desired to be reborn at some new

place, like a baby newborn the world, the whole experience was to be erased and confronted by the world as a piece white paper, no matter if it was in Germany or the countryside of Korea.

One day, I began my new life at my studio at Univeritaat der Kuunste Berlin (HdK). I walked around in my studio like an inexperienced child having nothing to do with my former ideas. I saw lot of stuff, but what attracted me most was a long piece of wood in the hallway. I took a close look at it, and then I found a piece of rope to hang it down from the ceiling. The batten was slowly spinning in the slightly flowing air in a balanced position. The balanced intensity had my attention right at the minute, and I started to put other battens on both end of it. It was like being absorbed into a mystic space as long as the balance was achieved though it was hard to reach. "The space dimension is constantly flowing in a stopped time dimension." The exciting encounter continued for a couple of days. The bunch of battens seemed to be at rest in tranquility, or flowing slowly on the floor. I had come to some ideas, such that the affection of "disappearance of time" and "the flow of space" which had attracted me for some time was not from the information I had received. Neither was the delight of discovering the truth, but the fact that I was here to look at it, the surprising fact that the crossing batten existed, and the mystery of being normal but quite out of the ordinary.

Until then, I usually considered eternity more valuable than the transience, and reasoning was a perfect world compared to sensibility. So sometimes, when you look at a person in action, you should not be confined by his behavior, but should focus on "who" he is and "what" he is trying to present. This is like the feeling you get with a gigantic view of the outside when you have been inside for a long time and then suddenly you push open the door unconsciously. My new trip just started here.

Biljana Ciric : One of your most important pieces at that time was done from a photo from the 1920s, and in the statement of that work, you talk about the sense of truth and human existence.

LEE, Yong Deok : The beginning of the work had been acting as a muse for the building of the notion of my work. I found an enrollment photo of elementary school boys by chance at the weekend market in Berlin. The date, place and character that were marked on the back of the photo said: [kl.k.7d. 24.10.1920., Berlin]

There was no connection between the photo and me; I was not compelled to do anything about it, but the boys impressed me deeply, and I had a one-way love for them. What is important is that there are multiple reasons to pull us apart, but they did not work, though I did not know why I picked up the photo in 1995 since it was from in 1920. The children were six or seven at

that time, but they would be 82-year old men if they were still alive. World War I ended two years before that. These boys were the doomed children who would have to serve in the German army in World War II when they grew up. Moreover, if they survived the war, they would be enduring the pain of the rebuilding of the country. The fact had nothing to do with me, but I made every single boy a sculpture, and I talked to him everyday; I believed that we were destined to meet. To me, they were still boys from the 1920s even they were over 80 in real life. I could not distinguish between the real world before my eyes and the image on the photo that took place 75 years ago because that was like a real existence to me. I saw the boys in front of the camera through the photo, just like a window in the wall through which one can see the past, but at the same time the wall keeps the past away. The boys behind the window were reconstructed through the sculpture, despite the difference of eras and by the projection to real life. The blurring fact once washed away by the giant flow of the past was now put in the space called nowadays, in a non-specific time and in a non-specific space way.

Biljana Ciric : That work was produced according to the photograph that you found. Does photography play an important role in your sculpture work in capturing the moment or playing with time?

LEE, Yong Deok : It played an important part when I began the creation. It played the same part no matter who took the snapshot. My discovery of it as well the care I put into it started the trip of transferring. Like taking the extraordinary scenic views from a trip back home with a camera, these scenes were recorded with the history of that time. The application of it can be used as a means to take people back to the days. The theme of the photo is not the scenery, but the touch of it, the concern of the cameraman. I was creating art works in the interest of recording this concern for a long time.

Biljana Ciric : Works done in recent years are recognized as a negative sculpture. How did you develop the concept, and what was the first piece that you produced as a negative sculpture and when?

LEE, Yong Deok : Since the middle 1980s, I have consolidated my ideas about it, and I have begun to attempt this type of creation. The creation presenting the theme of boundary still took place, but to present this, the theme had transferred from an angle of disconnecting and connecting to the doubt on the nature of the contradictory.

I remember I began from the visual effect. All square objects can be only seen in light, and all light has a certain direction. When light sheds on the facet of an object, an uneven shadow forms allowing people to feel the existence of the object. This basic optic rule is the same rule that all

sculptors apply in their creations. Looking back on the elementary school days, the inner side of the shoe bag obeys the same rule. You would get the same when you get the facet of a cube inverted or reversed. My initial works used the negative to present some part of human body; it definitely was an integral image of a human in visual effects. When you look at it more closely, the statures were a mix of positive and negative parts. I wanted to demonstrate that the mix of yin and yang could be a way of presenting a solid image then.

When I observe things in light of this, I find out that everything in the world was formed in the harmony of yin and yang. The rule of yin and yang is the main axis in the eastern philosophy. The positive confirmation of it was the reason that I had changed the theme of my works. The recognition of the “critical situation” is an exaggeration of the rule to resist nature. The world is filled with contradictions, and the acceptance of contradiction is life. Pain and happiness, yin and yang - the contradictory melts into a one-piece image. However, I still had a feeling that there was an inherent problem, and later I realized that I would never go beyond this if I attempt to present, explain, and define such provocation through the works.

The suffocating confusion was released after I got the idea in Germany. I realized that once I hinted a negative, the audience would react positively; isn't this a harmony? You do not have to emphasize the theme you have set up; the means of existence would have such effect. Just like collecting scenic photos, the recording is in a space with no time, because the contradictions, vexations and resistance are all taken in an instant of human life. Thus, I found an important thing from my inquiry.

That is to realize the existence through non-existence. A negative image of a human is to shed the surroundings of a person, and the rest of it confirms the existence of the human negatively. The original idea can be traced back to an element of works in the 1980s at which time artists used the negative part to present the existence. To present the character through the trace that is left, that is the same rule to prove an auto has passed by through the track left in the snow.

Biljana Ciric : Through the negative sculpture at the same time, do you question sculpture as a traditional form and its new possibilities?

LEE, Yong Deok : In my language, a double denial is an emphasized confirmation. Here, nonexistence and negation have different meanings; they cannot exist by themselves without an opposite position. That is to say that a double denial is not using the same denial twice, but using the same position.

In my work, facet has an important meaning, because it could be the basis of the opposite position. The work can be like a mirror, which would never expose its own existence, but to reflect on the object before it. Nonexistence and negation are all behind the mirror, and they have something in common. So is my negative part; it has the same function to prove the existence of itself, just like a positive. So, why not use the object before the mirror to achieve an even bigger reflection?

Positive words can exist without nonexistence and negation, and so does the positive style in traditional sculpture. The harmony of positive and negative forms the feature of the sculpture. The position to look at the feature is an orthodox one from outside and easily accepted. However, if I look at it from inside, the boundary of positive would be the surface. In that way a new feeling, visual confusion and illusion would appear. We are not going too far to say that traditional sculpture is applying the emphasis on existence in the world. Though not all sculptures are like that with a tendency to be bigger and stronger, but they do use the size and power to emphasize physics element as a result of lacking reversing means.

Biljana Ciric : The series that you produced over the last few years on a grand scale shows the daily actions and the daily motions. Can you tell me about the creative process of this work (do you photograph people randomly, and how do you collect your material and transform it into the negative sculpture)?

LEE, Yong Deok : The process of my works has an axis of transfer. They are chosen during the process of transferring from one media to another. The repetition of this process is the way I transfer. For example, we could collect all people and objects in common life, and pick the one in which we are most interested. The chosen object is a perfect fact, and we transfer it to camera. In the process, the background scenes would be erased to remove time and space. The photo is transferred by computer in various ways, and some elements would be preserved while many are discarded.

Choosing is a pleasant process, but I learned that choosing can be painful as well. I avoid adding things randomly, because everything is from the fact, and I have to be negative to present it. I hope to present the original fact in the end, objectively. Choosing is the basis of the presentation.

I set up a mold with a computer and then set up a model with clay in the traditional way; the model should be in an objective style, too. The model is transferred from a positive sculpture to a negative one through casting. There is plenty of picking and discarding. Color and other structures are added to get an illusion of the work. What most interests me is the nature of the character at this time, rather than the original nature of the character.

For example, we pick a person - who is he, his name and his occupation are not important at all. What means most is that they captured that very instant of life. I do not expect that only people who are familiar with me can bring me happiness; the unconscious touch with people I do not know can also give me the feeling of happiness.

Biljana Ciric : Negative sculpture deals with the sense of illusion by which the viewer is connected with the object. Does time based experience become more important for you in this space?

LEE, Yong Deok : I like coffee with sugar; it is fine if I can just smell the flavored coffee without sugar, but I would not have coffee on its own.

The illusionary effect of my work is like sugar; the illusion makes my work charming and tasty. This is how I attracted the audience when I found the batten on the ceiling and fixed it so it could not become separated. But when it starts affecting the flavor of the coffee, it can be taken off. The illusion does not just appear sensitively. When the spectators look at it, they would find their existence before them, so they would feel that the object and they are in the same space.

Actually, the illusion is oriented from the spectator. They would find the negative sculpture moving when they themselves are moving.

Biljana Ciric : Your negative sculptures are human images closed in boxes in their own space-time relation that makes them more distanced. Did you think about the space-time relation and notion of existence on both sides of the viewer and your work?

LEE, Yong Deok : In my works, the plane has been acting notionally and modally. To explain in numbers, that would be zero between + and -. It would mean nonexistence on a no-ego existing basis, but on the basis that + and - goes to two different ways, zero is the originality of everything, which is the soul of eastern philosophy. The meaning of it is not only the boundary of the two sides, but also the important effect on visual illusion and sense.

The plane is like a tranquil lake reflecting the moon in the sky. The misconception that it moves as we move is just like that in the real world, in that instant, the past becomes recorded, and then reality is stopped there.

Biljana Ciric : How is shadow related to the negative sculpture? Could it be understood as a temporal sculpture where the actual process is more important than the final product?

LEE, Yong Deok : The shadow is like cut paper.

I once showed that a plane is a yin carving and a yang carving. That is to put

the plane in the center as the beginning of + and -, and at the same time, the 3-dimensional work of the yin carving and yang carving of the two characters is compressed towards the center, so it is the coexistence of the status of + and -.

Another work is an experimental one about a room of shadows in a zero status. In this work, when a spectator enters the room, a strong light is shined on him instantly, and his shadow is displayed on the wall, but the shadow does not disappear with the light and lasts for about three minutes before fading out. The spectator observes the process and the emergence and disappearance of the shadow. What makes it unique is that the shadow does not move with the person, but stays in a fixed position, like a peeled-off piece of skin.

The principle of the work is the same as the negative works. The shadow doesn't strictly exist at the beginning; the spectator blocks off the light, the fluorescence material on the wall absorbs this light and it lights up for about three minutes. That is this work - the shadow of the spectator presented by the surroundings lighting up and fading out.

Biljana Ciric : What are your future projects, and how do you see your work in the future?

LEE, Yong Deok : We emphasize observing and being observed through the ongoing negative creating. It is not just for explaining, but also to prove that existence is rational. The existence itself is perfect even if it is not bringing any positive information, like the face of a child, and the rock and trees - they are all full of life. However, maybe someday I will be contagious with a feeling of self-humiliation - nobody can be certain.

Biljana Ciric : Do you have any projects that you would like to do in the future?

LEE, Yong Deok : The principles of my latest work come from my experience and bravery. I thought it over and brought it onto the moral and sensitive level. At the time, I never imagined I would create it in the future. If I ponder about what part of my experience can be used and how to present it in the future, the pondering itself would confine my future behavior.

I feel that life is like a trip where you do not know the destination. As a result, every second and minute of the trip brings me the feel of freshness. If everything settles down, maybe the body feels good physically, but it would surely be boring. That is what I want to say.

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