

Lee Seung Taek *Non-Art: The Inversive Act*



LEE SEUNG TAEK, *The Earth Touring*
Beijing, 1994, paint on c-print,
114 × 92.5 cm. Courtesy the artist.

High above the central courtyard of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Seoul, hundreds of thin strips of cerulean fabric twisted and fluttered in the breeze between the museum's two main buildings, where they were strung along a 70-meter-long rope traversing the open airspace. *Wind* (1970/2020), an understated and

generative outdoor installation by Korean experimental artist Lee Seung Taek, asserts a conceptual logic at odds with conventional approaches to sculpture by deploying a minimal formal vocabulary unfolding dualities of materiality and ephemerality. This seminal work in Lee's extensive oeuvre served as the initial point of encounter for visitors to "Lee Seung Taek's Non-Art: The Inversive Act," an encyclopedic presentation of approximately 250 sculptures, installations, paintings, and photos that sought to cement the artist's historical legacy and trace links between manifold bodies of work he has produced over the past 60 years.

The genesis of Lee's experimental impetus was very much a product of the postwar milieu he encountered upon graduating from Seoul's Hongik University in 1959. Lacking the means to procure traditional sculptural media and seeking to challenge preconceptions of Korea's burgeoning art establishment, Lee began working with readily available materials to develop the concept of "non-art" that

would thereafter inform his practice. In 1964, he stacked earthenware kimchi pots into a totemic form to create *Growth (Tower)*, which he installed directly on the gallery floor in order to strip away any aesthetic accoutrements that might imbue the household objects with overt sculptural connotations. For *Untitled* (1968), he stretched colorful vinyl sheeting around geometric steel armatures, yielding eye-popping forms that emphasized surface over substance and subverted the prevailing formalist sculptural grammar of the age. In addition to these pioneering sculptural installations, "The Inversive Act" included a vast array of pieces from his long-term "binding" series. Beginning in 1958, Lee subtly destabilized the materiality of all sorts of objects—stones, ceramics, books, and canvases—by tightly binding them with rope or twine. Unfortunately, these foundational works were relegated to an awkward transitional space between two larger galleries, precluding visitors from enjoying sustained encounters with some of the exhibition's most demonstrative examples of Lee's transgressive artistic attitude.

Whereas the first half of the exhibition focused on Lee's unorthodox approach to sculpture, the second half delved into the more socially engaged and performance-based works that dominated his practice in the 1980s and '90s. A chockablock installation scheme, however, made it all but impossible to parse the myriad motivations for Lee's expanding language of expression during this period—from the environmentalism underscored by his *Earth Performance* series (1989–2012), in which he tossed around a giant balloon painted

like a globe; to his criticism of 20th-century Korean geopolitics in *Last Supper of the Power* (1992) and *Fratricidal War* (1994), mixed-media installations with macabre allegorical representations of armed conflict; to the proposition of painting as performance evinced in *Water Painting* (1995/2020) and *Suffering of Green* (1996), where Lee minimized painterly subjectivity by letting paint drip onto the canvas in an uncontrolled manner. Throughout the overstuffed gallery, works were mostly displayed without interpretive wall text, archival photos, or other contextual clues that might otherwise aid in formulating a coherent narrative within which to situate Lee's increasingly experimental tendencies during the latter stages of his career.

In many ways, the retrospective felt like a physical manifestation of a monographic exhibition catalogue. While it may be permissible to cram as much content as possible into such a publication, doing so in an exhibition stifles the potential for meaningful engagement with the works on view. Indeed, "The Inversive Act" was most successful in the few places where artworks were given sufficient breathing room—notably, in the museum's outdoor public spaces as well as its cavernous sub-basement gallery. Lee's steadfast divergence from the tenets of Korea's modern art establishment towards an "inversive" logic of heterogeneity has rightfully earned him a place among the progenitors of Korean experimental art; regrettably, MMCA's presentation did little to advance the discourse surrounding his singularly iconoclastic practice.

ANDY ST. LOUIS