

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lee Ufan's ambivalent otherness and art historiography

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Abstract

This article aims to reexamine the relationship between the artist Lee Ufan and nationalist art history through his idea of “ambivalent otherness,” which he defined as both “suffering” and “power.” Traditional art history is established upon a nationalist framework that emphasizes the artists’ nationality, leading to the marginalization of national others at the border. As a *zainichi* Korean, Lee has undergone the “suffering” of being excluded by the art world and art historiography. However, he transformed it into his source of “power” to challenge art historiography based on nationality. This study analyzes the art criticism of “Japanese Contemporary Art History” written by Minemura Toshiaki and Chiba Shigeo in the 1970s and 1980s and highlights the ruptures that the artist’s in-between identity wrought on nationalist art history. This shows how both the Mono-ha movement and the artist were marginalized in the construction of “Japanese Contemporary Art History.” Furthermore, this study scrutinizes how Lee attempted to rewrite art history using Mono-ha art theory and a perspective committed to “overcoming coloniality” from the postcolonial in-between position, by reinterpreting Lee’s article on *Chosŏn minhwa*, written amidst an aesthetic controversy across the border between Japan and Korea.

Keywords: Mono-ha art criticism; nationalism and art history; overcoming coloniality; the “in-between” in art history; the politics of art history

Introduction

Lee Ufan, a Korean artist based in Japan, is renowned worldwide for his active artistic practice. Rare for an artist, several museums bearing his name have been established in Japan (Naoshima), Korea (Busan), and France (Arles), and major solo exhibitions of his work have been held all around the world. This attests to Lee Ufan’s significance as one of the most important artists since the Second World War. Nevertheless, although Lee is often viewed as a “world-class artist representing Korea,” his position in Korean art history is relatively marginalized. Lee Ufan is not regarded as a successor or representative of Korean modern or contemporary art history in the majority of research on this subject in Korean academia. The prevailing view categorizes him as an artist of Mono-ha, a Japanese art movement that is said to have “influenced” “Korean” monochrome painting in the 1970s. Therefore, Lee Ufan is perceived to be on the periphery, not at the center, and is regarded as an outsider rather than an insider of Korean modern and contemporary art history. However, it should be noted that his peripheral position in art history is not limited to Korean art historiography.

According to Homi K. Bhabha, the acknowledgement of subject positions is crucial for any identity claim in the modern world (Bhabha 1994). Nationalism has played a significant role in defining the position of the artist as a subject within art historiography. In particular, nationality has been a dominant expression of the artist’s identity within art history, leading to discrimination or marginalization of individuals who do not belong to a single national community, thus placing them outside its

boundaries, i.e., othering them (Chung 2009). This aspect of art history is closely connected to the structure of the art world. As a result, artists such as Lee Ufan have constantly been subject to exclusion from national boundaries. Lee's experiences of being caught between national boundaries have not only shaped his daily life but also significantly influenced his thoughts and works (von Berswordt-Wallrabe 2008, p. 7).

In the turbulent historical context of Korea, including independence from Japanese colonization, the North–South division, the Korean War, and military dictatorship in the twentieth century, Lee Ufan dropped out of the College of Arts at Seoul National University in 1956, slipped into Japan, graduated from the Department of Philosophy at Nihon University in 1961, and began producing his artworks in the early 1960s. At the same time, Lee was involved in the movement against the dictatorship of the Korean government and the unification movement in the 1960s (Kang 2004, pp. 210–11; Kim 2006, pp. 20–21; Lee 2000b, p. 265). His experiences of being monitored and tortured in South Korea on the accusation of being a communist because of such political activities in Japan,¹ of having to switch between his Korean and Japanese citizenship when exhibiting abroad,² or of being devalued in the Korean art scene as having a “Japanese taste” (quoted in Seo 1991, pp. 11–13; Yun 2012, p. 254) instilled in him an acute sense of an existential awareness of an “Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity.” This implies a “self-destructive” identity that “creates tensions or clashes between the will to be Korean and the will to be an artist.” He believed that being Korean or a member of the national community and being an artist who was skeptical of everything were contradictory and incompatible (Kim 2006, p. 24). As shown in the essay titled “The In-Between,” he deliberately embraced the “self-destructive” state of not having any national identity by pursuing a career in art.

I am lonely. There is no place to soothe me.

... In Korea, they say I have the color of Japan; in Japan, they say I have a thick Korean smell; and in Europe, they want to expel me because I am an Asian. They accuse me of being an in-between who should be hit back like a ping-pong ball, and no one ever bothers to recognize me as an insider.

... I am soon cast out from everywhere and seen as a danger. As a runaway on the one hand and an intruder on the other, I am left outside the community. Strangely enough, being seen also means that the people on this side look desperately at their counterparts on the other side. Unable to unite, they see each other all the more clearly the more they are out of line.

The dynamic of distance is what made me today.

The distance of alienation is suffering and power. To see and to be seen is terribly painful. But I think it is this sickening place that is not a place that could actually be the real world.

I cannot stay still in one place and have no choice but to deliberately keep moving. While repeating this, I have gotten into the habit of pulling objects out of the community to look at them differently over and over again. It is intense and sorrowful, the days of passing through the endless otherness and living with altruism. (Lee 2000a, pp. 11–12)

On the one hand, living as a Korean in Japan, or as a *zainichi* Korean, Lee has “experienced failure and rejection to the fullest, to the most miserable extent for various circumstances, such as being rejected for submission to an exhibition because of [his] nationality” (Lee 2000b, p. 265). In other words, he has experienced numerous situations in which an artist's nationality took precedence

¹When Lee Ufan visited South Korea in March 1974, he was abducted by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), tortured and interrogated for almost a week, and kept under the KCIA surveillance for the next three to four years. As a result, Lee had to be careful about his activities or statements in South Korea, and it was not until the late 1980s that information about Lee and Mono-ha began to appear in the Korean media (Kim 2006, pp. 21–22).

²For example, Lee was denied his participation in the *Japan Art Festival* (1968) in Paris because of he was a Korean artist, while he represented South Korea at the *São Paulo Art Biennial* (1969) and the *Biennale de Paris* (1969), and was a Japanese artist at the *Japan Traditional Gegenwart* at Städtisches Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf in 1974 (Yun 2012, p. 277).

over the value of the art itself. On the other hand, he needed an alternative to overcome the exclusion and rejection of the art scene based on the national community. The alternative was to transform “suffering,” his otherness itself, into the “power” that made him the artist he is. In this way, otherness became ambivalent for him.

For Lee, this concept of ambivalent otherness continues into the present. In a conversation with the *zainichi* architect Itami Jun in *Tōitsu Nippō*, a newspaper published by the ethnic Korean community in Japan, Lee elaborated on their commonality, that “their inability to belong to or to be included by a community is a strength,” and said that “since estrangement cannot be restored, it is important to be aware of one’s estrangement and to train oneself henceforth” (Lee and Itami 2010.8.15). Even recently, Lee commented, “When I left Korea, went to Japan, from Japan to Europe, to the United States, I continued to walk among strangers. It is very hard, but it resulted in a good fighting style.” Refusing to confine himself to a regional, national, or cultural identity, he asserted that “it is desirable that little of my own identity remain by exposing myself to a different air, ... by washing away little by little what I have” (Lee and Wang 2022). For Lee, encountering the other beyond the closed community was possible by making otherness the driving force of life and the value to be pursued. This was Lee’s critical stance and methodology for challenging and disrupting the totalitarian world in which “the ideas of closed community have survived under the name of universality” (Lee 2000c, p. 16).

It is noteworthy that Lee’s ambivalent otherness is characterized by the dynamic of performative transformation from “suffering” to “power,” which resonates with Bhabha’s postcolonial theory. For Bhabha, the in-between spaces or the interstices “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood that initiate new signs of identity” “from the minority perspective” (Bhabha 1994). In this sense, Lee’s self-definition as an “in-between” reflects not only a poignant awareness of the marginalized, but also a performative subjectivity that problematizes and reconfigures the collective illusion of the national community from the perspective of the other.

Additionally, Lee attempted to directly intervene in the writing of art history, that is, in art historiography itself. Through his in-between position, he appeared to acknowledge “the politics of art history itself,” as pointed out by Linda Nochlin. Nochlin contended that the production of art history is inherently political, since the creation of meaning is inextricably linked to the production of power. Therefore, she considered the current perspective and methodology of art history as lacking objectivity or neutrality, and challenged its inherent political ideology, by analyzing the mechanisms of power and dominating structures that shape art history as an “objective discipline.” For this reason, Nochlin proposed to critically reconstruct the current art historiography by “think[ing] art history Otherly,” i.e., from the perspective of the other (Nochlin 1989). In this sense, writing with the intention of constructing a counter-discourse against established art history negates the notion of “pure art” and unveils its political quality in a postcolonial context. The writing of Lee Ufan was also marginalized as a result of the nationalist politics prevalent in art historiography. Nevertheless, he demonstrated his postcolonial performativity as a critical art historiographer by struggling with the existing nationalist art history, and reconstructing it from a minority perspective, being in-between.

This article aims to reconsider Lee Ufan’s relationship with art history using his idea of ambivalent otherness, by examining his written works in relation to the theme of suffering and power. Firstly, to explore the aspect of “suffering,” this article focuses on how Lee’s identity as an in-between exposed the tensions and fractures within the nationalist art history, by analyzing the criticisms of Minemura Toshiaki and Chiba Shigeo. They are the foremost art critics of the 1970s and 1980s, as Mono-ha began to be evaluated in art historical terms within the framework of “Japanese contemporary art history.” This demonstrates how the construction of a coherent nationalist narrative of art history has marginalized both Mono-ha and Lee Ufan from the mainstream history of art.

This article secondly reexamines how he criticized the prevailing concept of art in the 1960s socio-cultural context and created his own theory of Mono-ha, and also explores how he attempted to write an alternative art history with the theory of Mono-ha. This portrays the transformative performativity of Lee, which embodies the aspect of “power.” This section examines how his Mono-ha theory deconstructs the very concept of art in the modern world, which underpins nationalist art historiography.

Furthermore, it analyzes how Lee rewrites art history with the theory of Mono-ha and the perspective of “overcoming coloniality” from the postcolonial “in-between” position, by reinterpreting his article on *Chosŏn minhwa*, written during the postcolonial aesthetic controversy across the border between Japan and Korea.

Mono-ha as “catastrophe” or “violence”: Minemura Toshiaki’s Mono-ha criticism

It was not from the beginning that the artists now categorized as Mono-ha spontaneously started a collective movement under the banner of Mono-ha. As a result, there have been ongoing controversies about the substance to which the ex-post name Mono-ha refers. Lee Ufan, one of the main proponents of Mono-ha and Mono-ha theories, stated that “Mono-ha exists only in the midst of widespread rumors, artists’ sentences and esquisses, the photographs that you can catch a glimpse of, and the vague memories of seeing them at the time. They give rise to fantasies and speculations that gradually move away from the original world of Mono-ha. Expanded into a myth without any substance, it is now even more difficult for those involved to grasp” (Lee 2000d, p. 251). Why did Lee Ufan not welcome the critical discussion of Mono-ha, but rather criticize it as a “myth without substance”?

Minemura Toshiaki was one of the first art critics to develop the theory of “Mono-ha,” and he explained about the name Mono-ha, “whether used in general or in specific, there was a common tendency and a self-conscious group around the 1970s.” Its main characteristic, according to Minemura, was “the decisive rejection of the existing artistic medium and form” as well as “the loss of the historicity of the medium itself” (Minemura 1978.7). When the Kamakura Gallery, Tokyo, held the exhibition *Mono-ha* in 1986, Minemura published an article in the exhibition catalog entitled “What was ‘Mono-ha?’” in which he coherently defined Mono-ha as follows:

The word MONO-HA, which literally means “the school of things,” refers to a group of artists in Japan active around 1970 who sought to elicit artistic language from “things” as they stood, naked and undisguised, by letting them appear on the stage of artistic expression, no longer as mere materials, but giving them a leading role. (Minemura 1986)

However, he categorized this group of artists into the following subgroups, defining Mono-ha not as a homogeneous group but as a common phenomenon shared by several heterogeneous groups: the “Lee + Tamabi Connection,” the “Geidai Connection,” and the “Nichidai Connection.”³ He went on to explain the heterogeneity of Mono-ha groups in more concrete terms by examining individual artists. As Minemura pointed out, the name “Mono-ha” was first created and used “with some connotations of contemptuous indifference” “among people who began to examine the Mono-ha phenomenon, especially that of the Lee + Tamabi group, with a critical eye” (Minemura 1986). Perhaps this perception at the time, especially the critical view of the Lee + Tamabi group, was an important reason for his emphasis on the heterogeneity of Mono-ha.

The controversy over the “substance” of Mono-ha is surely due to this different and conflicting view or evaluation of these groups or artists. Minemura attempted to identify the most exemplary Mono-ha artist by evaluating their artistic triumphs and shortcomings. For example, each group Minemura categorized had a different approach to the *mono*. While the Geidai group saw *mono* as both a medium and a subject, the Lee + Tamabi group took *mono* collected from nature as a medium, but found subjects not in the *mono* itself, but in its existence. Furthermore, Minemura criticized that “every other

³Minemura described each group as follows: (1) A group that could be called “Lee + Tamabi Connection,” consisting of artists who were to graduate from Tama Art University in Tokyo by March 1969 (Sekine Nobuo, Yoshida Katsuro, Honda Shingo, Narita Katsuhiko, Koshimizu Susumu, Suga Kishio) and Lee Ufan, Sekine’s close friend. (2) The Geidai Connection, a group of artists around Enokura Koji and Takayama Noboru, both graduates of the Tokyo University of Art, who appeared in late 1969, including Fuji Hiroshi and Habu Makoto, who later participated frequently. (3) The Nichidai Connection, students of the Fine Arts Department of Nihon University, whose central figure was Haraguchi Noriyuki. This group is also known as the “Yokosuka group” with the exception of Lee Ufan (Minemura 1986).

artistic group has neglected the irreplaceable quality of things,” explaining that for the Lee + Tamabi group “*mono* is an abstract material and can be replaced by other *mono* of the same quality.” For Minemura, however, it was Lee Ufan and Suga Kishio who laid the ideological and theoretical foundations and demonstrated the possibilities of Mono-ha art. Even more remarkably, it was Suga who best embodied the concepts and theories of Mono-ha in works of art and gave Mono-ha its real flesh (Minemura 1986). This perspective of Minemura developed into an art historical evaluation of Mono-ha.

On the one hand, Minemura acknowledged that the group was a faithful successor to “the most intellectual faction of Japanese art circles in the second half of the 1960s” (Minemura 1986) and that they created a new Mono-ha art out of it, starting with Sekine’s *Phase – Mother Earth* (1968). On the other hand, Minemura emphasized that Mono-ha should not be overestimated, and negatively evaluated Mono-ha as a destructive factor that created an oblivion effect on the history of Japanese modern art as follows:

If one looks at the MONO-HAs with synchronic eyes and sees in them only a transient group phenomenon, one can regard them as belonging to one of the quite numerous air pockets phenomena condemned to oblivion that have not infrequently wedged themselves into the stream of Japanese modern art as it strived for maturity. Such air pockets, which resemble the violence of war in that they destroy much of what history has built, or is building, completely change the relationship between things by bringing about a revolution in people’s consciousness. Whether the art that accompanies such upheavals necessarily gives birth to new forms is another question. ... The era of Mono-ha is a significant event for those who wanted to survive by criticizing it from within. It is at once an eruption of consciousness and a rupture, an inspiration and a catastrophe, a wall to be overcome, an enchantment, a falsehood, and, above all, violence to art within the realm of art. So Mono-ha should not be mistakenly mythologized like *Gutai*. It is a war experience that we should overcome. (Minemura 1986)

Minemura saw Mono-ha as a catastrophe and wartime violence that broke into the historical flow of Japanese modern art, devastated it and made people forget the “canonical” history of Japanese modern art before Mono-ha. He believed that the only way to normalize the trajectory of Japanese modern art history was to resolutely deny Mono-ha a place in it and critically transcend it. Consequently, the evaluation of Mono-ha artists was determined by their ability to overcome the core principles of Mono-ha. Minemura claimed that Suga was the only figure who established a new artistic language and turned the tide of Japanese modern art in a positive direction. In other words, for Minemura, Suga was an artist who embodied the “legitimacy” of Mono-ha and also of Japanese modern art history, because he was the only one of the Mono-ha artists who critically overcame Mono-ha as a terrible, negative factor, similar to a disaster, violence, and war experience. This paradoxical reasoning, in which the recognition as the most legitimate artist is acquired by overcoming one’s identity as a Mono-ha artist, reveals how challenging Mono-ha has been for critics who adhere to the framework of Japanese modern art history. Chiba Shigeo’s art criticism discloses evidence of inconvenience or negative recognition in a more complex manner.

Historicizing Mono-ha, othering Lee Ufan: Chiba Shigeo’s Mono-ha criticism

It is no exaggeration to say that Minemura’s criticism was a kind of denunciation of Mono-ha, defining Mono-ha as a negative factor to be critically overcome. Under these circumstances, Lee Ufan commented: “There was not a single critic who supported Mono-ha from the beginning. Moreover, we are still witnessing a bombardment of criticism, slander, and defamation based on arbitrary delusions” (Lee 2000d, p. 252). Chiba Shigeo is probably not unfettered by such a statement of Lee.

Chiba first published his theory of Mono-ha in 1983, and then published a partially revised version in *The Deviant History of Contemporary Art: 1945–1985* (1987), which dealt with the history of

contemporary art in postwar Japan (Chiba 1983, pp. 4–23; Chiba 1987). He attempted to articulate the genealogy of postwar Japanese art history and to situate Mono-ha within it, with a view that distinguished postwar art history from the history of prewar Japanese modern art, which had cumulatively become Westernized or the ruthless pursuit of the West. To this end, based on Ishiko Junzō's perspective,⁴ Chiba noted that what had coexisted in an undivided state in the period from “*Gutai* (具体)” to “Anti-art (反藝術)” polarized into the Japanese Conceptual Art (日本概念派), which centered on language or idea, and Mono-ha, which pursued *mono* in the late 1960s. Based on this historiographical framework, Chiba suggested that Sekine's *Phase – Mother Earth* (1968) and Lee Ufan's critique of the work – “Beyond Being and Nothingness: On Sekine Nobuo (1970–71) (1969)” and “World and Structure: The Collapse of the Object (1969)” – marked the beginning of Mono-ha.

In particular, Chiba pointed out that Lee's criticism was the epochal event that repositioned Sekine's work from the existing context of his “tricky” projects to the Mono-ha work. Chiba highly appreciated that “Lee Ufan has an awareness of the unique context endemic to Japanese (or East Asian) art, and Mono-ha is certainly one that reveals the original form and way of being of Japanese art” (Chiba 1983, p. 7), and emphasized the historical significance of Lee in that “it was Lee Ufan who drew out the authentic Mono-ha from the hitherto ambiguous, undivided streams” (Chiba 1983, p. 10).⁵ However, Chiba's assessment of Lee Ufan foreshadowed a rupture, since it was based on the conditional statement: “although it was achieved not by a Japanese but by a *zainichi* Korean” (Chiba 1983, p. 8). In his 1987 book, Chiba's concern that Lee was not being a Japanese but a *zainichi* Korean is expanded as follows:

It is very interesting and ironic that this [Mono-ha] was not set on fire not by a Japanese but by a *zainichi* Korean, Lee Ufan. What enabled Lee Ufan to go through the process of “negation of creation → affirmation of the world as it is (→ and his painting career after ‘Mono-ha’)” was, after all, a Korean logic and could have possibly have followed the context of the Korean art. In this case, it is probably necessary to introduce a perspective of East Asia as a whole, just as Takeuchi Yoshimi focused on the Chinese perspective to extend the issue of nationalism to the problem of East Asia as a whole. (Chiba 1987, footnote 50)

Chiba considered the presence and role of Lee Ufan in determining whether the art historical status of Mono-ha belonged to the genealogy of “Japanese art” or to that of “Korean art” in this context. Since Chiba had already recognized Lee's decisive role in the birth of Mono-ha, it was impossible for him to appreciate the art form without taking his contribution into account. Hence, Chiba considered the use of “East Asia” as a broader geopolitical concept instead of choosing either Japan or Korea. However, he could not avoid nationalism, which is firmly entrenched in the discipline of art history. Chiba chose to reduce and marginalize Lee Ufan's status and role in Mono-ha. Chiba stated that Lee Ufan's theoretical projects did not address all Mono-ha artists, and artists such as Koshimizu or Suga disagreed with Lee's theories. Chiba also noted that Lee's writings on Mono-ha contained grammatical errors and lacked philosophical refinement and artistic understanding. Chiba further explained that the sensation that Lee's theories caused in the art scene was due to the historical background or circumstances of the art scene, not solely due to the excellence of his theories.

⁴Chiba inherited Ishiko Junzō's view that the contemporary in Japanese art, which has only formally unfolded insisting on the banner of ‘Overcoming Modernity,’ is finally disintegrating into two polar ends – a disposition toward dematerialization/ideation and a disposition toward materialization/perceptualization – in the wake of the 1970s.

⁵Chiba further categorized Mono-ha into authentic Mono-ha, pseudo-Mono-ha, and Mono-ha in a broader sense. The authentic Mono-ha reached its peak around the exhibition *Trends in Contemporary Art* from August 1969 to the early 1970s and consisted of Sekine Nobuo, Lee Ufan, Yoshida Katsuro, Honda Shingo, Narita Katsuhiko, Koshimizu Susumu, Suga Kishio; the pseudo-Mono-ha included Haraguchi Noriyuki, Enokura Kōji, and Takayama Noboru, who served “the art of *mono*.” Chiba combines these authentic and pseudo Mono-ha and calls it “Mono-ha in a broad sense,” where the former is specified as the “Lee Ufan & Tama Art University” group, while the latter refers to the “Tokyo University of the Arts” and the “Nihon University (Art Major)” group as a whole.

Based on this argument, Chiba arrived at the conclusion that Mono-ha was inevitably bound to disintegrate quickly or could not be theoretically structured due to excessive individuality of the artists, contrary to the original attempt to represent Mono-ha as a collective whole. In the end, Chiba's conclusion was similar to that of Minemura: Suga Kishio was the only artist among the Mono-ha group to be honored with the artistic achievements in both works and writings, and hence, he is considered an "authentic Mono-ha" artist.

It is obvious that only Suga Kishio continued the ideas of "authentic Mono-ha." For this reason, I find the authentic Mono-ha of none other than Suga Kishio. In other words, it is only possible to specify Mono-ha as a movement by identifying the achievements of Suga Kishio after [the dissolution of Mono-ha] as an authentic Mono-ha....

In other words, his [Suga's] achievements in art and discourse complemented and far exceeded those of Lee Ufan. First, he deepened the meaning of Lee Ufan's "affirmation of the world as it is" in an artistic context. Second, he was clearly aware of the idea that art as a relationship to the world is what constitutes the originality of Japanese art. (Chiba 1983, pp. 13; 19)

Ultimately, Mono-ha was only able to become a part of the history of contemporary Japanese art in Chiba, which emphasizes the "originality" of Japanese art, by explaining Mono-ha as the accomplishment of one exceptional artist rather than a collective movement. This disregards other artists like Lee Ufan, who are relegated to incomplete attempts. Chiba acknowledges that Mono-ha is non-native influence responsible for causing disruptions in the context of Japanese art history, analogous to the argument forcefully expressed by Minemura. Lee responded to this assessment by saying:

In any case, what Mono-ha did was to break the continuity of history and dismantle the totality of the inside. By colliding with the outside world, it [Mono-ha] created a work of art with a more open structure. It showed that the negativity of otherness is the dynamic that activates history. [I believe that] the existence of "Mono-ha" will function as a spirit of criticism that will restrain the easy return to the illusions of modernism and Japaneseness amidst the global ambience of conservative swing. It will also function as a suggestion that questions the meaning of otherness in its endless manifestations and proposes a way to an open identity. (Lee 2000b, p. 269)

Lee Ufan redefined the negative evaluations of Mono-ha, such as the "rupture of the continuity of history" or "the negativity of otherness," as a positive force by making sure Mono-ha's heterogeneity and otherness became a spirit of criticism against the world and the current era. This ensured that the "easy return" to the closed community of the "originality of Japanese art" that Chiba was pursuing stayed in check, and "otherness" and "open identity" were associated with the historical importance of Mono-ha. However, such "negativity of otherness" got ignored or concealed in the critiques of Minemura or Chiba. In particular, their critiques highlighted that Mono-ha's "otherness" posed a threat to the survival of "art" itself and led to confusion about the genealogy of Japanese art. Their art-critical practices aimed at eliminating such dangers.

Self-negating art against modernity: Lee Ufan's Mono-ha theory

According to Lee Ufan, Mono-ha artists had non-artistic tendencies since they "were knowledgeable in theory and also pursued non-artistic studies. The art world certainly disapproved of their non-artistic tendencies and their criticism of societal norms" (Lee 2000b, p. 269). Mono-ha artists' common "non-artistic tendencies" led to their infamous reputation for being a violent group that threatened the conventional notion of "art."

Mono-ha's theoretical and practical foundation lies in the critique of industrial society. This indicates the logical link between Mono-ha's social critique and its art. As they lived in the industrial society of Japan in the 1960s, which was rapidly growing economically, they shared "in a Mono-ha way"

the various socio-cultural phenomena that erupted from all corners of society. In fact, Mono-ha artists perceived the emergence of radical socio-cultural practices – which were increasingly aware of the decline of industrial society – as an “expression of the characteristics of Mono-ha.” These practices called for the comprehensive dismantling of the present knowledge system, also known as “the self-negation of the illusion of homogeneity.” The goal was to create a new way of relating to the world by engaging in raw physical acts, restructuring or dislocating reality, and discovering the self through direct involvement in the world (Lee 2000d, pp. 255–56). The task of Mono-ha artists was to actively engage in the socio-cultural phenomena of their time. Lee’s definition of Mono-ha as “socio-critical expression studies as opposed to art” probably has its roots in this context (Lee 2000b, p. 265).

He saw the all-encompassing criticism of modernity, which included the nation-state, imperialism, production systems, art, and knowledge, as the driving force behind the radical practices of Mono-ha (Lee 2000e, p. 13; Lee 2000f, pp. 25–26). Ultimately, the criticism toward industrial society required a complete negation of modernity, which, according to Lee, culminated in a human-centered production (Lee 2000g, pp. 230–31). The activity of the human brain, which materializes human consciousness or concepts, was criticized for its mechanical exploitation (colonization) of the other and the outside world, as well as for transforming the outside world into a mere self-representation (self-identity), resulting in the denial of the heterogeneous, the other, and the outside, and leading to autocratic rule, totalitarianism, and imperialist colonization. Therefore, Lee identified the restoration of the relationship between human beings and the world by reintegrating those who have been alienated or marginalized as an important task (Lee 2000k).

The criticism of human-centered production leads Lee to deconstruct modernist aesthetics or the creation of modern art. He severely problematizes “the artwork that denies the heterogeneous, the other, and the outside, that is composed only by dataizing, categorizing, and instrumentalizing, and that pretends to equate reason and the world,” which, for him, was regarded as “a clever political strategy of domination by an ultra-dictator” (Lee 2000c, p. 16). For example, Lee criticized Mondrian’s abstract paintings as being “autistic spaces without exits” or “a painting without otherness,” because they “disable the encounter with the unknown, the opaque world” (Lee 2000h, p. 53). Lee theorized the critical awareness that “the boundless expansion of the inner self without the outer world” by modernity and modern artistic practices “has driven man to suffocation” and sought an aesthetic that would rescue and save him from this. In this regard, his statement that “creating [artworks] should be truly living” (Lee 2000c, p. 18) connotes Mono-ha’s characteristic practice, a postmodern recovery of human life through artistic practices.

“Self-negation” is therefore a negation of the self as a modern subject, and it is a direct encounter, without the mediation of consciousness, concepts, or images, with “otherness” or heterogeneous others that have been neglected as external to the consciousness of the modern subject and thus regarded as “the unknown” or “the unreal.” For artists, who stand at the apex of the modern “making” subject, i.e., the creating human being, it would be the ultimate path of self-negation to criticize the modern concept of creation/making as part of the critique of modernity, to actively “discover” the alienated and displaced objects and worlds, to “rearrange” them in tension with modernity, and to attempt a postmodern opening through the encounter of such heterogeneous worlds.

In summary, Lee expanded the Mono-ha aesthetic by incorporating socio-cultural criticisms of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as criticism of modernity and modernist aesthetics. Despite the claims of Minemura and Chiba, it appears that all Mono-ha artists shared this idea. In 1994, when Lee Ufan, Enokura Kōji, and Suga Kishio reunited at the Kamakura Gallery in Tokyo, they criticized the art criticism of Mono-ha that emphasized the differences and hierarchy among them. They demonstrated their unity by standing together and remaining undivided.

Furthermore, they believed that the *Anpo* protests and student movements of the time, such as the *Bikyōtō* movements at art colleges in the 1960s,⁶ had led to a dismantling of social hierarchy and an

⁶For further discussion of the *Bikyōtō* movements and the institutionalization of “Japanese Contemporary Art History” in the 1960s, see Park (2009, pp. 59–94).

upsurge of self-negation and introspection. According to the artists, Mono-ha was considered a socio-critical approach. They used their own terminology to explain that Mono-ha aimed to question all labels and classifications imposed by society, and to provoke inquiry by linking such labels to social or artistic establishments. Lee also described it as being “in an unmanageable situation where conventional conceptions are no longer sufficient to grasp it” (Lee, Enokura, and Suga 1994, pp. 35–38). In Lee’s view, their ideas and practices had cross-border resonance with social events of that time, including student movements, citizens’ rights movements, and anti-Vietnam War movements in the world including United States, France, and Japan around 1968. Lee saw these historical events as the expression of new ideas, questioning the national illusion and the homogeneity of human knowledge, and highlighting the importance of deconstructing and reconstructing the self (Lee 2000b, p. 265).

This comprehensive critique of modernity, responding to the social context of its time, was necessarily linked to questioning art history as a modern institution which arose during the establishment of modern nation-states. The Mono-ha artists expressed a deep skepticism toward the framework of “Japanese Contemporary Art History” and the concept of art as it has been established in Japan through the process of modernization. This perspective was inconsistent with the nationalism of “Japanese Contemporary Art History.” Therefore, the Mono-ha artists endeavored to challenge the socially ascribed label of “Japanese Contemporary Art History” and to transcend the “illusion of homogeneity” through a fundamental “self-negation.”

For art critics like Minemura or Chiba, who followed the nationalist framework of art historiography, a kind of “illusion of homogeneity,” Mono-ha’s ideological horizon and practice were considered impure outsider or intruder, threatening to the foundation of “Japanese Contemporary Art History.” Furthermore, these critics aimed to downplay the status and significance of Lee Ufan, because the presence and importance of a *zainich* Korean artist in Mono-ha was seen as a threat that could destroy the homogeneous narrative based on the nationalist idea of “Japanese art.” In contrast, Lee Ufan tried to rewrite the art history from Mono-ha’s theoretical perspective by intervening critically in the aesthetic disputes over *Chosŏn minhwa* in Korea and Japan during the 1970s and 1980s.

Rewriting art history for the nameless “in-between”: overcoming coloniality

In the 1970s, there was a surge of interest in *Chosŏn minhwa* – a term that refers to Korean folk paintings created during the *Chosŏn* period. The growing enthusiasm was mainly observed in Korea and Japan, and with the boom of *minhwa*, the debate on “*Chosŏn* beauty” also revolved around Yanagi Muneyoshi’s theories on *Mingei* (Folk Craft) and *Chosŏn* art (Seo 2019, pp. 97–98). Some participants argued for the abandonment of “the beauty of sorrow,” Yanagi’s central concept of *Chosŏn* art, because of its origins in the Japanese colonial view. Others, however, saw it as an essential element of *Chosŏn* art.⁷

During this period, Lee began to collect *minhwa* and published a series of articles on it. Lee participated in the debate with Itami, and their positions are well documented in *Folk Painting of the Yi Dynasty of Korea* (1975). This publication includes Itami’s prologue “Stone and Birds,” Mizuo Hiroshi’s “Interpretation of Folk Paintings: Examining Muneyoshi Yanagi’s Perspective on Folk Painting,” and Lee’s “Painting as Structure: On Folk Paintings of the Yi Dynasty” along with English translations (Itami 1975).⁸

⁷According to Itami Jun, the “*Chosŏn* Beauty” debate originated in poet Choi Harim’s commentary on painter Lee Daewon’s 1974 translation of Yanagi Muneyoshi’s *Chosŏn and its Art*. Choi criticized Yanagi’s view of “the beauty of sorrow” and argued that it was necessary to overcome Yanagi’s theory of *Chosŏn* aesthetics in order to eradicate the Japanese colonial view and construct an accurate theory of *Chosŏn* art. Subsequently, *zainichi* Korean and Japanese scholars published articles criticizing or revising Yanagi’s theory of *Chosŏn* aesthetics, in which Itami participated. While Itami acknowledged folklorist Kim Yang-ki’s rebuttal of the “beauty of sorrow” theory that the color white in *Chosŏn* is not the white of sorrow but of the sun, signifying sanguinity, he also pointed out that “the beauty of sorrow” is also an obvious element that constitutes the beauty of *Chosŏn* (Park 2014, pp. 120–21).

⁸Lee Ufan’s writing was later published in Korea with a translation by art critic Lee Il in 1977.

For Lee, *Chosŏn minhwa* was more than a mere act of becoming a “Korean” artist or discovering and identifying with “Korean art,” since he was conscious of his existential identity as an in-betweener in a complex postcolonial context. Lee has continuously criticized the exclusion of *minhwa* from art history based on the Japanese colonial perspective that focused only on the ink landscape painting and considered *minhwa* as lacking sophistication (Kim 2012). Simply put, Lee considered *minhwa* as an “other” excluded from art history because of the modernization of imperialist homogenization or colonization.

This perspective was linked to his critique of the concept of “Overcoming Modernity” in Japan.

The term “Overcoming Modernity” is too tainted in Japan. This is ... mainly because of its historical meaning, which overlaps the image of modernization with Westernization and makes it seem as if Asia was colonized in an attempt to overcome such Westernization.

But “Overcoming Modernity” has a different resonance in places like Korea and China. It is less a resentment against Westernization, but rather an independence from modernization, i.e., colonization, and implies a critique of the universalism of modernity. The slogan of colonial policy was to modernize the backward nations in the Japanese way, and its aim was to establish homogeneity through the ruling subjects. In terms of its basic motif, it was not so much “Overcoming Modernity” as a distorted modernization in itself.

What must be overcome is the illusion of identifying with the subjects that produce colonialism or imperialism. “Overcoming Modernity” must begin with the struggle against the ideologies of global domination based on a particular universal faith, be it Eastern or Western.

As an artist, the problem is not how to express (colonize) the world through internal self-expression, but how to transcend such expression in relation to the outside or to others. (Lee 2000i, pp. 270–71)

Lee redefined the concept of “Overcoming Modernity” in Japan, which was previously rooted in the geopolitical relations between the West and the East, from the perspective of view of the other, i.e., those who experienced Japan’s colonial domination as a problem relating to Japanese imperialism and its colonization of Asia. Lee criticized the discourse of “overcoming modernity” in Japan, stating that it was merely a pretext for Japan’s colonial domination. He argued that this discourse represents a form of “distorted modernization.” Instead, the belief he espoused was that we must overcome the false illusions of imperialist homogenization, an idea that he equated with colonization. Lee converted Japan’s “Overcoming Modernity” problem into the “Overcoming Coloniality” issue. Lee’s objective of defeating modernity came from his “in-between” status as a *zainichi* Korean molded by a colonized historical background. As part of this objective, it is critical to challenge and question the conventional art historiography, such as “Japanese art history” or “Korean art history,” which is subordinated to a modern colonializing knowledge system. Therefore, Lee’s attempt to rewrite art history by focusing on the *Chosŏn minhwa*, should be seen as an effort to overcome coloniality, i.e., to deconstruct the illusion of homogeneity within a postcolonial context.

In his article “Painting as Structure: On Folk Paintings of the Yi Dynasty,” which was written in a colonialism dispute, Lee emphasized the importance of the historical point of view and criticized the historiography of *Chosŏn* art. Precisely, Lee discussed how the historiography of *Chosŏn* art adopted the customs of “dynasty-centered historiography” from the ruler’s point of view. Consequently, the history of *Chosŏn* art was limited to the so-called “orthodox painting,” covering only the paintings of court painters, the noble literati, or a few monks and excluding the works of those outside the “legitimate” lineage. Lee criticized the lack of coverage on the artists that created architecture, sculpture, woodwork, and ceramics, which make up a substantial part of “Korean art history.” Most of these artists were neglected as “nameless” beings by the conventional art historiography (Lee 1975/1977, pp. 5–6).

Lee pointed out the injustice of art historiography in granting legitimacy exclusively to the paintings of the aristocratic literati or noble painters, and emphasized that interrelationships such as

competition, reaction, or control between aristocratic patrons/owners and (nameless) commoner artists were significant factors that produced and characterized *Chosŏn* art (Lee 1975/1997, p. 6). Such an approach takes into account the dynamics of *Chosŏn*'s social class relations, which cannot be grasped in the art historiography of orthodox painting, and is in line with Lee's definition of Mono-ha as the "socio-critical expression studies as opposed to art." In this regard, it is worth noting the situation in which the paintings of the nameless artists were reevaluated under the name of "*minhwa*" (Lee 1975/1977, p. 7). For Lee, the subversive approach of bringing *minhwa* into the mainstream of art history, the so-called history of "orthodox painting" excluding *minhwa*, was probably the starting point of his attempt at postcolonial and postmodern art historiography (Lee 1975/1977, pp. 13–15).

In this context, he partly adopted Yanagi's perspective and evaluated the art of the *Chosŏn* period as "the everyday art of namelessness with practicality cultivated through everyday life" rather than as "fine art with strong individuality intended for appreciation." Such a critique maintains a critical distance from Western modernity, i.e., the "pursuit of the appreciation of pure beauty, such as the artist's expression of dazzling images through the manifestation of his modern ego" (Lee 1975/1977, pp. 13–15). Lee believed that *minhwa* is faithful to its relationship with a specific place or condition. This characteristic is closely related to the reinterpretation of the "line," which Yanagi saw as the embodiment of the *Chosŏn* aesthetics. Lee contends that lines do not reflect the "beauty of sorrow" as posited by Yanagi. Rather, they represent "a concept that unites all the relationships of an object that is not substantial in itself but has no distinct features." It is an element that represents "the structural characteristics as a common relatum [relation] between the painting and the objects, daily life, or spaces, more than the individuality or meaning of the artist" (Lee 1975/1977, p. 40).

The "namelessness" that the artists follow while not pursuing individuality, self-expression, or ideology is what forms the "structural characteristics," which are the fundamental essence of *Chosŏn* art. The structural characteristics are described as "a structure that, in itself, is unfinished, unclear, and somewhat insignificant. However, it's ultimately completed when it interacts with other elements in everyday space. It's not so much a completed structure of meanings in itself, but rather an open organization that supports the emergence of that structure-role" (Lee 1975/1977, p. 12). Lee's opinion was that "structural characteristics" responded well to the "needs of the [contemporary] time" and the collapse of modern aesthetics, so he stressed their importance accordingly:

The attention that *Chosŏn* art receives today, when we are witnessing the collapse of the modern aesthetic of ideologism, is due to its peculiar structural characteristics. A world that is ready to close itself off, the mental pressure of the search for the absolute, forced individuality and the suppression of images are already on the list for disposal. Contemporary time desperately desires emancipation in the world of everyday formlessness and namelessness. Despite its contradictions and weaknesses, *Chosŏn* art should be reevaluated as more and more significant in view of its excellent, ideal structural characteristics that respond to the call of the [contemporary] times. (Lee 1975/1977, p. 12)

According to Lee, "adhering to these [modern] aesthetic perspectives today is as absurd as believing in a dead god, given the bankruptcy of such perspectives based on meaning, individuality, or completeness" (Lee 1975/1977, p. 15). Rather than sticking to modern aesthetics-based art historiography, Lee aimed to find a perspective that surpasses it and a new art historiography based on that Mono-ha perspective.

Nevertheless, Lee disagreed with the notion of reconsidering *minhwa* as a "national drama" because it contradicted the fundamental nature of *minhwa*. In Lee's view, the history of *minhwa* reflected the world of anonymous artisans who spent their entire lives as commoners, rural folks who never underwent proper art schooling, and transient painters who wandered through small towns and villages instead of the metropolis. Quite a few of them were rebellious and discontented with their class status

and the artistic institutions. As a result, they became drifters and embraced a precarious existence as the nameless one (Lee 1975/1977, pp. 16–19).

Their wanderings were noteworthy, creating a district type of “common illusion,” counterbalancing the “illusion of homogeneity.” The “common illusion” created by the wandering artists is considered “a jointly produced square or a scene,” and it pertains to the villagers’ sense of relief from having and ordering comparable works of art, thus being validated by their similar thoughts. For the villagers, art is “the medium that awakens commonalities” and “a ritual that confirms commonalities.” Itinerant artists serve as mediators or the media themselves, engaging in this commonality ritual. Drawing is merely an act of “producing the prototype that the villagers are easily aware of, in a characterless, neutral way.” Therefore, artists “need to nullify themselves and creating nothing, thereby revealing everything.” This is because the artist’s attempt to introduce individuality or meaning into art is liable to dissolve the “common illusion.” Hence, the common illusion of *minhwa* becomes a collaborative piece of art between the painter and the villagers (Lee 1975/1977, pp. 44–47).

Similarly, Lee Ufan thoroughly dismantles modern creation concepts using the “namelessness” and the “common illusion” of the wandering artists. This project aims to reconstruct the past beyond the art historical framework that submits to the modernity of imperialist homogenization/colonization, while also proposing the future course of contemporary art in light of the disintegration of modern aesthetics. Lee regards *Chosŏn minhwa* as a postmodern model that he has unearthed in defiance of the linear and progressive time of history, which is a product of modernity, and not as a premodern artifact.

Above all, *minhwa*’s art history reveals an alternative world that seeks to overcome and emancipate from modernity, by focusing on those who are overlooked, such as outsiders, others, and “in-betweens” like Lee Ufan. Wandering artists who rebelled against their strict class society, which was stricter than today, are also another manifestation of the “in-betweens.” They cut across and traverse the nationalist homogeneity or identity that was imposed from the outside. Lee Ufan probably believed that the “common illusion” created by these nameless entities might establish an alternative relationship without generating any “in-betweens.” In this sense, Lee Ufan’s theory of *Chosŏn minhwa* should be seen as an art historical proposition, a deconstruction of the modern illusion of homogeneity and the overcoming of coloniality, rather than simply an addition to the traditional historiography of *Chosŏn* painting.

Conclusion

During my research, I began with a critical reflection on the nationalist approach to art historiography that assumes an artist’s nationality and frequently references it. Considering the current situation where large retrospectives are frequently organized worldwide, Lee Ufan’s national identity or nationality may serve as a secondary modifier. This was also a goal of Lee Ufan himself. He always sought open encounters with unknown entities from outside, with the belief that he does not belong to any specific national community. Nevertheless, his artistic approach was informed by his painful experiences of discrimination and exclusion from national communities, alongside critical insights on modernity’s false “illusion of homogeneity.” Furthermore, his reflections and experiences extended to conventional art historiography, which was founded in a manner that generated and discriminated against the “other.”

Lee Ufan, who has often discussed the bankruptcy of modernity and modern aesthetics, believes that the idea of a closed community like “Japanese art history” or “Korean art history,” has already declined as a modern knowledge system. Despite this, it holds significant sway over reality and is being utilized to promote a self-fulfilling narrative of homogeneity. Mono-ha and Lee Ufan did not aspire to be known as “Japanese art” or “Korean art.” Rather, they rejected the epistemological structure and labels such as “Japanese art” or “Korean art” and aimed to have encounters and interactions with diverse subjects, places, and objects that these labels marginalize and exclude. For this reason, Lee regarded artworks that convey the illusion of homogeneity or impart the idea of harmony to

complicated contexts as “a self-satisfied delusion” and “violence and crime disguised as art” (Lee 2000j, p. 225). This is in contrast to Minemura’s description of Mono-ha as an outbreak of violence and catastrophe for “Japanese Contemporary Art history.” Likewise, Lee Ufan’s critique of art endorses the idea that the illusion of homogeneity can be imposed on knowledge systems such as “Japanese art history” or “Korean art history” and can be equated with violence and crime. Excluding or marginalizing *zainichi* Korean artists for the creation of “Contemporary Japanese Art History” and excluding *Chosŏn minhwa* from “Orthodox Painting” for constructing a “History of *Chosŏn* Painting” constituted similar modes of producing knowledge.

Lee Ufan created an alternative art history or counter-narrative to knowledge production that excluded *Chosŏn minhwa* from modern knowledge systems. He did so by capturing the nature of these paintings using Mono-ha concepts. Lee proposed a portrait of a postmodern artist by connecting the nameless wandering artists of the *Chosŏn* period and the Mono-ha artists based on a historiography that defies conventional standards. This was also a subversive attempt to legitimize the *zainichi* Korean, including himself, who are in-betweeners and not fully accepted into one particular culture or the other. Therefore, Lee Ufan’s deconstruction of the history of *Chosŏn* painting neither belongs to Korean nor Japanese art history, but instead creates an art history of the “in-betweeners” who transcend the national boundaries. Lee’s art history must be reevaluated for its role in stimulating a vision of an art historical horizon that is inclusive of in-betweeners like Lee Ufan and avoids subjugating or marginalizing them, instead of being limited to a narrow community.

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