



Lee Ufan, *Correspondence*, 2002. Oil and pigment on canvas, 90 x 116 cm. Photograph by Franz Schachinger. Courtesy of Lee Ufan and Galerie nächst St. Stephen, Wien.

## 5 REENCOUNTERING LEE UFAN

*“Today’s task is to make the empty square circulate and to make pre-individual and nonpersonal singularities speak.”*

—Gilles Deleuze *The Logic of Sense*<sup>1</sup>

Paul Roquet

Lee Ufan<sup>2</sup> has been an active painter, sculptor, and essayist since the 1960s, when he first left his native South Korea for Japan to study philosophy. He is best known for his theoretical essays on the *Mono-ha* group of artists, in particular the work of sculptor Sekine Nobuo. The *Mono-ha* group formed in autumn of 1967 and lasted until the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Collected in 1971 in *Deai o Motomete (In Search of Encounter)*,<sup>4</sup> Lee’s early essays on Sekine and others documented his search for an artistic practice that could shift focus in the visual arts away from human expression and towards material *things* (*mono* in Japanese). Drawing on his philosophical training, Lee argued that the core problem of modernity was an inequality between subject and object. Modernity, for Lee, meant the stifling presence of an all-powerful subject bent on molding passive objects to its will. Lee experienced this on three levels: in the way artists manipulated a set of materials toward their own expressive ends, in the subjugation of the natural world to human control, and, finally, in the colonial inequalities that gave some groups power through the objectification and manipulation of others. Lee’s first-hand experiences of colonialism and cultural inequality—first as a child in South Korea and later as an immigrant to Japan and Europe—informed his aesthetic search for a way beyond

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 73.

<sup>2</sup> This paper maintains the Korean and Japanese naming practice of placing family name first, except in cases where writers have published in English with family name last. Lee Ufan has maintained this original order in English-language contexts as well. While Lee Ufan is the most common transliteration of the artist's name, it also sometimes appears as U-hwan Yi and Lee U-Fan.

<sup>3</sup> See Lee's essay on the history of *Mono-ha* in *The Art of Encounter*, trans. S. N. Anderson (London: Lisson Gallery, 2004), 146–149, for more information as well as a complete list of participating artists.

<sup>4</sup> Ufan Lee, *Shinpan deai o motomete: gendai bijutsu no shigen* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Akira Tatehata, "Mono-ha and Japan's Crisis of the Modern," trans. Alfred Birnbaum, *Third Text* 16, no. 3 (2002): 223–236.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

objectification. Influenced by Sekine's early sculptures, Lee began theorizing an aesthetic encounter capable of disrupting the modernist impulse to reduce the material world to manipulable objects. In his texts and his artworks, Lee sought a more fluid relationship with the material world.

This counter-modern project was born in the context of late 1960s Tokyo, where Japanese artists were beginning to find ways to critique modernity as a whole, not as Japanese outsiders, but as global artists dealing with global issues. As art historian Akira Tatehata notes, the *Mono-ha* movement marked the first time Japanese artists actively sought to speak from the position of a presumed universal modernity, rather than as Asian artists asserting their local opposition to more dominant European and American art.<sup>5</sup> While earlier Japanese art movements had engaged with modernist aesthetics (such as the *Gutai* artists of the previous decade), Lee's theorization of *Mono-ha* was the first attempt at consciously moving away from the invocation of an indigenous Japanese "tradition," in favor of the "universal" status European and American artists had long since claimed for themselves. Tatehata notes that these aspirations towards Japanese universality in part became possible through the sheer force of the country's rapidly expanding economy—that is, a shift in global power enabled Japanese artists to imagine themselves on a level playing field with their wartime adversaries.<sup>6</sup> The "universal," for Lee, represented not an equivalency between different cultures, but a position of power, a centrality capable of reaching a global audience on global terms. Lee's aim was to articulate an aesthetic position that could function equally well in both European and East Asian contexts.

Drawing on the cultural ambiguities of minimalism, Lee and other *Mono-ha* artists emphasized an encounter with texture and form over symbolic meaning. They avoided national symbols and worked towards destabilizing affects, seeking out ways to have materials work directly on perception. Sekine's early earth sculpture *Phase – Mother Earth* (1968) was crucial to the development of this aesthetic. Consisting of a hole measuring 2.6 meters deep and 2.2 meters across, with a cylindrical mound of earth of equal proportions standing upright next to it, the work was as an early embodiment of the *Mono-ha* ideal. As Tatehata recounts, "the immediate material presence of the soil [Sekine] unearthed completely overwhelmed his preconceived ideas."<sup>7</sup> In Sekine's cylinders Lee glimpsed a way beyond the objectifications of modernity. Matter was no longer subordinated to ideas.

Lee has continued to explore the implications of this non-discursive material encounter to the present day. In 1993, Lee



began working on *Correspondence*, his most minimal series of paintings to date. Each *Correspondence* work consists of a gray, rectangular square on a white canvas, floating semi-transparent and marked by the streaks and bristles of a single brush stroke. The canvases are various sizes, but often stretch several meters across. Crushed stone is mixed into the ash-toned gray, giving the color an opaque shade and finish. The paint crests slightly where the brush first meets the canvas, and begins to thin in the span where the brush is drawn across. Each *Correspondence* painting maintains this basic pattern.<sup>8</sup>

The *Correspondence* series foregrounds the affective impact of such a small, cautious, temperate gesture. As a result of the delicate placing and visible brushstroke of the square, the image never congeals into a figure, never molds into a geometrical representation. No signifying element interferes with the gesture itself. But as the gesture is small and slight within the width of the frame, Lee's human intervention never overwhelms the materiality of the canvas underneath. The gray and the white fall into dynamic tension, not only with each other but also with the surrounding space. Lee's single stroke is the slightest possible gesture that works to activate the affective elements of the material world that existed prior to his paint. He seeks the precise minimum of movement that activates, rather than dominates, the surrounding space.

The degree to which Lee has remained committed to this early theoretical program in subsequent decades is remarkable, as by the mid-1970s most of the original *Mono-ha* artists had dispersed and most Japanese artists had moved on to other concerns. By 1973 *Mono-ha* had become the target of critique by a younger group of conceptual artists—the *Bikyōtō* (*Bijutsuka Kyōtō Kaigi*, or Artists' Joint-Struggle Council). *Bikyōtō* artist Hikosaka Naoyoshi led the charge, accusing Lee of suppressing history in favor of a mystic irrationalism, denying the importance of human agency and representational discourse.<sup>9</sup> Looking to earlier models of avant-garde practice, such as the work of Akasegawa Genpei, *Bikyōtō* pushed for a more immediately political art that worked against the status quo through targeted tactical interventions. From this perspective, Lee's concern with material encounters appeared too abstract and apolitical.

In histories of postwar Japanese art, this shift toward a more urgent social-political agenda is often seen as the moment in which Lee's importance as an artist and theoretician finds its end.<sup>10</sup> However, the tendency to contain Lee's aesthetic philosophy within the limited parameters of the short-lived *Mono-ha* movement elides the ways in which Lee's material-oriented art

<sup>8</sup> The square on an empty canvas carries echoes of the work of some Russian modernist painters from the early 20th century, particularly Kasimir Malevich's "Suprematist" period, which for Lee "bypassed the concept of composition," in the process "rewrote the history of painting." See "Kasimir Malevich: Kaleidoscopic Catharsis," in *Art of Encounter*, 57–59.

<sup>9</sup> Reiko Tomii, "Historicizing 'Contemporary Art': Some Discursive Practices in *Gendai Bijutsu* in Japan," *positions* 12, no. 3 (2004): 626. See also Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 267.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say the *Mono-ha* influences simply disappear. Alexandra Munroe discusses "post-*Mono-ha*" developments in "*Mono-ha* and Beyond," in *Scream Against the Sky*, 267–68.



practice remains relevant—increasingly so—to contemporary aesthetic discourse. Contrasting *Mono-ha* only with *Bikyōtō* also occludes the ways Lee’s aesthetics, contrary to Hikosaka’s critique, *does* in fact contain deep engagements with history. While the *Mono-ha* critics were correct in asserting that Lee’s aesthetics lacks a certain kind of political specificity, their critiques ultimately signal a difference of opinion about how art should engage with political discourse, rather than any oversight in Lee’s thought. To put it another way, Lee’s aesthetic project was not displaced by a more politicized conceptual art, but to the contrary, has in time become an increasingly viable model of aesthetic practice as affect and perception take more prominent roles in the cultural syntax of globalization.

More importantly, in Lee’s view, the purpose of art is not to didactically change people’s minds in the manner of discursive (or political) argument, but to begin to alter their relationships to the objects surrounding them. In a favorite turn of phrase, Lee argues that such art creates an “encounter” (*deai*) with material objects in a way that breaks through the *a priori* objectified relationships of modern life. With this goal in mind, Lee sought to develop a mode of perceptual aesthetics that was predicated on new affective modalities and sensibilities, ultimately leading toward a more dynamic, open, intuitive, and non-exploitative way to relate to the material world.

In rethinking the relational time of subject and object as a dynamic sensory process, Lee’s work has much in common with other philosophers of affect, in particular Gilles Deleuze.<sup>11</sup> Curiously, Deleuze is absent from Lee’s essays, though he makes frequent mention of Immanuel Kant, Nishida Kitaro, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Deleuze’s own exploration of a Bergsonian aesthetics of affect and virtuality serves as a useful point of correspondence through which to more fully understand Lee’s own conception of the aesthetic “encounter.” Deleuze’s model of the unfolding of events through the dynamic dispersal of sensation and form helps reveal the vibratory concreteness of Lee’s aesthetics, defending them against accusations of mysticism and irrationality. More closely examining both Lee’s and Deleuze’s writing on the relational time of the aesthetic encounter reveals how Lee’s art does not avoid historical questions, but rather works to develop a different aesthetic relation to history, rethinking culture as a practice of sensory ethics.

Attention to the ethical dimensions of aesthetic practice also begins to reveal the remarkable extent to which Lee engineered his own career as theorist, painter, and sculptor—ostensibly to

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. D.W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Lee, *Shinpan*; Lee, *Art of Encounter*.

overwhelm any *a priori* notions of the “Asian artist.” Lee continually positioned himself at the borders of the Japanese and European art worlds, engaging in a strategy of destabilization, where the assumptions keeping Asian artists outside the sphere of the “universal” might be dismantled. In the process, Lee achieved a remarkable synthesis between the ethical aesthetics of his works and his own personal trajectory through the vexed spaces of modernity.

## Correspondences

Beginning with Lee’s move from Korea to Japan in his student days, and later followed by his move from Japan to France, Lee’s trajectory across cultural borders provides one way of tracing the historical dimensions of the kind of aesthetic form inherent in the *Correspondence* series. This line of geographical and cultural shifts—a sort of gesture in itself—is shaped by two vectors, which subsequently create a third. In the first vector, Lee motions toward the concentric circles of the “universal,” first moving to the capital of East Asian modernity in the 1960s, Tokyo, and then moving on to Paris in the next decade. These shifts were not only pragmatic and practical career moves, but also mark Lee’s deliberate attempt to use his own mobile presence in Japan and Europe as a way to confront the spaces of so-called “contemporary art”—much in the same way as his gray squares are placed in relation to their surroundings. Not content to work on the sidelines, Lee sought ways to have his smallest of gestures ripple out to the widest possible audiences. Writing near the end of the century, he recalls: “For thirty years now, I have made Europe the main base for creating and exhibiting my art because I wanted to fight on a larger and more meaningful battlefield.”<sup>13</sup>

In the second vector, echoing the first on a philosophical plane, Lee traced an intellectual path through the circles of modern thought, graduating with a doctorate in philosophy from Nippon University in Tokyo, and engaging seriously with the history of both European and Asian critical traditions. Mindful of the ease with which European and American intellectuals can ignore the non-Western, he was careful to fix the language of his aesthetics within the parameters of an intended global (that is, Western) audience. This extends even into his use of the Japanese language:

I have tried as much as possible to write in a way that is easy to translate into European languages. To the extent possible, I have reduced the number of passive statements, taken care with the relationship between subject and predicate, avoided the repetition of vague words and synonyms, and done my best to make logical and universal statements. In short, I have tried to write in a way that is accessible to people of different cultures.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 141.

<sup>14</sup> From “Japanese and Translation,” Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 136.



Lee's essays reveal a constant awareness of processes of cultural translation, from Korean into Japanese, Asian into European, European into Asian, Japanese into Korean. This constant bidirectional shifting gives rise to a third vector, the place from which Lee's aesthetics is born: the unforeseen lines of thought that emerge from between cultural poles, creeping into the logic of both the center and the periphery, beginning to reconfigure both from within in a way that resists the subordination of the latter term. Lee generates the conditions for this third vector's emergence by bringing multiple layers of cultural distance within himself—remaining outside of Japan by being Korean, outside of Europe by being Asian, and at the same time, outside of Asia by living in Europe, outside of Korea by living in Japan:

I left my native land long ago and have been living a tumbleweed life ever since. This way of life may have given my words a precarious existence. My thinking has been invaded by various languages and takes place in a strangely mixed condition. The things I see and eat as well as my words have become diverse and complex, and there is nothing I can do about it any longer. The world around me is a sea of translations, and I am left floating in the midst of this shifting and fluctuating expanse.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 138.

Lee's decision to push against the dominant outward flow of modernity has meant confronting the many obstacles designed to keep Europe at the center of the contemporary scene. In France, Lee reported (with a sense of weariness) on his difficulty with the continued orientalizing of his work: "Sooner or later, I would like to be released from the word 'oriental' and stand on the horizon where the artist is judged according to his individual existence and the quality of his work."<sup>16</sup> As part of his attempt to gain access to the universal subject position of the modern artist—to be taken seriously as an individual, not as a representative of some distant culture—Lee had to place himself in positions where he himself becomes thoroughly objectified. This lends urgency to his aesthetic philosophy, born as it is not simply on a philosophical plane but out of a lived struggle to free himself from the constraints of objectification.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

In his essays, Lee often argues for the possibility of dialectically realizing a third cultural space, neither recognizably European nor recognizably East Asian. Lee highlights two prominent modes of relation within these two regions. In the first, a person confronts otherness in the guise of person-to-person relations across diverse cultural and ethnic identities. The individual self is recognized in contrast with other people who are recognizably different. Lee emphasizes that this interpersonal

position-taking tends to obscure the larger social and environmental ecology that binds all these individuals together. In contrast, in the second mode of relation Lee identifies, persons locate the cultural other not in other humans but in nature: rocks, landscapes, trees, oceans, mountains, etc. As such, identity is structured differently—the self is recognized against the other of nature, leading to little friction in interpersonal spaces, but objectifying the non-human world instead.

Lee finds both systems unsatisfactory, for while the first has the advantage of allowing for personal difference, it ends by objectifying other people, and while the second allows for the integration of society as a whole, it ends by objectifying the natural world. Lee seeks an aesthetic solution to this ethical problem through his sculptural use of materials that fit neither model of human relations. That is, materials that can be recognized as representative of neither human individuality nor some untouched “natural world.” Instead, Lee prefers quasi-industrial products such as glass and metal, materials both de-individualized and de-natured.<sup>17</sup>

Lee’s language, like his materials, also seeks out an in-between space. Following Heidegger, he finds subject-centered European languages good for clarity, precision, and forcefulness, but lacking in suppleness and porousness. East Asian predicate-centered languages, in contrast, Lee notes, are wonderfully flexible but often ambiguous, and thus difficult to use for precise and categorical thinking. In his own writing, then, Lee strives for something in-between, working to make his Japanese texts amenable to translation into European languages, while maintaining the openness and polysemy he claims of Japanese.

Lee’s discussions of such cultural and linguistic differences, while extremely generalized, reveal a basic aesthetic technique central to his painting as well as his logic. This technique is one of *semi-transparency*, a focus on undecidable areas that never give themselves away entirely to transparent knowledge, and thus can never fossilize into a subject/object relation. This emphasis on the semi-transparent is Lee’s defense against what he sees as parallel aspirations towards the absolute. On one hand, the individualist orientation falls prey to the illusion that the world is transparently available to be amalgamated to the self, and the only relations that matter are with other human subjects. This image of the self is misleadingly transparent, for it denies the contingency of identity on the non-human and the non-self. On the other hand, the emphasis on a human/nature divide pretends that the interpersonal world of human society is absolutely structured, and that the task of the individual self is to simply

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



fold over into it, thereby asserting one's role in relation to nature. Here, it is the homogeneous image of the social that is misleadingly transparent.

Lee's primary strategy in bridging this divide is to focus on the points of *correspondence* between the one and the other, between self and nature, between subject and object. The semi-transparent gray squares establish a contingent relation to the spaces around them. The viewer encounters the semi-transparency of the work, which reveals itself only partially, resisting identification with either individual or cultural totalities.

For example, in *Deai o Motomete*, Lee articulates a number of techniques he uses to pull back the "veil" of everyday appearances and meanings, and upset the habitual associations a viewer might have with an object.<sup>18</sup> Lee's early sculptural works often juxtaposed disparate materials, such as cotton wool and iron plates. In later works, this disruption of associations was achieved more discreetly through a careful restriction of methods, such as the single gray square in the *Correspondence* series. This technique relies on introducing contingencies into the artwork just below the level of conscious awareness: "the secret lies in creating subtle shifts and discrepancies that suggest perfection or balance." This can only be achieved "through the same sort of strict discipline that an athlete uses to hone his skills and a careful use of logic in arranging the materials."<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously, however, Lee includes shapes molded by forces beyond his own control, such as large rocks molded by the weather, and the pre-existing contours of gallery spaces. This "doing of not-doing" (*nani mo shiteinai koto o suru koto*) allows for the "contingency of the world itself" to emerge.<sup>20</sup>

Parallel to this careful process of arranging materials, Lee favors imprecise techniques in the actual painting of the canvas. Admiring the imprecision of the brush for the way it reveals the ambiguities in every human gesture, the paint Lee transfers to the canvas is never entirely the direct facsimile of the original mental image.<sup>21</sup> This is one source of the "subtle shifts and discrepancies" that are never geometrically uniform, never quite mimetic, and yet also not pronounced enough to register as off-balance.

Lee also uses repetition to estrange the habitual relations between subject and object. Lee notes that a painter who repeats the same actions seemingly ad infinitum (like all the squares in Lee's long *Correspondence* series) may appear to have gone insane, but is actually engaged in a search for subtle variations.<sup>22</sup> The repetition within Lee's work—the way he tends to stick to a few titles and forms, repeating them with minute variations—also acts

<sup>18</sup> Lee, *Shinpan*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 27, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Here Lee seems to be drawing in equal parts on Martin Heidegger and Chuang-tse, both of whom are referenced in Lee's essays. Lee, *Shinpan*, 114; Tatehata, "Mono-ha," 230.

<sup>21</sup> Lee upholds this ambiguous style in contrast with the use of machines and sub-contracted employees by some recent Japanese artists, most famously Murakami Takashi. Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 170. Deleuze makes a similar point in his description of Francis Bacon's use of chance in his brush technique (Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 76–77).

<sup>22</sup> Lee, *Shinpan*, 110; Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 27.



as a refrain, sedimenting the effects of his aesthetic through reiteration.<sup>23</sup> Repetition also produces estrangement. When an action is repeated enough times, it breaks through the shell of its familiar contextual contours, and a new unfamiliarity emerges. The individual parts of the gesture lose their integral wholeness, allowing them to break up and form new connections. This strategy is sometimes employed in Lee's essays as well. Describing Sekine Nobuo sculpting with oil-clay, Lee writes:

Within the gesture, oilclay is made oilclay, space is made space, Sekine is made Sekine, oilclay is made space, space is made oilclay, Sekine is made oilclay, oilclay is made Sekine, space is made Sekine, Sekine is made space.<sup>24</sup>

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In other words, with each recurrence (*kurikaeshi*), “conditionality (*jôtaisei*) is strengthened, and the world becomes visible in repetition's secret ceremony.”<sup>25</sup> By cycling through the set of every possible variation, Lee overcomes the familiarity of any particular relation, and opens up new possibilities for how each aspect of a work relates to the others. Rather than isolate individual points in a field, Lee's repetition explores the whole series.

Through all of these techniques, Lee effectively presents the “forces beyond [his] own will,” encouraging an engagement not only with Lee's original intention, but with the myriad of forces at work on the matter and materials he employs. Lee's engagement with these forces functions as another plane of historical engagement in his work. This material layer of historical time remains outside the familiar human realms of signification and moves more towards the geological, the kinesthetic, and the molecular. The self is no longer the single subject of history, and the artist “both performs and is being performed simultaneously.”<sup>26</sup>

Although Lee makes a point of emphasizing the role of “otherness” in his descriptions of the “encounter,” it is important that this other is never identified as a particular object or being. Rather, otherness is the path through which the “encounter” transpires, moving from the self-oriented realm of the modern subject towards an open-ended, unbounded “circulation” of sensation.<sup>27</sup> An othering worked upon the subject; a movement of de-subjectification. And in the process, an encounter with a different kind of history: a history of matter. Rather than the world of ideological struggle between subjects, the modern history Hikosaka wants to interrogate, Lee points towards a broader material history, beneath and

<sup>23</sup> On the refrain, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 310–50.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, *Shinpan*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>27</sup> Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 11.



<sup>28</sup> C.S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2 (1893–1913), ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 274.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, *Shinpan*, 117.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 149. Here Lee is describing *Mono-ha* works as a whole.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, *Shinpan*, 125.

<sup>33</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986), 211.

foundational to the birth of the modern subject. Every nook of every rock of Lee's sculptures holds traces of past encounters. Every brushstroke visibly manifests the moment of the physical, imprecise gesture that created it. Indeed, as the linguistic theorist C. S. Peirce reminds us, these indexical traces have an existential *relation* to the forces that created them.<sup>28</sup>

The encounter with this material history opens up the potential for a new mode of relation between individual and material environment. Lee describes the encounter as having the nature of "the reciprocal relationship of actors in a play,"<sup>29</sup> which creates "responsive 'fields' rather than objects of cognition."<sup>30</sup> Crucially, this doesn't end with a complete abandonment of thought and logic in favor of pure mystical materiality (as Hirosaka accused). Instead, Lee argues for "conditions of painting [that] must be established dynamically so that it can leap in either direction, toward reality or toward ideas."<sup>31</sup> This trans-subjective relation, in which the subject no longer rules over objects but is one among them, embedded in the same set of forces, also establishes what is for Lee a more ethical model of social and material relations.

In *Deai o Motomete*, Lee emphasizes the conditionality (*jôtaisei*) of these material relations. Material beings (including humans) acquire significance not through some kind of internal essence, but in their movement through a field of other materials, other forces which work upon them and which they work upon. He quotes Pascal: "At the same time as a human is in the world, the human is in conditionality. There is a direct connection between the existence of the world and a person's conditionality."<sup>32</sup> In emphasizing the unity of conditionality and identity, Lee's thought does not simply signify the natural world or foreground material forces as ontologically more "real" than the realm of human psychology. This marks Lee as an exception to art historian Rosalind Krauss's Lacanian-inflected reading of 1970s art that foregrounds the indexical trace. For Krauss, when an artwork is "uncoded—or rather uncodable—it must be supplemented by a spoken text, one that repeats the message of pure presence in an articulated language."<sup>33</sup> Thus, the drive to get outside of signification, in this model, only results in a more streamlined form of signification: a signification of presence. Bringing Krauss's interpretative schema to Lee's work would again raise the specter of mysticism: that Lee might just be presenting material *qua* material, being *qua* being, and leaving it at that.

Instead, the aesthetic shifts in the development of Lee's career may be understood as a long-term struggle to get outside of this kind of reification of materiality in minimalist art. The early

sculptures of the *Mono-ha* years focused on the relations between objects, and the objects within their environment. In 1973, Lee began the *From Point* and *From Line* series of paintings, which emphasized the physical encounter between the brush and the canvas. In these paintings, Lee places points on the canvas and continues to draw lines until the paint on the brush is used up. Unlike the relatively static tensions of the *Mono-ha* sculptures, the points and lines signal a more gestural and vectoral force. In the early 1980s, Lee's *With Winds* series, where all visible restraint falls away in place of a more fluid, chaotic surface, reacts against the possibility that the lines and points of earlier works have become overly formal and static—losing the plasticity of their relation to the surrounding space. Finally, the *Correspondence* works of the 1990s-2000s are uniquely focused on making only a single mark on each canvas, maybe two, maybe three—each of which are carefully placed to resonate outward into the canvas and the surrounding space.<sup>34</sup>

Broadly speaking, then, these variations in marking traces a path away from the presentation of indexical traces, towards a canvas full of vectors, both organized and chaotic, and a progressively greater emphasis on opening up relations between the artwork and the surrounding space: “The air around the work, rather than the work itself, takes on density, and the site where these objects are placed vividly reveals itself as an open world.”<sup>35</sup> By the time of Lee's *Correspondence* paintings, where a single gray square is all that appears, the emphasis is less on the indexical traces themselves (Krauss's supplemental message of presence) and more on the way such marks affectively encounter their surroundings. The works turn outward, more interested in interacting with the space around them than in establishing their own presence.

### The Ethics of the Affective Encounter

Importantly, Lee's aesthetics aim for the production of forces that never cease to interact with the world around them, never stopping to resist something new. As Lee writes,

All things in the universe start from a point and return to a point. One point calls up a new point, and extends into a line. Everything is a scene of gathering and dispersal of points and lines. Existence is a point and life is a line, so I am also a point and a line. Just as the things of the universe are not reproductions of my ego, the points I create always turn into new forms of life.<sup>36</sup>

Accordingly, Lee does not *represent* life through the medium of the points and lines, but the points *themselves* become active lines

<sup>34</sup> Rodan Gallery, “Lee Ufan: In Search of Encounter,” *Rodan Gallery*, 7 December 2006. <[http://www.rodin.co.kr/rodin-gallery/rodin/exhibition/leeufan/en\\_sub.html](http://www.rodin.co.kr/rodin-gallery/rodin/exhibition/leeufan/en_sub.html)>.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.



<sup>37</sup> See Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

of movement, in the same way that Lee makes his own life a vector through space. This brings Lee's thought closer to a more Deleuzian conception of aesthetics, where art is less representation and more a collection of vectors and forces, always at work upon each other in a collective field. Although Lee does not engage with Deleuze directly, his conception of art as the creation of points that extend into lines of encounter is an exemplary Deleuzian model of art as abstract machine—one that is non-discursive and self-propagating.<sup>37</sup> Summoning a few of Deleuze's concepts, in turn, will further clarify how Lee's works are both fully historical and ethically efficacious *in themselves*, without requiring recourse to a supplemental discourse.



Lee Ufan, *Correspondence*, 2002.  
Oil on canvas, 291 x 218 cm.  
Photograph by Keizo Kioku.  
Courtesy of Shiraishi Contemporary Art, Inc.

<sup>38</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 208.

Deleuze introduces the dimension of the *virtual* into the ontological status of the artwork. The *virtual* is a set of possible relations immanent to a work, but not yet actualized.<sup>38</sup> For example, the *Correspondence* canvases, through their balance of lines and forms, generate a set of possible relations with whatever spaces they might encounter. This set of possibilities is intrinsic to the artworks' sensory makeup, but, as in Lee's case, remains on a virtual plane until actualized in the artworks' encounter with a particular set of exterior forces. Deleuze shows how these virtual properties are no less *real* simply because they are not all simultaneously actualized in the visible artwork:

Far from being undetermined, the virtual is completely determined. When it is claimed that works of art are immersed in a virtuality, what is being invoked is not some confused determination but the completely determined structure formed by its genetic differential elements, its "virtual" or "embryonic" elements. The elements, varieties of relations and singular points coexist in the work or the object, in the virtual part of the work or object, without it being possible to designate a point of view privileged over others, a center which would unify the other centres.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 208–09.

The ways in which the virtual eliminates the possibility of a privileged perspective provides a clue to the ethical basis of Lee's aesthetics. By emphasizing the relationality of his works, Lee eliminates the possibility of the single "point of view privileged over others" necessary for the relation of subject to object. Lee recognizes the ethics of the aesthetic in the way the structuring of affects in the canvas sets up the parameters of the virtual—the whole set of possible relations that might be actualized between the artwork and the world.

Affects mold the body in positive or negative ways; they also give rise to concepts and kinds of knowledge. Therefore, the structuring of affect has direct ethical implications. Deleuze, in deploying Baruch Spinoza's description of affect,<sup>40</sup> calls for a movement from affect to ethics through an art practice that calls into play the sensory relations between matter in all their virtual complexity:

The important thing is to understand life, each living individuality, not as a form, or of a development of form, but as a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles. A composition of speeds and slownesses on a plane of immanence.<sup>41</sup>

Following Spinoza, then, Deleuze locates the basis of ethics in the sensory world of affect. Artists, by reconfiguring the affective experience, can open paths to new forms of signification and new forms of relation. This is precisely the site of Lee's *encounter*: "I want painting to be something that mediates between consciousness and the body, acting as a buffer between here and there, and stimulating the imagination to vigorously spread its wings."<sup>42</sup> In this process, the relations between self and other become more permeable, beginning to break down. Lee writes:

The world transcends me and is non-transparent. In my approach, as I face this non-transparent other, the self continually loses its purity and is filtered and then reborn as the other.<sup>43</sup>

Through the affective mediation of the encounter, the borders of the self gradually become more porous and the wider set of virtual relations comes to be actualized.

This is not to say that, for Lee, the self ever entirely dissolves. While Deleuze, in his writings with Félix Guattari, emphasizes the danger of completely dissolving the subject (urging for an "art of dosages"<sup>44</sup>) his emphasis and enthusiasm at first seems to point towards such a total vectorization of being. Lee is more cautious. In his essays, Lee often emphasizes that his work and

<sup>40</sup> Spinoza writes: "By affect I understand affectations of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained." Quoted in Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 41.

<sup>41</sup> Discussed and quoted in *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 91.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 160.



thought are the result of long decades of practice, discipline, and experience. Sensitivity to the dimensions of the aesthetic encounter is less a sudden choice than a slowly-trained and hard-won habit. To borrow a phrase from anthropologist Charles Hirschkind, the skills for setting up the encounter are achieved through a long-term “process of sedimentation,” like “coats of lacquer applied to a wooden box that becomes clearer with each new layer.”<sup>45</sup> Hirschkind discusses this process in the context of Walter Benjamin’s essay on the Storyteller, where Benjamin laments how modernity “has the effect of undermining the forms of knowledge and practice that depended on processes of gradual sedimentation and embodiment.”<sup>46</sup> In this sense Lee’s insistence on discipline and long-term practice is also a central part of his critique of modernity.

This emphasis on practice and discipline does have roots in Deleuze’s work as well, as emphasized in Alain Badiou’s recent study of Deleuze.<sup>47</sup> Badiou writes that in Deleuze’s philosophy,

We must, through the sustained renunciation of the obviousness of our needs and occupied positions, attain that empty place where, seized by impersonal powers, we are constrained to make thought exist through us. [...] Thinking is not the spontaneous effusion of a personal capacity. It is the power, won only with the greatest difficulty *against oneself*, of being constrained to the world’s play.<sup>48</sup>

Lee, even more explicitly than Deleuze, insists upon this “being constrained to the world’s play.” In the essays, Lee emphasizes the importance of the *unmade*: “Values should no longer be centered on the process of making, mediated by human consciousness. This process must be limited and defined to create a stimulating relationship with unmade things.”<sup>49</sup>

As we have seen, Lee’s art progressively purified into making the smallest possible gesture to stimulate encounters with the unmade world beyond the artwork. Rather than push creation as an end in itself, Lee’s aesthetics works to fend off the forces of signification and then *get out of the way* to let the unmade, unobjectified forces take over. Lee’s relation to history is not mystical but virtual: his political act is to reorient the affective encounter towards an open-ended relation with the unknown.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 26.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Lee, *Art of Encounter*, 170.