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Modernism Put in Perspective

By Andrew Maerkele

Currently based in Seoul, Lee Bul is one of Korea's leading contemporary artists. She first became known for street performances incorporating provocative soft sculptures of her own design and then went on to create sculptures and installations commenting on contemporary culture and aesthetics.

After making the "Cyborg" and "Anagrams" series, which deconstructed idealized approaches to bodily form during the latter half of the 1990s and the first half of the past decade, Lee began a series of works reflecting on the legacy of utopian Modernism with the installation "Mon Grand Recit" (2005), incorporating models of iconic early 20th-century buildings into a delirious landscape accentuated by flashing LED displays.

Her new permanent commission for the Hara Museum ARC in Shibukawa, Gunma Prefecture, "A Fragmentary Anatomy for Every Setting Sun" (2010), continues the artist's exploration of Modernist thought. The large-scale installation features a menacing vortex of architectural forms — some resembling flattened skyscrapers, others suggesting fragmentary details — sculpted in relief in a polyurethane panel that is sandwiched between a mirror on one side and two-way reflective glass on the other. Viewers peering through the glass are sucked into an infinite regression of images. Displayed in the museum's entryway, the work both beckons and reflects visitors as they approach the building.

The Japan Times met with Lee Bul at Hara ARC to discuss her work.

After the "Cyborg" and the "Anagrams" series considered bodily form and the technological sublime, why was it a logical next step for you to move on to dealing with Modernism and architecture?

Actually the "Cyborg" and "Anagrams" series were already addressing aspects of Modernism because they were not only about technology, they also considered human desire. I often say regarding the concept behind those series that the words "cyborg" and "anagram" are not new words, they have their origins in Greek culture.

With those series, I was focused on how humans constantly return to an idealized vision of the future. For a while I tried to focus on that point alone, but I already had the idea for my recent works over 10 years ago. It's just that I couldn't begin the Modernism project because I thought it would be overwhelming and I wasn't ready. Once I turned 40, I realized that I might not have any more time to wait and that I had to start pursuing this project. So, in the recent works themselves is a story about myself and the present, and people and history.

So you were already investigating Modernism and Modernist forms even while you were working on those series?

Yes. But maybe we could be even more specific and say that I'm interested not just in Modernism but the utopian ideas generated by Modernism, especially failed or unrealized utopian ideas. And that's very connected with my idea for "Cyborg."

The "Cyborg" and "Anagrams" series were also looking at Classical form and humanist sculpture. Maybe rooted in the Classical tradition was a belief in attainable, individual perfection, whereas Modernism aimed to sculpt an entire, perfected society.

It depends on what meaning we ascribe to Modernism. I would say the base concept behind Modernism is still perspective, which is why I used the Classical Greek form of the body as a departure point in "Cyborg" and "Anagrams," because that kind of humanism contains perspective.

But my current sculptures don't have any perspective. Even if it looks like they do, there are mirrors and other reflective surfaces that distort everything into a twist on traditional perspective.

Does that mean you are trying to critique utopian ideals?

I'm not trying to critique anything, because that's been done already. I am reflecting on the process of how these visionaries conceived their ideas; that's why I focus on the failed or unrealized ideas.

Is your work then a call to people in the present to think beyond reality?

What we call "reality" these days is actually only an idea of reality, plus the collective desire to endow the idea with some sort of substance.

You studied sculpture and then your early works integrated performance; now you've come back to sculpture. What is sculpture to you?

At the start of my career, I tried to escape traditional genres. Today I have very pressing questions about how to approach sculpture, because even if I try to seek some kind of deeper meaning through my work, I can see that there is a pervading emptiness behind such notions.

It's a little bit chaotic for me. Maybe I can say making art is a way of surviving or dealing with life. But even that kind of explanation is too simple. It doesn't communicate my whole mood or feeling, so I end up calling art my hobby.

How about the formal qualities of your work? Many of your recent works seem to present the idea of sculpture as an obstacle, like the "Infinity" series pieces which, when displayed at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York in 2008, had weird, stretched proportions and were placed at odd angles. Do you think of your works as obstacles and do you want them, in a way, to obstruct people from "viewing?"

Actually that is part of my intent, but at the same time my works have a very personal element to them, so it's not simply about "decoding" the intent of the artist. The works also reflect my feelings in a way that is not simply about expression. I find myself in my pieces.

If you asked me this kind of question 10 years ago I might have said "yes, you're correct" or "no, you're wrong" or otherwise tried to guide how people read the work. But today, I can't say for sure what's going on in my work because I don't know myself. It's getting increasingly foggy.

The reflective surface of your installation at Hara ARC makes it difficult to see "into" the work during the daytime, although the interior becomes clear when viewed at night. How much consideration did you put into the reflective surface and how it would affect the work?

Viewed straight on, the glass surface reflects back the image of the viewer, resulting in an overlapping of images, of the viewer and the work. It doesn't permit complete transparency. But when the viewer approaches the work obliquely, an illusion of perspective appears. This false sense of depth and dimension is intrinsic to the meaning of the work.

Are you referencing any particular architectural forms here?

Nothing specific, but forms and elements that echo and recall archetypal or iconic structures are impressed on our collective memories and concepts of the Modern.