Thinker of the Present

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The Art of Lee Ufan

"As an artist, I'd like to be able to move between those parallel concepts of time—time that people want to control and time that escapes their grasp. I'd like to inhabit that ambiguity." **LEE UFAN**[1]

LEE UFAN painting with water on stones in the Hakone Valley, 1998. Copyright the Lee Ufan Archive.

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INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

BY JEAN-MARIE GALLAIS

1 Interview with the author, published in *Lee Ufan. Inhabiting Time*. Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2018, p.97

In December 2018, I was in Kamakura, Japan, visiting Lee Ufan. The radiant winter sun warmed the ground of the quiet city, while running water glistened alongside the streets. The artist's studio was flooded with light. The tea was steaming, the radio gently quivering. An assortment of brushes of different widths hung on the walls. I proceeded to interview Lee. We were preparing his personal exhibition at the Centre Pompidou-Metz, which was later titled "Inhabiting Time." During the conversation, when he spoke to me in Japanese, I was hypnotized by the recognizable flow of his speech, its rhythm, intonations, and silences. Since I do not speak Japanese, I was accompanied by an interpreter and had to wait for her to render his words into English. This delay created a strange suspension in time. Lulled by the sounds of the artist's voice without understanding them, my mind began to wander. I imagined him at work in the studio, crouching on a board, and reaching for the middle of a large white canvas to apply, again and again, with concentration, a single, powerful brushstroke, one of the artist's trademarks. I imagined him in the mountains, searching for stones for his sculptures. When his words were translated, I returned abruptly to reality and resumed the discussion.

LEE UFAN, *Relatum*, 1970/2019, stone and glass, 70 cm and 240 × 300 × 1.9 cm. Photo by Origins Studio. Copyright Artists Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris; and Centre Pompidou-Metz. Courtesy Kamel Mennour, Paris/London.

Once our exchange was finished, Lee asked me if I had any time left. I mentioned the schedule of my train to Tokyo. He glanced at the clock and responded, with a childish grin on his face, "So I can still show you something, but we'll have to hurry." Lee decided then and there to show me some of the temples in Kamakura, a famous pilgrimage city, before I left, starting with the bamboo grove of Hokoku-ji, an old Zen temple. We even took the time to share some tea while contemplating the tombs of the Ashikaga shogun family. Then we ran—Lee, in his early eighties, literally took off in leaps and bounds! I did my best to keep up with his brisk sprint to see the Great Buddha, Daibutsu, at Kotoko-in. No language was required. He wanted me to experience these fleeting moments of peace before being assaulted by the din of the station and the screeching train. Once again, time stopped, or perhaps, the present had stretched indefinitely. It was not a matter of measuring time but of living in it. This handful of visits recalled his art.

Has Lee found a magic formula to manipulate time? He has been playing with time as a medium forever. But beyond his gestures, it's up to the viewer to turn time into both an intimate and universal ally, to see, feel, and perceive reality in a different way. Though Lee's maneuvers are simple, each work suggests a profoundly cogent thought. More recently, his pieces seem to have taken on a new dimension with lockdowns around the world and forced relationships with new time frames due to the Covid-19 crisis.

But let's backtrack for a moment. Lee's work has a specificity shared by a relatively small number of artists: it attempts to transcend historical and cultural context, and address the primary sensory and cognitive faculties of the human mind. I use the word "attempt," because, in spite of everything, certain contextual elements have had an undeniable impact on his work, from the moment of emergence of his thoughts to recent events.

The story is well known: born in 1936 in South Korea, Lee first exhibited his works in Japan in the late 1960s. By steadfastly striving to reduce his artistic intervention to a minimum, to erase his personal imprint, to limit his gestures, Lee, along with a few other artists of his generation, pursued the ambition of renewing perceptions of the world. After joining the concepts of Dansaekhwa with the Mono-ha movement, he quickly became one of the main Mono-ha theorists, thanks to his philosophical training. The turbulent technological world of Japan in the 1970s provided the backdrop for the creation of his first experiments with painting and sculpture, which invite us to move away from the presumptions of a worldwide attention economy, and to question deeply the simplest relationships between things. His installations bear the same title: *Relatum*, a visual and sensory concept, meaning relationship—between a stone and a sheet of glass, for example. At first glance, these objects seem to oppose each other: the stone originates from the mineral world, untouched by humans and shaped by geological and tectonic movements over millions of years. The glass, with its sharp edges, flat shape, and controlled mass produced by humans, reflects the progress in industrialization and technological innovation within the most recent few millennia. Yet, from the present, guided by the two materials, we can move freely throughout the ladder of time. The

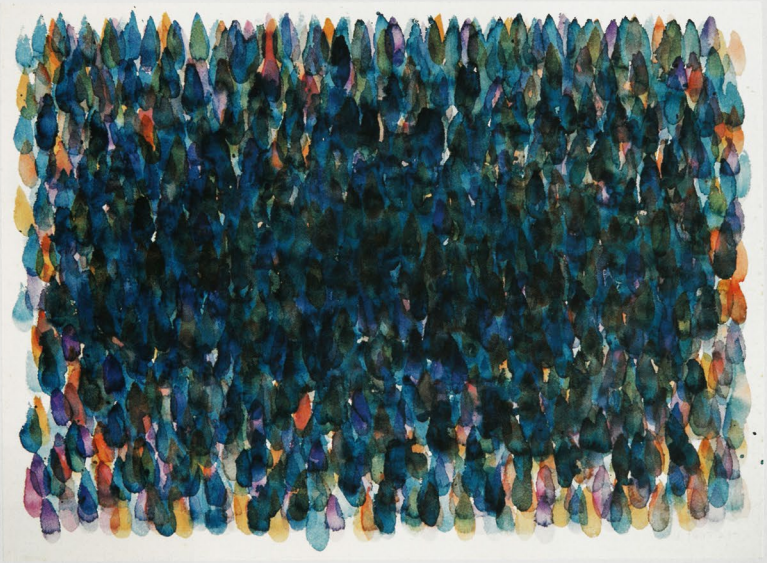
LEE UFAN, *Relatum* (formerly *Things and Words*), 1969, paper, dimensions variable. Copyright Artists Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Studio Lee Ufan.

dependence between the two worlds is blatant, if the spectator takes the time to question the relationship that the artist has triggered through his tempered staging.

While Lee's installations are housed in museums today, many of his works first emerged in the streets, as with *Relatum* (formerly *Things and Words)* (1969), three large sheets of blank paper that he left in a public plaza to blow about in the wind, inviting the natural force to co-author the installation. In their reflections about the end of anthropocentrism and attempts at establishing a dialogue between the human and nonhuman, his works anticipated topics that are central to today's creations. Modernity, mainly in its Western expression, has endeavored to reduce the world into a dichotomy: humanity against nature, rationality against irrationality, individuality against society. The upheavals of our time demonstrate the falsity of this calamitous division: humanity is not separate from nature—we are immersed in it, as has been stated by philosopher Bruno Latour, the co-curator of the latest Taipei Biennial. In short, this is what Lee, along with a few other pioneers, have been trying to tell us since the 1970s, using the vocabulary of art. He has been making the case for including nonhuman elements in our perception of the world, and for a vision of art in which the artist must acknowledge their limitations in controlling the parameters of creation.

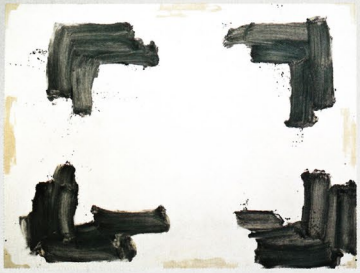
> "By reining in my expressivity, keeping my active intervention to the minimum—in other words by being 'purer,' more stoic—I can see or hear other things. And to do that, in a way, you must gradually distance yourself from human society, adopt a non-human stance. Silence, and the absence of the spoken word, are a natural, essential part of that."
>
> **LEE UFAN**[2]

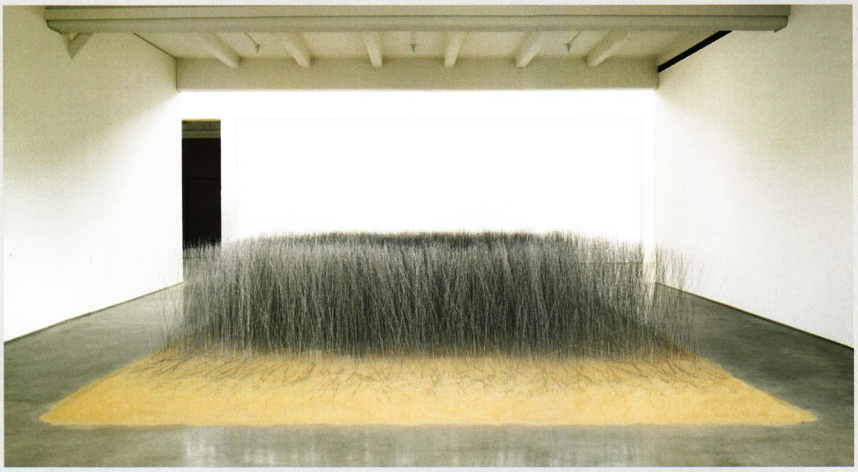
Take his painting as an example: Lee questions repetition and the role of the author in his famous series *From Point* and *From Line* (both 1972–84). Stretching his brushstrokes regularly over the surface of the canvas until the ink runs out, he focuses on the idea of reproducing an identical gesture. Inevitably, no brushstroke resembles another, and no point is identical to the previous one. Mechanical reproduction is the hallmark of the machine, but the body—just like the pigments, the canvas, the brush, and even the temperature of the room or the time of day—plays a role in the artist's creative act. Despite his

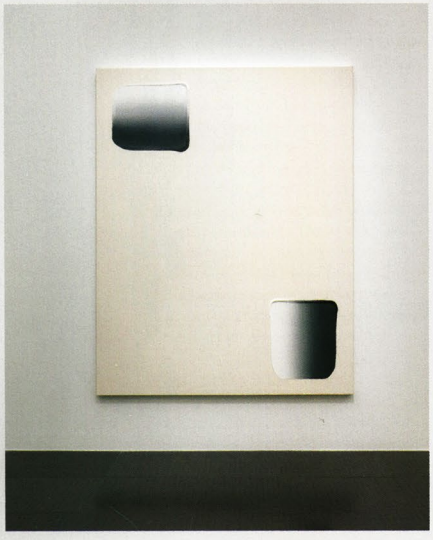


LEE UFAN, *From Point*, 1975, watercolor on paper, 56 x 76 cm. Copyright Artists Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Studio Lee Ufan.

2 Op. cit., p.102.







This page, top to bottom: **LEE UFAN,** *With winds*, 1991, oil and mineral pigment on canvas, 218×291 cm. Copyright Artists Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Studio Lee Ufan.

Installation view of **LEE UFAN**'s *Relatum* (formerly *Iron Field*), 1969/2019, sand and steel, dimensions variable, at Dia:Beacon, New York, 2019. Purchased by the Dia Art Foundation with funds from the Samsung Foundation of Culture. Photo by Bill Jacobson Studio. Copyright Artists Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

LEE UFAN, *Correspondence*, 2006, oil and pigment on canvas, 227×182 cm. Photo by Origins Studio. Copyright Artists Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris; and Centre Pompidou-Metz. Courtesy Studio Lee Ufan.

Next page: Installation view of **LEE UFAN's** *Relatum – The Shadow of the Stars*, 2014, steel, seven stones, and white marble granite, 2×45×40 m, at the Château de Versailles, 2014. Photo by Fabrice Seixas. Copyright the Artists Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris.

concentration, he cannot overcome the intrinsic instability of these elements.

In *From Winds* (1982), Lee introduced what is probably one of the most poetic inventions in contemporary painting: he decided to "paint with the wind." The wind had helped Yves Klein create his *Cosmogonies* (1960–61), but in Lee's work, it is a metaphor for freeing the artist from his ego, and letting the brush twist and turn according to the whims of the elements, like a bird being carried upward by an unpredictable current of air. In the 1980s, the same approach appeared in the practice of Alighiero Boetti, when he met Japanese calligrapher Enomoto. With the "winds," Lee attempts—it's always an attempt, because part of him inevitably resists the process, he candidly admits—to silence any form of expressiveness, to concentrate on listening to the elements, like an exercise in meditation, as if he is an intermediary between us and the universe. The ultimate intent and nature of Lee's work is to invite us to join this meditation.

Lee's work has been surprisingly coherent from its inception to its maturity, and although he has created many unique experiences, all of them are based on the same vision: to shift our mode of being in and seeing the world. His sculptures—whether modest in size and comprising light materials such as cotton or grains of sand, or monumental in scale and made of steel and stones—share the tacit desire to prompt reflections on what we have encoded into our landscapes and architectures, including how our categorical thinking has shaped our institutions. His sculptures thus chime in on the institutional critique of artists of his generation. For his renowned series *Correspondence* (1993–), he prepares on his palette subtle color gradations that he then transfers with precise sweeps of a brush onto the surface of a canvas. Placed around a room, the canvases become "dialogues," and the distinction between paintings and sculptures fade away. When Lee's brushstrokes appear on the floor or on the wall, the entire space becomes a sculpture, a three-dimensional painting.

After the wind, the artist also worked with shadows, literally and figuratively playing with them in three-dimensional works such as *Relatum - The Shadow of the Stars* (2014)—an outdoor arrangement of seven stones on a circular bed of white gravel—and discussing their philosophical nature with fellow artist Jiro Takamatsu. With his reverential relationship to nature, like the poet Li Bai in front of Mount Jingting, Lee celebrates humanity's humble existence in the vast universe, as well as the strength of the human spirit.

Alongside his paintings, installations, and sculptures, his writings, which have been regularly integrated as active elements in his art since his early career, should be recognized in their own right. The artist's most recent text, titled "The Message of the New Coronavirus,"[3] was written in April 2020, shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic. We have chosen to reproduce an excerpted version of the essay here (the full text is available online). As a thinker who reflects on living entities and relationships, Lee hopes to look at the virus as an ally, not just an enemy. If certain radical parts of the text warrant an open critique and discussion, these lines reflect the artist's great honesty and are legitimate offshoots of his aesthetic work. Lee asks: will humanity listen to the message of the virus?

3 Lee Ufan, "The Message of the New Coronavirus," April 22, 2020. First published on the website of SCAI The Bathhouse (https://www.scaithebathhouse.com/en/news/2020/05/message_from_lee_ufan/)

THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW CORONAVIRUS

Selected excerpts

The history of civilization is mostly an account of war, but it cannot be told without stories of fights against plagues. To read scientific reports on viruses makes one realize what perplexing, mysterious beings they are.

They appear to be two-sided beings that bring with them not only the risk of death but the promotion of life within the progress and evolution of humanity. Therefore, as an unavoidable aspect of life, they cannot be eradicated or destroyed. In order to alternately fight and live in acceptance of them, we will need to exert more vitality—that is, our entire physical, intellectual, and spiritual strength—but it raises many other questions as well. As we know from the *yakubyōgami* (spirits of pestilence), the more we confront each other, the stronger we become, and the structure of a virus, which varies in appearance according to the time and context, is highly dialectical and suggestive. In other words, to be alive means to be constantly engaged with the external and the Other, while we develop our responses to the situation and the moment. Like modern art, modern medicine must be dismantled. The role of the *yakubyōgami* had no place in that discipline. At last, the path can now lead away from anthropocentricism and toward a reconsideration of life as intrinsic to the reciprocity of the ecosystem and the environment. What the existence of this virus teaches us is precisely the synchronicity of the global environment, the solidarity of life, and the intermediation of all organic and inorganic beings.

Ours is now a strange existence in which we limit our interactions as much as possible, refraining from handshakes, kisses, and even casual conversation. Looking back on the anomaly of our former courage and enthusiasm, and discovering the pitiable vulnerability of humankind, a strange awareness of life's uncertainty takes over. In any case, while we cannot predict how long the virus's ferocity will last, this experience is certain to bring about a major turning point in human consciousness.

In the meantime, it is not unthinkable that we will weather storms of vile misinformation, dubious occult thinking, and horrifying totalitarianism. Humanity is being subjected to an unprecedented trial.

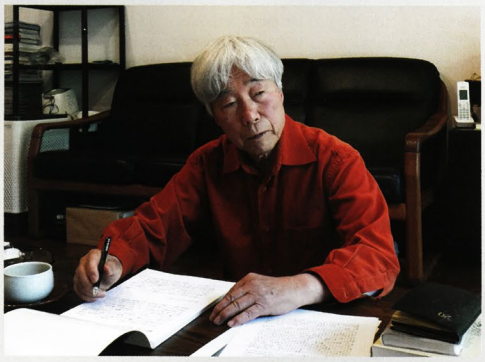
It is all too apparent how civilization has destroyed the earth with its creation of holes in the ozone layer and its pollution of the atmosphere, mountains, rivers, and cities. But I am relieved to see that nature remains resilient. Once again, I am moved by nature's splendor and inner strength. At the same time, I am appalled by civilization's capacity to spoil nature and ruin the earth. The conflict between nature and civilization is not the only thing exposed by the ferocity of this virus. For better or worse, our political and economic cultures, which ought to be expanding with globalism, are now in decline. Some countries have reverted to self-isolating nationalism and are devolving into hysterical societies where people indulge in indiscriminate, self-centered feuding and disobedience. Disruption has occurred at the very moment that the modern world was becoming global and we might finally have a chance to know and acknowledge the external and the Other.

Incidentally, perhaps what people are searching for is neither devotion to nature nor the defiant reassertion of civilization, but an ambivalent awareness of existence that spans both. With the arrival of the virus, people feel threatened by the external and have turned inward. Yet, nature instantly began to recover and heal from the mutilation and destruction that civilization wrought upon it. The fact that nature has such restorative power probably means that humankind, which was originally a part of it, also harbors such potential. Human beings could mend civilization by engaging in a dialogue with the roots of existence.

The calamity of the new coronavirus has forced humanity to face a new horizon. Let us refine our capacity for remorseful reflection and self-control so we can avoid annihilation and survive. True self-control is to listen to your own voice. That is, what we must adhere to is not the law, the authorities, or our self-consciousness, but the natural order from which we originated, and the mechanism of the universe born out of physical sensations. To put it another way, by transcending individual will and state control, and cultivating a dialogue between humanity and nature, we awaken to the interrelationships of the living world. The horror and hope we are experiencing with the spread of this virus and our fight against it carries a message—let us see whether or not humanity takes heed of it.

LEE UFAN
April 22, 2020

Translated from Japanese by Ashley Rawlings



LEE UFAN in his studio, 2020. Photo by Mina Lee. Courtesy Studio Lee Ufan.

LEE UFAN lives in Kamakura, Japan, and Paris, France. He was awarded the Praemium Imperiale in 2001 and has had solo presentations at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul; the Château de Versailles; Dia Beacon, New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and Gardens, Washington, DC; and the Kamakura Museum of Modern Art, among other institutions. Several foundations and museums are dedicated to Lee's work, including in Naoshima, Japan; Busan, South Korea; and soon in Arles, France.

JEAN-MARIE GALLAIS is a French art historian and curator, and has been head of exhibitions at Centre Pompidou-Metz since 2016. He has curated thematic shows such as "Painting the Night" (2018), "Folklore" (2020), and the monographic presentation "Lee Ufan. Inhabiting Time" (2019). He is preparing an exhibition entitled "Writing is Drawing," to be presented at Centre Pompidou-Metz in the third quarter of 2021.