Trouble in New Utopia

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Exhibitions of contemporary art in Asia have proliferated in the major visual art centers of Europe, the United States, and Japan in the past ten years. Among the largest of these in terms of quantity of works and artists shown was the 1997 group exhibition “Cities on the Move,” cocurated by the Musee d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist and independent curator Hou Hanru. Its significance lay not so much in its size as in its optimistic conception of “Asia” summarized as New Utopia, a term borrowed from architect Arata Isozaki’s invocation of a New Utopia from his Haishi/Mirage City proposal to construct an artificial island near the southern coast of Hangqin Island and Macao in southern China. In “Cities on the Move,” New Utopia was built on works whose formal components or general physical appearance overly suggested physical movement and speed. The recurrence of such works implied a different and more specific definition of New Utopia than Isozaki’s original proposal, which was based
on the rejection of the authority of the “master” urban plan. Rather, Obrist and Hou redefined the term as “a general disintegration of all established notions of boundary, nation, identity, [and] morality” stemming from “the staggering frequency of displacement, speed, [and] exchange.”

The construct of New Utopia directly challenged established and ongoing conceptions of particular national geographies as negatively unstable. These conceptions metonymically defined a particular territory as encumbered by myopic obsessions with economic development or sociopolitical agendas on the part of its governing regime. For example, critic Toshiya Ueno argued that the nation-state speculatively invests in anything conceived as a facilitator of progress without considering the nature of the investment it proposes to make. Others, especially those based in geopolitical sites crucially affected by colonial histories (e.g., Hong Kong, Korea, the Philippines), conceived these sites as discrete and unique in their perennial struggles against the invasive effects of the “West.” Seoul-based critic and curator Lee Young Chul asserted that “modernity” is predicated on an understanding of progress that feigns to be inclusive and egalitarian in nature but that in truth is part of the hegemony of the West.

The main issue at hand, however, is a question less of whether the works chosen as examples of New Utopia convincingly elide such negative conceptions of instability and more of the interpretative process and methodology involved in arriving at such an assessment. Consciously or not, most viewers embark on a process of interpretation that frames the images visible in a work as iconographies calibrated according to subjectively held perceptions of the artist’s specific cultural, national, and racial backgrounds. This process is founded on the immediate verification of the images as metaphorical representations of the external, physical world inhabited by the viewer. The cost of this immediacy and, to some degree, interpretative clarity is the occlusion of significations derived via an assessment of how a work’s formal components engage with each other to produce a virtual, imagined, and internal “world” separate from the nonvirtual, material, and physical one inhabited by the viewer. Although there is always tension between the two, little if no attention is paid to it.
On the Viewer/Artist Relationship, Briefly

A crucial reason for this occlusion lies in the nature of the relationship between the viewer and the artist. Here the viewer has seized the power to define the signification of the work from the artist. The relation of signification, to recall Erwin Panofsky’s phrase, is underwritten by this triumph of the viewer and forces a gap between the intention of the artist and the means through which intent finds expression. Offering further assistance in clarifying this relationship is the argument made by Roland Barthes in *The Death of the Author*, in which he states that the multiple readings of a text invalidate the author’s existence. On its face, an analogy can be drawn between the work and text, and between the artist and author. But this would be a strategic misreading of Barthes, who seeks to reclaim the completeness of a text lost to authorial agency, or to the claim of the author to “explain” the text for the reader. The situation with regard to the interpretation of so-called New Utopian works entails a reversal of roles rather than the actual liberation of the work from its servitude to an author. Now playing the role of the author is the viewer external to the construction of the work, to which the artist’s potential capacity to intervene in the process of interpretation is necessarily and concurrently subordinated.

The viewer’s power to determine a work’s signification owes its activation to three aspects concerning the contexts in which these works are mostly shown and discussed. First, the viewer’s encounter with a work is almost always determined in part by another set of earlier viewers who possess the specific power to affect the conceptual activity of others by virtue of their institutional, biographical, or geographical credentials. To take one instance, a particular group of earlier viewers attempts to mediate between audiences in the metropolises of Euro-America (and sometimes Japan) and artists based in localities far removed from those audiences. Underwriting these mediations is the assumption of an essential discrepancy between Euro-American and Asian cultural expression in which works are perceived as part of an alterior contemporaneity inferior—or superior—to that of Euro-America. Lucid examples of this are those exhibitions of contemporary Asian art exported to major metropolises of Euro-America that are organized by curators based in an Asian nation-state. Critic Lee Yongwoo, for instance, framed the works
in “Information and Reality,” his 1995 show of contemporary Korean art at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, as part of a teleology revolving around the evocation of qualities inherently Eastern in character, or of the East (dongyang), a term whose initial deployment in the context of modern Korean art history was largely a reaction to the West (seoyang). He chose to position the works as iconographical depictions of Easternness, inevitably precluding from view those aspects of the work not conforming to his conceptual structure.

Second, certain forms of encounter with a given work are repeated enough times so that subsequent generations of viewers are habituated to accept a correct trajectory of interpretation that begins with a consideration of the geographical or cultural provenance of the artist or of the images visible in his or her work. How this general trajectory is expressed takes various forms. At approximately the same time that “Information and Reality” and similar shows took place, another standard of curatorial practice began to emerge at an increasing rate. Influenced by the institutionalization of postcolonial notions of hybridity in cultural studies, other curators disassociated themselves from the strategic nationalism powering shows organized around a single nationality and began to consider the work and the artist as dialectical repositories of cultural differences. It is at this point that transnational artists, artists living and working in places other than their country of national origin but often retaining strong personal, professional, or official connections to that country, became prominent. Such artists may be classified into one of three types. There are those who came to be based in Euro-America after receiving tertiary education, such as Mariko Mori (b. 1967), as well as those in involuntary or voluntary exile, such as the many expatriate Chinese artists who left China after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. There are also artists like Lee Bul (b. 1964) who are still based in their countries of national origin but exhibit and travel extensively outside of those countries. The formation of this type is, in large part, a direct result of the visibility received through nation-themed export shows especially prolific from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s.

Turn to “Cities on the Move.” It brought artists like Mori and Lee under the notion of the whirlwind, or the tourbillon where “East meets West.” This framing was characteristic of Hou Hanru, whose curatorial practices
have focused on promoting a particular definition of Asian art as a function of converging economic and sociopolitical forces rather than as a body of continuums separated on the basis of national boundaries. The New Utopia advocated in “Cities on the Move” bore a close relation to the artist Chen Zhen’s notion of “transexperience,” which Hou invoked in the catalog of the 1998 exhibition “Inside/Out: New Chinese Art.” From his observation of fellow Paris-based Chinese expatriates Huang Yong Ping, Chen Zhen, and very likely his own self, he expanded on the “transexperience” of living “in between East and West.”

Hou contended that this experience of extensive travel and contact with multiple cultural contexts allowed the artist to critically interrupt the “normal” functions of both, or in other words, disrupt subjective perceptions of what appear to be national or cultural differences. As a theoretical construct, however, “transexperience” failed to hermeneutically interfere with the means of interpretation set aside for contemporary art made by Asian artists. Aside from its lack of a reflexive defense against the likely possibility of co-optation by a grand capitalist teleology, it too easily directed the viewers focus toward the artist’s cultural biography. In reviewing a solo exhibition of Mori’s work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in 1999, a newspaper critic commented that “the way she [Mori] presents ‘Japan’—whether contemporary or ancient—is very ‘un-Japanese.’”

Likewise, Lee’s extensive overseas exhibition activities have prompted some critics to accuse her of not being sufficiently dedicated to the domestic Korean art scene. Some, in particular, have accused Lee of opportunistically presenting herself as a “Korean feminist” artist in exhibitions outside of Korea. The discussion firmly remained within an assessment of the artists’ relationship to a specific cultural group. It appears that the early generation of viewers who determined how subsequent generations of viewers should encounter the work has effectively set the perimeters of interpretation.

These kinds of critical reactions, and more broadly, the limited scope of interpretations, have prompted artists to distance themselves from being associated with one particular culture. This is the third aspect that has contributed to the viewer’s authorial agency: contrary to the argument proffered by New Utopia of a borderless reality, these statements compel the artist to demonstrate an amplified consciousness of, and engagement with, processes of identification based on perceptions of national and cultural differences.
Lee Bul, for example, attempted to circumvent critical accusations through her works based on the related images of the monster and the cyborg in the mid-1990s. Made in response to her realization that “such explicit politicization [in Lee’s early works of the late 1980s and early 1990s depicting the graphic identification of women in patriarchal Korean society] seemed too obvious, too complicit with that which I am trying to critique,” she pointedly referred to these later works as privileged symbols of the “future” and “the highest aspirations of technology.”

Amaryllis (1999; color plate 7), an installation comprising a large number of tangled tusk- and rootlike appendages, suggests, for example, a multitude of diverse cultural references including Greek kouros, Joseon-era baekja ware, and the impossibly curvaceous forms of female cyborgs found in Japanese animation. The seemingly intentional suturing of these references metaphorically describes the erosion of cultural, national, geographical, and chronological borders confirming the truth of New Utopia.

Mori poses a more ambivalent case, for she deliberately features images taken from Japanese popular culture. Yet works like Birth of a Star (1995; color plate 8), featuring literal performances of costume play (kospure), a popular trend in Japan in which the participant dons the guise of a favorite cartoon character or entertainment figure, invoke the latent motivation of kospure practitioners (and arguably Mori’s motivation) to escape one’s assigned identity in the material and physical world. She states that her objective is to reach “a place that is nowhere” (dokodemo nai basho), possibly in response to her experiences in London: “I wanted to forget the fact that I was Japanese and wanted to express myself as an individual and singular identity.”

A New Turn for the “Authorial” Viewer

In spite of the proactiveness with which artists like Lee and Mori resist interpretations based on perceptions of their nationality, their statements have been largely ineffectual in severing the authorial grasp of the viewer as they too inscribe themselves within the parameters already set forth by early viewers. The trajectory of interpretation where the cultural difference of the artist’s background and that of the images most immediately visible in a given work remains the primary, and in many cases the exclusive, focus of the viewer.
Curator Lisa Corrin writes in specific reference to the large multimedia installation *Nirvana* (1997; color plate 9) featuring the artist in the dress of a bodhisattva, who, courtesy of special glasses provided to the viewer, appears to literally float on a lotus flower against a petal pink backdrop. She comments that “Mori uses technology to produce a state in which we leave behind exhausted [and] primarily Western categories of thinking to arrive at enlightened responses.”\(^1^8\) In the work, Mori has emptied the Buddhist imagery of its intended sign value with the ahistoricization of the bodhisattva. The historical significance of that figure is considered only from a perspective of ex post and is significant to the viewer insofar as it enhances or affirms the work’s capacity to describe the future in confirmation with the aspirations of the present. Through her statement, Corrin tries to insert the New Utopia frame into the emptied signifier. But in doing so she also resuscitates the long-standing relationship between notions of “Japan” and “technology.”

Curator Yuko Hasegawa, in contrast, speculates that Japanese viewers would be indifferent to Mori’s work, rationalizing that masquerades in works like *Nirvana*, *Birth of a Star*, and *Play with Me* (1994) only recede into the preexisting diversity of subcultures in Japan.\(^1^9\) Implied in her statement is Toshiya Ueno’s argument in his assessment of what he describes as “techno-Orientalism” that Western audiences will look for cultural specificity when there is none to be found.\(^2^0\) Through her speculation, Hasegawa tries to restore the works to their origins by domesticating the masquerade, by embedding it within a normalized perception of quotidian Japanese life. Yet this, as much as Corrin’s mediation, serves as evidence of how viewer perceptions of cultural difference or lack thereof still persist in regulating how signification takes place.

In the name of providing a proper contextualization for the work, it might appear self-evident to apply such perceptions as the initial means of undertaking interpretation. Consider *Birth of a Star*, which was first shown in “Made in Japan,” a solo exhibition at the American Fine Arts gallery in New York, the Shiseido Gallery in Tokyo, and Deitch Projects in New York in 1995. The work is a full-color Duratrans print of the artist in the dress of a nymphet *idoru kashu* (literally, “idol singer,” an idolized popular music star) mounted onto a rectangular light box 183 centimeters high and 122 centimeters wide. The title of the work refers to a television program in
which members of the audience can audition to become actual pop stars.\(^{21}\) The image of the masquerading body represents the point at which the audience can reach gratification. Viewers can become what was once to them an unattainable object of desire. Where *Nirvana* and similar works depict the desire to step outside the constraints of mainstream society, *Birth of a Star* has the capacity to metaphorically depict the actualization of otherwise improbable or long forthcoming desires. Mori states that this work comprises part of a larger project to “use technology to make things better.”\(^ {22}\) Her attempt at “utopianizing” technology, though, further emphasizes the materiality indispensable to the dynamic of production and consumption. The artist’s intentional use of *kosupure* may signal a desire to escape reality, but also a return to its service. The celebrity or cartoon figure emulated is usually produced by a free-market enterprise, *kosupure* being just another form of demand for that figure.

The didactic message of *Birth of a Star* is collapsed into the double pleasure of the artist who undertakes the narration and the viewer who witnesses this process—recall again the celebratory voice of Corrin’s mediation. The self is a modified schoolgirl figure who tries to arouse in some viewers a desire evoked by the coincidental allusion to the figure of Lolita.\(^ {23}\) The bright, primary-school colors of a plaid skirt, purple hair, and iridescent irises shining in the artist’s youthful face attest to the work’s artificial quality, consumability, but above all, its promise of pleasure. The startling directness, even urgency, of this metaphorical description is evident in Mori’s formal strategy, which is mainly characterized by a heavy dependence on highly saturated colors and centripetal organization whereby the eye is pulled toward an intentionally pivotal image. In *Birth of a Star*, as with all of Mori’s *kosupure*-inspired works, the importance of the body is immediately established by its central placement and magnified scale relative to the other images. There is no opportunity for the viewer to focus on anything else but the image of the body, which is rendered in a sensual palette of colors associated with artificially flavored confections also used in other works, including *Nirvana*.

Strengthening the metaphor is the almost concurrent rise of Mori in the nonvirtual, physical world as a critically and commercially successful figure in the contemporary art worlds of New York and London.\(^ {24}\) Her appearance as the pop star foreshadows the signification of herself as a veritable “thing”
of fantasy. Costumed in pristine white, in a tableau that is removed from the plebian confines of daily reality, she appeared in the August 2000 issue of the U.S. edition of fashion magazine *Harper’s Bazaar*. In turn this preceded her subsequent incarnation as a collectible doll in *Birth of a Star* dress, in which the work and the artist collapsed into a single commodity.25

From this interpretation, *Birth of a Star* seems to clearly be only a metaphor for the external, physical world. But can the same argument be made without automatically summoning the metaphorical capacity of the image to refer to the world concretely outside of the virtual, internal, imagined realm within the work? “Automatic” is an appropriate term given that what is striking about this kind of interpretation is not only the speed at which the summoning takes place but also the sense of certainty, or even inevitability, with which it occurs. In the interpretation described above, the deck is already stacked against the possibility of the work’s playing host to a virtual, internal, and imagined realm—all the evidence consists of allusions and connections to the nonvirtual material world external to the work. I contend that the work is less a metaphor, than an intermediate site, or corridor, between two worlds, accessed through an examination of the work’s formal construction. This, eventually, is an argument for a turn in the viewer’s encounter with the work that, by prioritizing formal construction generally, moves more definitively toward the erasure of master readings and interpretations.

A useful suggestion toward this end can be extrapolated from Norman Bryson’s remark that the artist insufficiently distances herself from her various roles according to Western standards.26 Although this observation fails to fully untie itself from the allure of Mori’s highly visible Japanese physiognomy and references, it also indicates the interpretative approach that has often been ignored: the presence of distance, but in this case, distance as indexed by the pictorial components of the work, their relationships, and the work itself as a physical object defined by its relationships with other concrete forms in the exhibition space.

What characterizes *Birth of a Star* is its lack of optical, illusionistic depth. The foreground and background are compressed together, although the totality of this compression is rejected by the candy-colored bubbles that appear to recede and protrude from the picture plane occupied by the image of the body. Roughly dividing the work into three lateral registers, each
section features bubbles that simultaneously engage in this recession and protrusion. The upper third features a receding light blue bubble on the left and a larger red one situated on the right that seems to emerge from the white background, while that sequence is reversed in the middle third, with the bubble on the right receding at the same time as that on the left protrudes. The bottom third again recalls the sequence of the uppermost section. This shifting of planar situations produces a kineticism that denies the attempt of the eye to hold together all the images in a single glance. Instead, they must be understood in separable intervals in which either the body is seen first, and then the bubbles, or vice versa. The work is thus a gathering of fragments that demand, to draw from Jonathan Crary’s analysis of the stereoscope, localized attention.

Additionally, in order for the viewer to be able to process these zones, he or she must also recede from the work so that his or her scope of visibility encompasses all of the images. What is visible at this point is the relationship of the work to the exhibition wall. In every venue in which the work has been shown, the white cover of the light box almost perfectly mirrors the white gallery/museum wall in value and hue. The ground appears to disappear into the larger expanse of the wall. Against what resembles a vast field of white, the saturated primary and fluorescent colors of the images insist on their autonomy and refuse the formation of a coherent, imagined world. The disappearance of the ground into the wall begins to erode the divide between the imaginary, psychological, and ultimately internalized world inhabited by the images and the nonvirtual, physical, and material one. This divide, the presumed boundary between the wall and the work, is not as utterly erased as in *Nirvana*, in which the images of the internal, imagined realm within the work directly attempt to transpose themselves onto the external, nonvirtual one. Yet it is sufficiently disturbed so that the core identity of either world is their *slippage into each other*. The virtual realm can, without too much effort, thus be seen as coalescing into the nonvirtual one, and vice versa.

**Toward Visual Accountability**

The main argument I want to make, however, is not the complete devaluation of perceptions of cultural specificity (as opposed to difference and
discrepancy) in the process of interpretation nor that the work should never be considered as a metaphorical representation of the nonvirtual, physical world. For in the handful of instances where the iconographic framing of the image as a function of such specificity is bypassed altogether, the signification derived is as incomplete as in those interpretations that rely exclusively on an iconographic framing of cultural difference. An example is the mediation of the anthromorphic monster and cyborg installations of Lee Bul. As with Mori’s works, they appear in exhibitions like the 2001 group show “My Reality: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation,” first held at the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa, where culturally discrepant elements (the Japanese animation-influenced parts of Lee’s installations) determined their mediation. Lee’s installations, however, have been frequently mediated through theorizations not revolving around the perceived cultural discrepancy of the artist or work.

A case in point was the 2002 exhibition “The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture” at the Vancouver Art Gallery, where Lee’s works were cast in terms of Donna Haraway’s influential writings of the cyborg. Reclaimed from its historical identification with the patriarchal “abjectification” of women, the monster and cyborg iconographies were positioned as part of a strategy of evasion. In this project, the monster/cyborg body rejects the prescribed role of the female as a site of psychological, physiological, and metaphorical receipt and instead becomes the predator, vampirically surviving through the omnivorous appropriation of references. The result of mediations along this kind of interpretative approach is the allegorical signification of the work as a liberated subject rejecting gendered systems of identification impressed into the service of patriarchal authority.

Also potentially exemplary in this sense is Amaryllis, the first work by Lee to directly fuse images of the monster with those of the cyborg. The appeal of this transgression overlaps different cultural contexts. In A Cyborg Manifesto Haraway valorized the cyborg, who has no origin, at least in the Western sense: it is “a ‘final’ irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the ‘West’s’ escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space.” Similarly, art historian Kang Tae-hi described the monster image as part of a “gothic sublime” in which the body’s abjection reaches a point where notions of
gender are inevitably overcome. Kang’s reading implies that *Amaryllis* and works like it have successfully circumvented the reductiveness of systems of identification generated from perceptions of cultural discrepancy and categorical notions of gender. The mechanics of the mediation, however, are identical to those used in framing the image as an iconographical description of perceived cultural discrepancy. Only in this case, the viewer has severed the work from its applicability to specific cultural contexts without providing a rationale for doing so. In a manner of speaking, he or she must preemptively “cyborgize” the work in order to produce a signification confirming New Utopian transcendence of paradigms of culture, nation, and gender. The work then becomes Haraway’s “man in space,” an incomplete fragment pried from the context in which it was created, and in many cases, for which it was partly intended.

An artist who has created several kinds of stylistically different works, Lee described in her early works a given personal experience and its connection to a larger, more general body of phenomena and relationships. In works like the performance *Abortion* she depicted the physical human body as a declarative symbol of a larger, deindividualized collective. This concurrently recalled the early performances of the group Sinjeondongin in 1968–69 and the adamantly iconic depiction of the body in *Minjung* painting, a corpus of work often simplistically abbreviated as a derivation of Soviet and Chinese Socialist Realism that gained prominence in the 1980s. Created in part as a reaction against the then-establishment practices of *informel* painting in the 1960s and “monochrome” painting of the late 1970s, both kinds of work were intended as a function of the social, political, and cultural phenomena of the world commonly inhabited by the artist and the viewer. But beginning in the mid-1990s, when the social and artistic milieux of Korea were no longer dominated by an understanding of adversarial sociopolitical relationships, Lee’s visual language underwent a marked shift, becoming less obvious in her references and in their deployment. The objective of her artistic practice—reactive critique—remained constant, but instead of using images particularly evocative of categorical perceptions of an obstinately undefinable “Koreanness” or “Asianness,” as in the installation *Hydra* (1996), she opted to use images whose cultural provenance was harder to track.
Still, her works never entirely abandoned their allusiveness to specific cultural contexts. It was simply that the artist attempted to divorce the work from a certain ideological turn hinged on the production of refusals, whether the subject being refused was monochrome painting, patriarchal authority, or the West. Although Lee retained the form of the disembodied tentacle from earlier works, their iconographical origins in a teleological structure of Korean art powered by serial refusals were not kept. Instead, she expropriated this form from the system of multiple refusals so that it no longer was tethered to prescriptive notions of the artist’s country of national origin. The scope of the tentacle form’s capacity to enact metaphorical description was loosened, so that it could be applicable to a specific cultural context but also to those contexts grounded in cultures with which the artist may not have a direct, or even a secondary, relationship.

The signification of *Amaryllis*, for instance, can be traced to an event that took place early in her life: while perusing a tempting bakery display as a young girl, she witnessed a sudden crash of a scooter, which resulted in the instantaneous death of two lovers. The conglomeration of desires (Lee’s material lust of the cakes in the bakery and the lovers whose intimacy she recalls regarding with a “mixture of envy and longing”) conflate into the tragedy of the failure of technology as denoted by the crashed scooter. Seen as part of what the artist called “a derelict vision of the future,” Lee’s interpretation of this incident is that realizing imagined economic and technological possibilities is not an entirely desirable state, because their realization is separate from the manner in which these innovations will be used. She observes that such progress “operates within a context that is still very much complicit with prevailing ideologies.”

The figures of the monster and cyborg metaphorically describe this kind of progress, summoning in turn Paul Virilio’s fear of technology and its relationship to the body. This fear developed in a historical and political context similar to that of Lee’s formative years. The mid-1970s to mid-1980s saw the formation of a Korean nation-state whose identity was defined by the juxtaposition of rapid but uneven economic development and accelerated cold war hostilities accompanied by massive government spending on military technology. In this space, the human body was understood as a unit of capital on which was inscribed the ambitions of the state, where “the last
‘territory,’ human physiology thus becomes the privileged site of experimentation for the micromachines of communications.” Support for this kind of reading can be drawn from the artist’s prior representations of the body as a declarative symbol and as a confessional figure, including a twelve-day performance piece enacted in 1990 titled Sorry for Suffering—You Think I’m a Puppy on a Picnic? (color plate 10). In photographs of this performance, in which Lee paraded the streets of Seoul and Tokyo covered in octopus tentacle-like appendages made of pink and orange padded cotton, her performance on the street appears as a provocation to passersby.

It is unclear, though, what end this provocation and that of Amaryllis serve. Is she/it a grotesque but commanding figure intended to disturb viewers by her/its presence, as the context and genealogy of her works would suggest? Or does the provocation lie in the exhibitionism of the literal or figurative body’s futile struggle with the flailing, octopus-like limbs? Central to the adjudication of this question of signification is the relationship between the work and the viewer, which fluctuates according to the physical proximity between the two. When acute, the internal, imagined world constructed by the parts of Amaryllis appears as a rarefied object on three levels. First, the work’s absolute scale (210 × 120 × 180 centimeters) becomes magnified so that its relative scale vis-à-vis the viewer is immense. Although the viewer understands the absolute scale of the work to be large, that consciousness does not make itself viscerally felt until the viewer realizes that the scale of his or her own body proportionately decreases in relation to the increase in the perceived scale of the work. Second, the tangled combination of appendages generates an effect of constant motion. At this point, the eye cannot rest. It follows the length of one tusklike protrusion only to find that its presumed conclusion happens at the beginning of another one. Unable to force a conclusion to the work whereby the eye can depart from the virtual realm comprised by the appendages, the viewer is compelled to forfeit his or her power to determine the work’s perimeters. Third, the whiteness of the enamel surface is resolutely consistent; the enamel coating betrays no indication of a handmade mark, unlike the brushstrokes that are often faintly visible on exhibition-wall surfaces.

Writing in reference to the stylistically similar Monster (1998), critic Kim Jung-hee observed that “the tactile attraction is conflated with optical repulsiveness.” If extrapolated to the mediation of Amaryllis, her observation
suggests that the allure of the smooth, reflective white surface of the appendages leads to a mediation of the work as an object of alienation. But this sequence is initiated only when the encounter happens at a physical distance sufficiently removed from the work so that the relationship between the viewer and the exhibition venue can be fully fleshed out. When seen in spacious venues like the Artsonje Center, where *Amaryllis* was shown in 1998, with exceedingly high ceilings or without the distraction of adjacent objects, the work begins to look like a “lonely amputee” or as “helpless.” Such effects can then lead into a metaphorical reading of the work as a combination of refugee parts set adrift in the realm of the imaginary, never to find its way back to a coherent whole.

As this brief examination of the works of Mori and Lee denotes, a given signification relies on the refusal of equally persuasive interpretative approaches in the process of interpretation. Such obfuscation is frequently attractive to viewers wanting the work to confirm or promote their preconceptions, but its exercise, to recall Barthes, disallows the total existence of the work. What is needed in this predicament is for the viewer to actively consider the fundamental task of looking as a spatiotemporal enterprise. The work is seen according to the spatial relationships jointly and severally discerned by the eye and the body, thus necessitating a deliberate introduction of a lag between the moment of the viewer’s initial encounter with the work and the moment at which he or she begins to speculate on its signification. The element of viewer responsibility is accordingly restored in the form of visual accountability whereby the viewer engages with multiple interpretative approaches and anchors them through a consideration of the work as a formal construction. Under this system, viewers cannot arbitrarily assign particular significations but must test them against the varied, and variable relationships between formal components. In other words, can the argument in favor of a certain signification be as convincingly made on visual grounds without having to primarily defer to phenomena external to the work’s formal construction? Can viewers release their desire to see the work only as mimetic glimpses of the world they inhabit? If so—if acts of interpretation are stabilized by a mandatory charge to reexamine proposed significations according to those independently generated by the work’s formal construction—I contend that such investigations with their inevitable revelation of signification’s contingent
nature, offer the most productive opportunity of troubling heuristics like New Utopia in constructive, rather than exclusively deconstructive, ways.

Notes

Excluding cases in which common usage or the bibliographic reference indicates the given name before the surname (e.g., Mariko Mori, Toshiya Ueno), all Japanese and Korean names have been enumerated by surname first, followed by the given name.

1 The exhibition traveled to different venues (including the Wiener Secession in Vienna, Austria; the Musée d’Art Contemporain Bordeaux in France; P.S. 1 in New York; the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark; the Hayward Gallery in London; and the Chulalongkorn University Art Gallery, as well as commercial and nonprofit spaces in Bangkok) between 1997 and 2000. It included well over one hundred artists and architects, mostly Asian in national and ethnic origin.


4 The comment by Ueno is from his interview with the economist Iwai Kasuhito, “Intaanetto shihonshugi to kahei” (“Internet Capitalism and Money”), InterCommunication 13 (Summer 1995), n.p.

5 Lee Young Chul, “Jubyeonbu munhwa wa hanguk hyeondaes misuleui aidentiti” (“The Periphery Culture and the Identity of Contemporary Korean Art”), in Sanghwang guw insik (Situation and Knowledge) (Seoul: Sigak Gwa Eoneo, 1993), 12. This text was originally written for an exhibition that Lee cocurated with Jane Farver, Hye Jung Park, and Christine Chang titled “Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art,” held at the Queens Museum in New York and the conglomerate-sponsored Kumho Museum in 1993 and 1994. An English translation of the text can be found in the exhibition catalog Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1993), 10–17. I have relied on my own translation here because the English text is a summary and offers a considerably different, and occasionally inaccurate, meaning from the original Korean. The quality of translation and the growing need for more interpreters and translators with both a strong grasp of linguistic nuance and art historical/critical writing is a key, if underemphasized, problem in the study of contemporary art in Asia.

8 Kim Youngna implies that the term dongyanghwa (Eastern-style painting), which made its debut in the series of colonial state-sponsored exhibitions known as the Joseon misul jeollamhoe (Chosun Art Exhibition, abbreviated as Seonjeon) in the 1920s, was part of a collective response by traditional ink-brush painters rethinking their identities in relation to the proliferation and strong visibility of Western-style painters. Kim Youngna, Haebang ijeoneui hanguk geundae misul gaegwan (A Survey of Modern Korean Art before Independence), 20 segieui hanguk misul misul gaegwan (Twentieth-Century Korean Art) (Seoul: Yaegyeong, 1998), 31.
10 Born and raised in Tokyo, Mori moved to London to attend the Byam Shaw School of Art and the Chelsea College of Art and later relocated to New York in 1992 in order to take up a fellowship in the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her exhibition schedule requires extensive international travel, as is the case with Lee Bul, who graduated from the department of sculpture at Hongik University in 1987. Lee continues to live and work in Seoul.
15 Interview with the author, July 24, 1997. At the time of this interview, Lee had begun production for her monster and cyborg installations. Another interview of the artist by Hans Ulrich Obrist took note of the idea that the monsters and cyborgs demonstrated an extension of earlier investigations into femininity: “Cyborgs and Silicone,” in Lee Bul (Seoul: Artsonje Center, 1998), n.p. The second comment is quoted in James Lee, “Parody Parable Politics,” in Bul Lee (Seoul: Ahn Graphics, 1997), 88.
16 Kostapure (or cosplay) is now something of a mainstream trend, with retail chains like Cospa selling costumes. Some trace its origins to the 1970s, when comic book vendors dressed as the characters they were trying to promote.


Dominic Molon, “Countdown to Ecstasy,” in *Mariko Mori*, 5. Molon, the curator of the exhibition during its Chicago installation, mentions *Lolita* in casual passing, but his use has an unconsciously ironic resonance vis-à-vis his opening statement comparing Mori’s work to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, also the director of the 1961 film version of *Lolita*.

Mori is a niece of the billionaire financier and real estate developer Mori Minoru, whose vast Roppongi Hills development in Tokyo houses the Mori Art Museum.

An edition of ninety-nine dolls signed by the artist was offered in conjunction with an issue of *Parkett* that featured a series of essays on Mori. These dolls originally sold for US$490 each but were later assessed at US$3,000–4,000 by Sotheby’s in the catalog of a November 2003 auction of contemporary art (www.sothebys.com, accessed October 15, 2003).
29 Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Limits of Discursive Sex (New York: Routledge, 1993), 53. Butler discusses this role of the receptacle as the collapse of the feminine into a set of figural functions.
33 Among a number of artists’ groups that were active in the mid-1960s, the group Sinjeondon-gin (Jeong Chanseung, Gang Gukjin, Jeong Gangja, Im Seonhi, and Gim Inhwan) staged Munhwaineui jangraesik (Death of a Cultured Being) in 1969, one of the first performance pieces in Korea to directly take place on the street. Former performance artist-turned-critic Yun Jinsup provides a helpful account of experimental art of this time in “70nyeondae hanguk silheom misuleui jeongaewa geu yangsang” (“The Development and Phase of Korean Experimental Art in the 1970s”), Gyegan misul pyeongdan (Summer 1991): 16–33.
34 Some of these binaries would include generational tensions. These include the antagonistic relationship between artists active in the Minjung art (literally, people’s art; more figuratively, art loosely defined as a mode of visual expression intended to give voice to the politically and socioeconomically disenfranchised) movement and those aligned with progovernment institutions in the 1980s as well as the tension in the 1990s between the so-called sinsedae (new generation) artists and the older establishment artists, including artists formerly associated with the Minjung movement. For a more detailed exposition on the former, see Sung Wan-kyung, Minjung misul modeonijeum sigakmunhwa (Minjung Art, Modernism, and Visual Culture) (Seoul: Yulhwadang, 1999).
36 Ibid., 107.
37 “Cyborgs and Silicone,” n.p.