

Lee Bul

Majestic Splendor

ARTISTS



NOTE ON LEE BUL AT 'SSACK'

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Lee Bul's feature in this issue of *Afterall* offers an occasion to reflect on the relationships between the development of her artistic language with the shaping of exhibitionary and curatorial trajectories in South Korea. As part of 'Ssack' [*Sprout*] (1995), the inaugural exhibition of the Art Sonje Center in Seoul which opened in 1998, Lee Bul presented several works – a doll, *Alibi*, as well as the seminal *Majestic Splendor*. 'Ssack' was highly significant in the definition of contemporaneity in South Korea. The exhibition was not only an exploration of what the contemporary was through the artists it included, but it was also through the articulation of a type of space and institution best suited for their practices that it was pivotal. In her catalogue introduction, Sunjung Kim, the exhibition's curator, discusses the complex historical and cultural dynamics as well as the profound societal changes to which the artists in 'Ssack' and Art Sonje Center as an institution attempted to respond to. As noted by Kim, 'After the Liberation, Koreans tried to retrieve their traditional culture, which had been suppressed during the Japanese colonial period. But they were drawn into the flood of Western, especially American, culture particularly after the Korean War, resulting in a mixture of traditional Korean culture and elements of Japanese and American cultures.'¹ And so, that *Majestic Splendor* was staged in a *hanok*, a traditional Korean house overbuilt with a Japanese-style interior and a later Western-style extension next to Art Sonje Center's modern facilities can be seen as a material manifestation of this postcolonial hybridity and erasure.

Within this context, the idea behind 'Ssack' was to showcase various forms of engagement with traditions reshaped by colonisation and Westernisation and how artists individually negotiated the impact of this twofold force through their practice. As Kim further noted, 'The exhibition Ssak was planned in order to show the characteristics of these artists of the new generation and for these young artists to be able to illuminate themselves through it. The main concept of this exhibition is that inviting them into an inhabited place instead of the usual fluorescent and square space, artists choose a proper place to display their works, and they work on the basis of using new technologies and free imaginations about their chosen place, which will soon disappear.'² *Majestic Splendor* consisted of 'fish garnished with beads and spangles' which reference the 'childhood memories of the beaded bags that Lee's mother made at home'.³ Parodying the ornamental excess conventionally projected onto the 'feminine' body, as the days advanced, the sensory register shifted. The fish began to rot, releasing a stench in the room. When *Majestic Splendor* travelled beyond Korea – MoMA in New York in 1997, where it was withdrawn before opening due to the overwhelming smell, and later to the Lyon Biennale where it remained on view in its intended form – its reception hinged on this interplay between surface and decay. But the 'Ssack' presentation reveals how inseparable the work's formal and sensory provocations were from its initial context of presentation which was inherently bound to questioning Korea's postcolonial condition and contemporaneity.



- 1 Sunjung Kim, *Ssak* [*Sprout*] (exh. cat.), Seoul: Art Sonje Center, 1995. The artists included in 'Ssack' were: Ahn Kyuchul, Choi Jeong-Hwa, Dongi Lee, Hein-kuhn Oh, Keumhwa Choi, Lee Bul, Nak Beom Kho, Soyoung Park, Suknam Yun, Sung Min Hong, Sunghun Kong, Sunmyong Choi, Wooil Kim, Yiso Bahc (Mo Bahc), Yook Keun-Byung, Youngsook Park, Yousun Kim.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*

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