

Lóránd Hegyi **Comments on contextualization in the painting of Lee Ufan**

Within the painterly discourse spanning the past fifty years, i.e. since Informel, Lee Ufan has taken a stance that seems to be focused a lot more on essential, primary, basic, elementary, constitutive components of painting perceived as stabile, timeless, as well as objective and untouchable, rather than on articulating the contextualization of painterly practice in mental and socio-cultural structures. This assessment is also accentuated by his rigorous, consistent, and reductive methodology. With his austere, purist, and disciplined style he refrains from exercising a multitude of design options and from applying spectacular, sensually alluring techniques that draw the viewer's attention to the physical and material execution of the visual and plastic surface. Purism and reductivism spawn formal rigor, resulting in what appears to be monotony and an utter concentration on essential elements.

From a traditionally modernistic and formalistic vantage point, this aesthetic attitude could be interpreted as a deliberate decision to dispense with any anecdotal, narrative, symbolic, and personalized referentiality - decision which leads to the isolation of the artwork and its auto-referential basic structure. Placed in this context, the artwork is just what we currently see, and it makes us focus all of our attention on itself, redirecting our thoughts with utmost intensity. The artwork constitutes the sole and exclusive mode of legitimizing its existence. This precludes any allegorical, exemplary, psychological, or anecdotal interpretation. The artwork is not designed to suggest similarity or highlight parallels between it and other aspects such as history, nature, personal experiences, subjective emotions, memories, or empathy. On the contrary - it stands for something autonomous, incomparable, distinctly independent, self-sufficient, sovereign, self-sustaining, and self-explanatory. Paradoxically, Clement Greenberg replaced this dramatically enhanced autonomy and independence by the ethical category of "freedom", radically reconfiguring it. Hence, it relinquished its original, purely aesthetic, and phenomenological entity absolutized by Greenberg himself.

This contradiction is emblematic of Lee Ufan's position. He claims that the artwork should never be separated from the complex mental, socio-cultural, and anthropological context characterized by cultural tradition, ideology, conventional forms of communication, and metaphorical sign structures. The artwork lives and thrives within this thick layering of conventional, learned, appropriated, and symbolic forms and signs internalized during long processes; these forms and signs are the carriers of our anthropological contextualization and orientation. Hence, the individual artwork is no allegory, no imitation of something external; much rather, it lives within the confines of externality, it being clearly understood that the internal structure of the visual and plastic phenomenon derives its meaning from the anthropological context of our existence.

From this viewpoint, the artwork's apparent autonomy is not to be construed as an allegory of freedom, but as an appearance of natural language that evolves and functions in a dense anthropological, mental, and socio-cultural context. Therefore, there is no rigid, impermeable, impenetrable border between the autonomous artwork and external realities. The latter emerge in the specific visual and plastic entity of the artwork since it is part of the anthropological complexity of our existence.

Slowness rather than speed, utter silence rather than noise, reductivism and scarcity rather than a hedonistic accumulation of diverse effects and techniques, a seemingly monotonous repetition rather than a seemingly bold change of methodology, respect for spatiality and its borders rather than a violation of space and disregard for its limits, modest self-control rather than a subjectivist escalation of the ego - all these are pretty rare qualities in today's artistic practice.

Lee Ufan's art and his meditations and reflections on the essence and potential of art teach us a new viewpoint, another model of thought, a lifestyle different from the modern Western interpretation of art. Nevertheless, his artistic and theoretic work, his writings and paintings, his sculptures and installations are entirely embedded in the patterns of Western art. His style is imbued with Western elements, his differentiated, varied, and well-balanced articulation readily lends itself to being deciphered in a Western

context, his formal and structural design principles evolve in a prolific and dialectic interaction between Orient and Occident. His practice feeds primarily on experiences with Informel and gestural abstraction prevailing in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as on the reductivist strategies of Minimalism and analytical painting. But his fundamental aesthetic attitude, the place in which he observes the complexity of existence and sounds out the potential of precise identification, i.e. the mental point of departure from which he designs his universe, is found in the Orient.

Today Lee Ufan seems to be a teacher incarnate, a great and wise old man whose physical presence is almost unfathomable and almost goes unnoticed, whose body is hidden behind his work, whose material presence is elusive, who talks haltingly and in a low voice - so low that his listeners do not hear a human voice anymore, not the voice of a specific person, but something impersonal, objective, and sublime.

The Western model of gestural articulation almost exclusively concerned speed, unquestioned immediacy, and the unrestricted, direct, and virtually automatic response to existential experiences and positions. Lee Ufan's paintings and sculptures, however, reveal their nature in another manner. Gestures are not created by immediacy and spontaneous, emotional reactions, but by a firm and fundamental ideological conviction rooted in convention and meditation. This conviction refers to the basic design of the universe as well as to its intelligible perception or representation. It is only on this stable basis of the existential perception of being and the representation of elementarity, or, in other words, the immutable, that he opts for the monotonous repetition of similar formations. Thanks to their nuances and small but significant differences as regards space and materiality, the imaginary temporal sequence and motion, they acquire universal validity. This claim - capturing and explaining universal validities in an anthropological context - invests Lee Ufan's art with concealed and latent ardor. And yet he never displays this ardor directly and with spectacular theatricality but with modest purism and self-effacing tranquility. Lee Ufan is an artist, theorist, poet, and teacher whose work revolves around the notion of vocation. His discourse on the various interpretations and Strands of art, on different approaches to art within the Eastern and Western world promotes a dialog with like-minded interlocutors. His Western partners are Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Pierre Soulages, Antoni Tapies, Günther Uecker, Niele Toroni, and especially Roman Opalka. Lee Ufan's place is neither the Orient nor the Occident, but the process of comprehending and recognizing the specific entities of an artistic practice that does not define art in isolation but embedded in the anthropological context of our complex existence.

In: Cat. Lee Ufan, Painting, Sculptures, 52nd International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, Palazzo Palumbo Fossati, Venice, Fondazione Mudima, Milan 2007