

LEE UFAN On Infinity

I like art that evokes a sense of infinity. There is something that goes far beyond the artist in the landscape paintings of the Tang and Sung dynasties, bursting out of a powerful, resonant space where painted and unpainted parts interact, and ancient Roman murals in which the small remnants of painted images jostle against the broad expanse of plaster which takes up the space around them. Buddhist images carved into natural stone in the mountains, weathered by many years of wind and rain, and the Belvedere Torso, whose missing arms and legs interpenetrate with the surrounding space, are works of art that derive their legitimacy from a relationship with the outside world and they exude an atmosphere of inexhaustible infinity.

When a certain critic uses the example of Claude Monet in a discussion of Lucio Fontana, lie inevitably refers to infinity. Although the paintings of Monet and Fontana have a firm base in self-awareness, they dramatically introduce immeasurable elements from the outside world and are permeated by awareness of it. Both Monet and Fontana present a world in motion, Monet using color to suggest the infinity of time that changes with every passing moment while Fontana cuts slits in the canvas to suggest the infinity of space. They brilliantly give visual form to the existence of the outside world and relationships that are formed with it.

Works of art can speak, but they are not language as such. As long as works of art have a relationship to the outside world, they are necessarily separated from language. According to modern linguistic theory, words are basically representative signs that express and represent the self. I sometimes start from the self/ language, but I always want to maintain a relationship with the uncertain, unknown world beyond it. I do not want to put the world into words or possess it with my ego but to enter into a relationship with the world that allows me to perceive it.

Therefore, although my works are mine they do not depend only on me. The work is not identical with me. That is because the outside world enters deeply into my work. Briefly stated, my approach to art is an expression of curiosity and an exploration of infinity. Infinity begins with the self but is only manifested fully when connected with something beyond the self. I do not want to fix or represent the self as self, but to recognize the existence of the self in relationship with otherness and perceive the world in a place where such a relationship exists.

In the series of paintings 'From Point and From Line' that I made in the seventies, I attempted to express infinity as a concept of repetition with unlimited variations. Emphasis was given to repetition and variation rather than relationships with otherness. In the eighties, as the range of the variations expanded, emptiness emerged on the pictorial surface. I paid attention to place as a territory where painting comes into being and evoked a sense of infinity through corresponding relationships with point and line.

In sculpture, I began by setting up conflicts between dissimilar materials such as stone and glass, encouraging an encounter with otherness by presenting the effects of forces beyond my own will. Action and eventfulness were important elements in these works. Eventually, I juxtaposed steel plates, neutral industrial materials, with natural stones, objects that contain many ambiguous elements, in a flexible temporary arrangement, presenting art as a situation created by bringing

certain things together. A confrontational relationship was emphasized and responsiveness to the outside world was enhanced.

My paintings resemble those of Daniel Buren and Richard Trelawney in their imagery and, sometimes, the use of repetition. My sculpture, in its themes and materials, resembles that of Richard Serra and Richard Long. However, there are decisive differences between my work and that of these other artists. Their work is characterized by abstraction or generalization of the pattern or details of the painting or the steel or stone, acting to represent the logos of the artist. The canvas or material they use is familiar. It does not have a recognizable individual character, and it does not reveal a shift toward otherness. The work, whether painting or material object, does not accept things outside itself, does not have a close relationship with space, and does not incorporate the atmosphere of the outside world. Their work is enveloped in a concept of "infinity" derived from the self or ego.

My works are thoroughly individualized and specialized, unfinished and ambiguous, because they create a relationship between inner and outer worlds. This may strike the viewer as strange or, in some cases, irritating. My paintings seem to be comparatively easy to understand, even if there are parts that are left unpainted or empty, perhaps because I use canvas, the standard format of painting. However, my use of natural stone without any embellishment seems to cause perplexity in people whose thinking is centered on the human ego. In the world of thought, theories that emphasize non-self and otherness are gaining influence, but it is still difficult for people to recognize the existence of things outside the self, especially the world outside human beings. A young French philosopher said to me, "In your sculpture, stone is speaking for itself without listening to you, so it bewilders the viewer." The stone I bring into my work does not represent me. It is not intended to speak my words. It is an uncertain entity that communicates with the outside world while accepting its limitations. I make art in order to see how I can relate to an undefined and unfamiliar unknown.

In Western society, there are many situations in which mutual recognition between self and other takes place in human relationships. In East Asia, on the other hand, there is a tendency to emphasize a territory of otherness in relationships with natural things like animals, plants, stone, and earth. My works show a preference for the mediation of a relationship with uncertain, inorganic things rather than directly bringing out human self-consciousness, and this is probably due to the environment in which I was raised.

My historical awareness and view of the world lead me to see the self in connection with a larger outside world, which includes human beings. The world transcends me and is non-transparent. In my approach, as I face this non-transparent other, the self continually loses its purity and is filtered and then reborn as the other. It shows that art is a kind of overcoming, a leap from one condition to another. Therefore, a work of art must be the site of such a leap, a place where there is interactive mediation between self and other. Unlike modernist art, my work is not a closed, self-contained object that reproduces the self. It is arranged as an open place by means of a relationship between self and other.

In my work expression is not privileged as expression or representation of the self but is neutralized as a relationship with the other to form a non-objective place. My recent paintings bring out responsive relationships with minimal touches and strokes, operating in an undefined

peripheral zone to become a place that evokes a sense of infinity. In my sculpture as well, the emphasis has shifted gradually from the relationship between one thing and another to the relationship between a thing and the surrounding space, and I am presently concerned with the connection between expression and the outside world. In my painting, the empty margins and the wall mediate each other, and in my sculpture, things in the exhibition space respond to things in the real world.

Ultimately, a work of art is neither reality as such nor a bundle of concepts. Because of the fundamentally intermediate character of my art, it neither approaches close to reality nor takes a conceptual direction.

My art is both simple and complex. I strictly limit myself in the sense of keeping the choice of materials, the structure, and acts of making to a minimum. However, the works are complex and difficult because I use irregular materials just as they are and accept the conditions of the space that surrounds them. In short, by limiting myself as much as possible, I try to become involved with the world as much as possible.

My kind of minimalism is a method that requires the space around the work to be energized more than the work itself. The work is not a text made up of signs. I want it to be an energetic living body possessing variability and contradictions. The situation of one brushstroke, one stone, or one steel plate must become a living organism brimming with energy in its relationship with otherness. The inherent strength of the materials used is more important than my actions, and they must function as parties to a relationship, an interaction between the materials themselves and between the materials and the surrounding space. This can only be achieved through the same sort of strict discipline that an athlete uses to hone his skills and a careful use of logic in arranging the materials.

I am responsible for producing the energy of the interaction, but I depend on the power of empty space to evoke a sense of infinity in the work. Thus the work is given vitality through reality and ideas and it influences the reality and the ideas at the same time.

I want my works to be non-transparent entities containing the unknown for me and for others.

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