The Thin Line between Reality and Illusion

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Ye Seung Lee’s *CAVE into the cave* is a major installation piece that reflects on the themes the artist has been concerned with over the past few years. The scale of this installation is large even according to the artist’s own standards. A round, Coliseum-shaped screen is placed in the middle of the residency studio, and the audience follows a path to view the art piece. Lee’s *oeuvre* has been set up so the audience can view the work of art from all angles, wherever they are standing. The sound of dripping water and shadow and light on the screen guide them through the exhibition; The moment the spectators are surprised, they realize that the shadow on the white screen is their own “shadow play.” At this point, the short journey that began with a viewer’s curiosity about the mysterious shadow comes to an end. It is an unfamiliar and “uncanny” experience.

The round screen in Ye Seung Lee’s installation is a stage setting of sorts. The mimesis on the stage presents reality as a play. Reminiscent of Aristotle’s theatre, in which the audience is one with the protagonist, light and dark is a recurrent theme in her portfolio. As can be seen in the 2012 Media Art Biennale’s outdoor screen project at Seoul Square, shadow play has always been an important formal element in Lee’s work. Shadow play is a mechanism that draws upon memories from the past, sometimes as far back as childhood, and offers a moment of tranquility in a bustling big city.

But Lee does not allow her audience to dream away into the past. Objects are placed so that the audience questions the reality of what they see. Lee, by overlapping reality with illusion, urges the audience to stay alert and to shift viewpoints. The artist does not in any way force
this intervention, but allows it to occur indirectly and *inconspicuously* through an image projected on screen. The intervention is so subtle that it unravels like a mind game on and off the screen.

What is inside the round screen? It is filled with interactive machines that react to sound. Other than the cold, hard metal of the equipment, we find around the perimeter of the exhibit common objects such as a vase, a glass bottle, a Coca-Cola bottle, plastic bags, vibration sensors, an intravenous drip holder, an infusion set, sterilized gauze, tweezers, sterilized instruments, and a stethoscope scattered about. The scene looks cluttered, but each item has been meticulously placed by the artist in consideration of how its shadow will appear on the screen. She has precisely placed each while looking at the object’s shadow. What is real or illusionary becomes clear when looking at the screen while sitting on the stool. It is clear that the sizes have been distorted with a projector. Some are duplicated via the usage of a mirror and the screen. Like an image in a kaleidoscope, all the images projected on the screen are manipulated and controlled by various machines, all of which results in the distortion of reality. Then, the shadows appear and disappear in accordance with the computer programming, and actual objects that are placed behind the screen create a tension between reality and illusion. It becomes impossible to tell what is real and what is computer-generated.

What is reality and what is not? Does it even matter?

The round screen is a grotto inspired by Plato’s *The Allegory of the Cave*, or *Plato’s cave*. The allegory is about a prisoner, chained to the wall of a cave. His only contact with the outside world, or reality, is whatever shadow is projected on the wall before him. Today, the
cave or grotto represents the digital world, the computer-controlled world, implying that everything we see belongs to the world of shadows.

Lee’s piece at the 2013 Nanji Open Studio is in part an extension of *Reconstructed*, which was an installation at the 2011 Taehwagang International Installation Art Festival. The latter was an assemblage that was built with discarded furniture and containers acquired from the city of Ulsan. She built a giant square box covered with aluminum foil that glistened under the sun as it reflected the city. Contrary to the flashy and glamorous exterior, the interior was shabby and dark. The contrast of the two created a juxtaposition of reality and illusion. In 2011, once more Lee experimented with reflective objects to create images that blur the line between reality and illusion. Surely the historic background of Nanji and its ties with Korea’s modernization must have served as inspiration for her recent artwork.

Lee’s media art and installations have always featured silhouettes, lines, and shadows (or shade). This is no surprise considering that she majored in ink wash painting in college. She creates shadows that vary in tone much as ink wash painting. The perspective is not panoramic as it is in Western painting, but rather the bird’s eye view. The silhouette on the screen continues to change depending on where the viewer is standing; in other words, the experience is relative. The viewer is not omnipotent; viewer and scene become sender and recipient. The viewer’s perspective changes with every step. The audience does not gaze into temporality and space. Experience of the situation is altered by perspective and sound. Because a circle represents the time cycle, past, present, and future are not one parallel line in Lee’s universe; *time is fragmented, partial, and punctured.*
We must remember that Ye Seung Lee evokes a mechanism to intervene with the audience, thus preventing them from becoming completely immersed in the work. Berthold Brecht introduced the concept of V-effect or Verizfreundung (distancing: alienation) in realism theatre at the end of the 1920s as an alternative to the classic theatre of Aristotle, whose traditional theatre invited the audience to completely empathize with the happenings on stage and with the actors, making the viewer oblivious to reality.

Classic theatre has the audience emotionally invested in the play, and this has been the focal point of traditional theatre. Brecht believed that it was dangerous to put the audience into a passive position where they immersed themselves into the events on stage. Brecht wanted his audience to distance themselves from the characters and events that take place on stage. They were to feel a sense of the unfamiliar, so they could be critical about what was happening. Brecht’s distancing effect is about removing what is clear, customary, and understandable to the audience (i.e., a character or action), to induce curiosity and surprise. Lee has made the immersion and distancing effect a two-way interaction. The artist chooses to expose the mechanics and objects instead of hiding them behind the curtain. This approach blurs the line between reality and illusion, and invites the audience to rely on their own senses. CAVE does not reflect on reality. Rather it is reality itself.