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2014

Mystery in the Active-Passive Voice: Notes on Lee Fi's *The Inside of the Angel*

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The artistic practice of Lee Fi is a way of existence to seek answers to one huge question. After encountering the traumatic big bang—birth, an organism gains life in the vessel of a human form and attains a body whereby the new life form conceives the world through bodily experiences that are holistic yet specific. Lee explores these tremendous but mundane events. In other words, the artist explores how to understand life with all of her senses. Instead of reflecting on preexisting language or frame of thought, Lee focuses on the root of the 'self-existence-life,' which is directly in contact with the world, as a primal experience. Perhaps, this is a recurring question that began from Lee's first solo exhibition, *A Person Searching for Eyes, a Nose and a Mouth*. However, Lee's recent works in her 10th solo exhibition, *The Inside of the Angel*, seem to approach the core of her ongoing extensive questioning with more clarity and deftness.

The Inside of the Angel is deeply related to Lee's last solo exhibition in 2014, *The Whole World on My Face*. Lee's most well-known pieces, *The Whole World on My Face* (2013) and *The Whole World on My Body* (2015), are about the senses on the surface of the flesh (skin) expressed in pink. However, in *I've Just Opened My Woman Storage* (2016), a creature with multiple limbs, which often appear in Lee's works, opens up the other side of the skin—inside the body, which is expressed in blackish red as if it is divided in half and about to bleed. The circular structure of the work, in which the whole and the parts surround each other, becomes more interesting through the contrast of inside and outside. Like a preview, the two major paintings in current exhibition, *Oxygen* (2015) and *Nitrogen* (2015), were used for the front and back covers of *The Whole World on My Face* exhibition catalogue. However, the previous versions were not paintings but instead 17 x 26 cm black and white drawings from 2013. Lee's drawings and

paintings are the same and different simultaneously, and have inside-outside structures in themselves. Each painting is coupled with a drawing. Rather, we should perhaps say, each drawing generates a painting. Lee's new piece, *The Inside of the Angel* (2016), whose title is identical to the exhibition title, was completed on Feb. 24th, 2016, but its original drawing was made on Jan. 4th, 2014. *Sweet Taste Swimming Pool of Oblivion* (2016) was finished in 2016; however, its drawing was made on Sep. 2nd, 2013. Likewise, Lee's drawings and paintings live singular but binary lives at the same time.

In her artist statement, Lee mentions that she makes drawings as if she were "writing in a diary." Lee makes drawings based on images and impressions from everyday life on a 17 x 26 cm notebook. They are usually created from fleeting impressions and sensations, usually at the beginning or the end of the day. These works are not the result of planning, or intend to express particular thoughts. Rather, her style actively embraces the effect of momentary and improvisational chance. Later on, the artist makes sophisticated and large paintings from selected drawings. What is surprising in this transformation is that the rough sketches of the paintings do not change much from the drawings. Most parts remain the same except some small details. Given that most artists use drawing as a means to record or express their ideas, Lee's uncommon drawing practice might be the core of her work. As for Lee, drawings have meaning as they are drawn from particular moments gathered from the coincidences of the artist's everyday life. A series of moments are accumulated as events, eventually becoming a framework in Lee's art practice. Marking intermediate spaces, do the terms "angel," "gap," and "preposition," written in Lee's notes during the preparation of *The Inside of the Angel*, imply the "fleeting and temporary" truth—the fundamental mystery; sensations toward a life that exists on its own while penetrating things that are defined by the outside and confined within conventional frameworks. Lee mentions in an interview, "I want to create images of what we encounter in our daily lives before they are fixed to certain concepts in our brain." Lee's desire to restore our senses, which are conceptualized through language and prejudice, back to primary experience lies in tight tension and balance throughout her work. Instead of holding an omniscient view of an artist towards the world, Lee allows the world to pass through her and speak on its own. Therefore, Lee compares her works to an altarpiece: "I dedicate my body as the work of an angel—I dissect the moment of the angel." Here, Lee's concept of "I" is not limited to her ego, but rather we could see it as a passageway, where the *Inhale* and *Exhale* of breath travel. Thus, metaphorically speaking, Lee aims to become a camera lens transmitting light, instead of a cameraman taking images.

It is important for Lee how her works relate to each other. In Lee's practice, each work is interconnected, while one work embraces other work(s), some parts can be separated from the whole as individual works. During the process of repetition and selection, complex relationships between her works attain a sort of depth. It is not surprising to see deformed creatures appearing in Lee's work. Even though we cannot thoroughly understand Lee's intention, perhaps for the artist, the form of the monstrous creature is a "mandala" that is represented as the most natural state. Just as neurons connecting the senses are closely related to each other, Lee's work operates as a whole rather than as individual pieces; they are like one organism sharing life.

Rather than creating work out of things already in existence, Lee's art practice is a procedure of suggesting a form of non-existence as non-existence. Her methodology does not take an easy route, because she employs a primordial language, and might take a very long time to be understood by others. Perhaps, the works will merely remain as murmurings until they cross the threshold of the graspable. Some other day I would like to see Lee's work in a huge space, encompassing her whole career from her earlier to more current works and future developments. Then, we might be able to finally grasp the root of her works and the scale of their transformation. In contemporary society where our civilization is threatened by invisible things, I look forward to seeing Lee's journey of transforming the world that progresses from her understanding of it. I think the work will achieve as much strength as it bears the weight of the reality.

2011

The body possessed by media

Joyelle McSweeney

Can a body be possessed by media? It's a trick (and tricky) question, since a medium, in the occult sense, is supposed to be possessed by others. If an entity can be possessed by a medium, or, worse, by media, it is then opened to all kinds of possession, penetration, contents it cannot contain, overcrowding, doubling up, debility and damage. Deformation and eclipses, ellipses, reemergence and reemergence.

The gist of these metaphors calls to mind the libels directed at immigrants by nativists in most parts of the world—that immigrants crowd the space, use up the resources, create waste, destroy property, crowd out the job market, live in crowded living spaces, over-impregnate, make loud music, cook loud food, dress provokingly, wear the wrong skin, crash the state or (in America) crash emergency rooms with their bodily catastrophes. Such licit fantasies reverse the actual power dynamic in which the established population holds final power over the immigrant's body.

But what if we reverse this current of thought, construing the foreign body as the one which is infiltrated, possessed, crowded, crashed with catastrophe?

In this reversed current of thought, rather than the body of the state, the foreigner's body becomes mediumistic and is itself run through, supplicated, saturated with further media, conduit of infection, irritation, correction, image, odor and noise, and worst of all: more bodies.

The Korean artist Fi Jae Lee's work operates in this zone of contamination, inflammation and metastasization. Her work is multimedia, but with none of the technophilic, flow-chartish nicety and expertise that term has begun to imply. There are too many media here, too many, even, for the multimedia environment of the Internet—her website has too many images to get a sense of the whole body of work; so much text crowds the text window that the scrollbars must be constantly manipulated to bring more into view; on my screen the crucial scrollbars are occluded. As for her art work itself, it involves sculpture, painting, installation, monologues, her own body and hair, the performance of rituals. As much as they are brimming over with color, texture, scale, activity and sensation, they are also lousy with text, text which is a bad fit for the artwork, in that it seems to occupy a testy, inflamed adjacency.

Lee's work < Le Massacre de Jesus Egoiste > is a multimedia performance which occurred in France and Chicago; on the Internet it's a heap of photographs attended by a tract which substitutes for an artist's statement, in which she asserts "I am selfish Jesus."

Here we have Jesus as the contaminating medium—as a selfish, parasitic medium. He/she/Jesus/Fi Jae Lee mediates ‘between’ God and people, but he/she/Jesus/Fi Jae Lee also passes into a second medium, “people’s minds” from whence he/she/Jesus/Fi Jae Lee reboots inexhaustibly “forever.” However, this is not the end of the Moebius like hypermediumicity and hyperpossession balling up in the piece:

As the Selfish Jesus, I have realized that the unbreakable and fundamental energy, which established and maintains the world, is our selfish desires. Unfortunately, people hardly ever attain this knowledge because of what I call, “the skin,” which wraps and hides the desire. For those blinded by “the skin,” I do a barbarous orgy whose name is “Le Massacre de Jesus Egoiste.”

Here one medium, Selfish Jesus, already possessed by Fi Jae Lee (or vice versa), does battle with another medium, “the skin”, taking up the medium of “scissors.

As the tract specifies,

To enter the orgy of “the Scissors Woman,” people draw the faces of human beings who they bitterly hate. “The Waitress,” the priestess of the Selfish Jesus attaches the cursed faces on each headless doll scattered around her, and brings the dolls to the scissors. I ruthlessly cut the heads off. The heads fall into the pond of blood. Dangling arteries, I soak the blood to behead more and more heads. Opening their thickest “skin,” all human beings in the ceremony fall into extremely delightful feeling.

The dangling modifier “dangling arteries” suggests the ways bodies have been distressed by this performance—do the arteries dangle from “the heads” or from Selfish Jesus? Meanwhile, the blood somehow becomes a medium for beheading as well as a supersaturatable medium which can become ‘soaked’ with itself.

Audience participation adds more bodies to the ritual; audience bodies become one more medium in the already supersaturated space. But the ritual keeps producing more personae—the Mistress of the Scissors, the Waitress, the Selfish Jesus, the dolls and their heads, the evil skin and the capacious blood. But lest that settle things, the Selfish Jesus also wishes

wish I could squeeze myself into the cracks of everyone’s “skins.” Settling down there, I will boom boom boom beat “the skins” to stimulate their desires. They shall call the Selfish Jesus again to liberate their desires.

It is impossible to be free of the inlooping, parasitical media, what some might call a ‘feedback loop.’ The parasite artist/messiah’s job is to irritate this interrelationship, to prompt a continual production and destruction of media, which then sites the human as the medium through which both the violence and a “delightful feeling” wells.

It’s easier to assess this work through the text than through the text *and* the photographs, the photographs which in their multiplicity depict more and less than we want to see. In the photographs we get a sense of an art that is simultaneously pressing out of and into the space of itself, into and out of the room-sized installations, becoming herniated, cartoonish, bursting and suppurating. Fabric forms and sharp-looking stalactitic “shrines”, photographic doll heads which compress the images of the face weirdly to two dimensions and refuse to produce an organizing third dimension, strange clear liquids that float hair and bend light, a shin-bruising fountain of wine, a woman with her body and face obscured in the garbage-like heaps of her work.

Odor and texture aren’t visible in these sticky photos, yet they aren’t detached from them, either. Instead they are made present in the way the images stutter, replicate and stick to each other, never settling down into a nice 360 degree “installation view.”

Lee arrived at her autoproducting jelly-like mediumicity upon watching a documentary about disability:

After having recovered their lost sensory capacities through an operation, they suffered more acutely from the sudden deluge of light or sound than when they had lived with the disabilities. Our senses both require the ability to sense as well as to edit. I was shuddering under the unfamiliar environment and language much like people with such disabilities. I wanted to materialize the chaotic state in my work.

The “chaotic state” is the body’s shudder, unable to regulate its own mediumicity and absorbed in an at first responsive but then self-generating spasm. Her work doesn’t safely “replicate” or “recreate” this state, but “materialize[s]” it, creating a mediumistic extension or surplus with which her own body is conjoined. As she later remarks on smelling scorched dried squid, upon her return to Seoul: “In a sense, the border of a community can be translated into boundaries of the senses. The reeking odor of grilled squid is the other as well as the abjection of the West.” This is the signature gesture of Fi Jae Lee’s art, this diffused and jelly-like body of work, not to exemplify or illustrate but to reek, to permeate, to particalize and infiltrate the brain of the perceiver through the porous nasal passage, even as the work itself breaks down, becomes disorganized, is destroyed yet malingers.

As Lee’s mother comments, “Your workspace reeks of putrefying smell.”

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