

Lee Lee-Nam. Selection and Use.

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My very first encounter with a work by Lee Lee-Nam — *Korean Eight-Fold Screen*<sup>1</sup> (2007) in the exhibition *Thermocline of Art: New Asian Waves* curated by Wonil Rhee (ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany, June 15–October, 2007 — was a delightful surprise and made an indelible impression on me. A large folding screen with eight vertical wood-framed panels displayed natural motifs familiar from traditional Korean ink wash paintings: landscapes, snow-covered boughs of trees, branches with blossom, ponds with colorful fish, some with Korean characters running from top to bottom which I am unable to read. While contemplating the work I suddenly became aware of slight movements, which first irritated me: snowflakes descending infinitely slowly, the fluttering of butterflies' wings, the silent gliding of fish through water, and the gentle swaying of blossom in the wind. Small colorful birds flew across the screen unhampered by the wooden frames of the folding elements. A closer look revealed an entire natural world in the eternal cycle of creation and decay, which surprised me because it ran counter to all accustomed viewing habits. Paintings and drawings do not move; movement is found in film, video, and animation. At that moment I realized that the “panels” of the folding screen were large flat screen video monitors and that the artist had produced a bewitching combination of very old motifs and the latest technology.

To the question “Is media art the vehicle to make things come true?” Lee Lee-Nam replied, “I used to make sculptural works, and I felt limited to express the purpose of the work, because it's bound to the material, the sculpture. Later, I was acquainted with media art, and it allowed me to overcome the limitations ... It helped me to make it closer to my idea and concept which I had dreamed about.” (Video interview, Korea Artist Project, 2011)

Korean artist Lee Lee-Nam was born in 1969 in Damyang (South Korea). He studied sculpture in Gwangju where he graduated in Fine Arts in 1995. After an intensely creative period in which he learned to work with traditional and new techniques and materials and his enthralling works were exhibited in many solo and group shows which won him international acclaim, Lee Lee-Nam continued his art studies at the Graduate School of Communication and Arts of Yonsei University in Seoul (2011) and at the prestigious College of Fine Arts of Chosun

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<sup>1</sup> 8 monitors, mixed media, 552 × 198 × 9 cm

University in Gwangju. There he gained his doctorate in Fine Arts in 2013. He remains faithful to his city of Gwangju, where he lives and works. The recipient of many awards, Lee Lee-Nam is represented in over fifty important collections.

Although Gwangju in South Korea can be regarded as an exemplary center of the democratic and cultural renewal of Korea,<sup>2</sup> many of the artists who live and work in this city have just as close links to Korean traditions as to the advantages of creatively using new media in the sense of a new departure. When painters and sculptors turn to using new materials and techniques, the consequence is often, but not always and exclusively, that they discover the almost limitless possibilities of expression offered by images for computer and video monitors which becomes their medium of choice. The Korean pioneer Paik Nam June is internationally acclaimed as the founder of video art. And since the early 1970s many Korean artists have followed his lead and have founded a specifically Korean tradition of media art. One of the most creative and original is Lee Lee-Nam.

Just as during the fifteenth-century Joseon dynasty Ahn Gyon created superb landscapes with the ink brushes of his period on paper (for example, *Mongyu dowondo; Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land*), contemporary artists like Lee Lee-Nam produce artworks using the media of our times that reflect today's technology and how we approach life today. In no way does this mean that the traditions and subjects of the old masters have been lost. On the contrary: they are revisited, interpreted anew, and reconfigured using the media of today. Progress in art emerges from readdressing traditions and the breaks with these traditions. And in all ages the then new contemporary technology was used to this end, for instance, printing, photography,<sup>3</sup> electronics, and so on, which expanded the particular generation of artists' creative scope. This applies especially to digital technology, which for decades now has been changing the world.

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<sup>2</sup> The people of the city of Gwangju have vivid memories of the repression of pro-democracy movements, when during the Korean democratization movement, in a popular uprising in Gwangju in May 1980 hundreds of students and civilians were brutally killed. Since those times, especially with regard to culture, the city of Gwangju and its Chosun University have become important centers for democratic cultural change.

<sup>3</sup> When, in 1826, the French scientist Nicéphore Niepce took the very first photograph, he called his invention *héliographie*, writing of the sun. Although he had invented a radically new technology, Niepce was not concerned with experiments on sensory perception or with the cultural importance of his invention, but simply with the discovery of the photochemical action of silver bromide and with the pressing problem of fixing his volatile images. In his book of 1844, *The Pencil of Nature*, one of Niepce's famous followers, the Englishman Henry Fox Talbot, maintained a distinction between the heliographic technique and art when he wrote in the Introductory Remarks that the plates in his book were "wholly executed by the new art of Photogenic Drawing, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil. [...] obtained by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper." In 1839 this new technology was first referred to as photography, light writing. But already by 1859, when French poet Lamartine wrote "we will no longer say it's a profession, it's an art", the enormous potential of photography for culture and sensory perception had been fully recognized. It was as though this new medium of fixed images en masse could extend our senses and thus authenticate our short existence in a rapidly changing world; since then photography has become the focus of the furious modernist desire for images that represent the visual world. With its documentary properties, it seemed to enlarge both time and space and thus conserve and convey the true memory of history. At its origins, photography's mission was to elaborate a new planetary consciousness, serving the memory and truth of the world and its cultures.

With the rapid technological and social transformation of our world in the course of globalization, the very core of theories and practices in the arts is being reassessed, and traditional standards are being called into question.<sup>4</sup> This interrogation from the ground up has become necessary because of the rise of digital tools and transmission media that have fundamentally altered the conditions of production and distribution in the arts.<sup>5</sup> Media artworks created in the last five decades elude any hasty classification according to well-known genre concepts. Apart from the use of new materials in art, which began in the early twentieth century in parallel with advances in artistic techniques, the rise of digital art especially since the 1960s has led to new concepts of artistic authorship and to new ways in which visitors/users engage with artworks and intervene in how they are perceived.<sup>6</sup>

Public space has now been extended outwards from the enclosed rooms of public buildings to encompass outdoor urban areas and, via the media channels of radio and television, also the global information space, where today all information can potentially be in all places at all times. Along with the high expectations fueled by a society increasingly shaped by the cult of the event, the continual evolution of the methods of artistic production confronts museums and collections, curators and conservators, with hitherto unimagined possibilities, coupled with unanticipated curatorial challenges.

Some decades ago the seemingly auspicious term “new media” was associated with far-reaching technological and social visions aimed at both the individualization as well as the globalization of information and communication.<sup>7</sup> It was envisaged that it would be possible for individuals to connect in real time from any location on the globe to any other individual on the planet. The totality of global information would be freely accessible for everyone at any place in the world. Yet alongside the expectation that globally networked communications and understanding

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<sup>4</sup> The self-image of our societies has, for example, been influenced for thousands of years by stable systems for handing down customs and traditions — systems that are geared toward longevity. In his studies of ancient Egyptian culture, the Egyptologist and scholar of religion and culture Jan Assmann has demonstrated convincingly that “the tradition within us, [...] which has solidified over generations, through centuries, even millennia of repeated texts, images and rites, [...] shapes our consciousness of time and history, our image of ourselves and of the world.” Jan Assmann, “Das kulturelle Gedächtnis,” in *Thomas Mann und Ägypten: Mythos und Monotheismus in den Josephsromanen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006), 70. Crucial to this conclusion is the argument that “cultural memory” (a term coined by Assmann) has in all civilizations thus far been oriented toward longevity and reliability, in particular in response to the constant threat of outside influences, wars, deliberate destruction, natural disasters, and natural processes of decay.

<sup>5</sup> In all epochs, and in all societies, cultural developments are closely intertwined with economic, political, and social conditions, which both determine and result from them. Hence, we must include a consideration that goes beyond the accustomed horizons of political, conservatorial, or stylistic evaluations of a collection. It is only against this broader horizon, which questions in very general terms to what extent culture is dependent on economics, that phenomena can be understood which, upon closer inspection, can all too easily be ascribed to the imperfection of individual technologies or the failure of individual institutions.

<sup>6</sup> “He [meaning the interpreter] participates freely in the reinvention of the work.” Umberto Eco, *The Open Artwork* (Frankfurt am Main, 1977), 32; Italian original *Opera Aperta* (Milan, 1962). This statement can be applied to the consumer or user of media art as well.

<sup>7</sup> The term “global village” was coined in 1962 by Marshall McLuhan in his famous book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

would have uniquely positive outcomes, later reduced to and summarized in the marketing buzzword “the information superhighway,” even in the 1960s the potential danger of an inherent totalitarian tendency was recognized and clear-sightedly described.<sup>8</sup>

It goes without saying that Lee Lee-Nam, who once referred to himself “a new media artist”,<sup>9</sup> engages with these changes in our societies. In his personal notes he concludes that “We live in an age of darkness bereft of harmony where everything has become increasingly polarized and divided.” His artistic work, he continues, “aims to find the missing balance and explores the possibility of bridging the gap between mind (i.e., analog) and matter (i.e., digital).”

If one looks at the rich and diverse spectrum of Lee Lee-Nam’s oeuvre, it is immediately apparent that his subjects invariably come from the repertoire of well-known old master paintings, both Asian and European. He chooses works that have featured in the international historiography of art for generations and are held in the world’s most important art museums — paintings and sculptures that have long been a part of our collective cultural memory, not only in Europe, but also in Asia. In this process of the globalization of art, its digitization and fast dissemination via electronic networks plays a decisive role.

In his video works Lee Lee-Nam performs the miracle of setting static painted figures and things in motion through digital image processing. These are not optical illusions, but a complete digital recreation and reanimation in the realm of moving pixels, which gives rise to perplexing simulacra of the original works on high definition video monitors. In a creative act that is almost magical, the artist gives back life and movement to the originals, and in this way brings them once more to our attention. By giving full rein to his imagination and not being afraid of any defamiliarization, Lee Lee-Nam invests these sacred cows of art historiography and popular literature’s uncritically revered art icons with a distinct touch of irony.

How about using the latest digital technology to develop Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503), universally admired for her enigmatic smile? Untold artists have commented on this masterpiece in countless imitations in every kind of material and using every kind of technique. Before the eyes of amazed viewers, in Lee Lee-Nam’s video work a slim La Gioconda puts on so much weight that she threatens to burst the frame, and thus she needs a new title: *Obesity Mona Lisa* (2009, 55 inch LED TV, 129 × 77 × 10 cm). Or what if the subject of Jan Vermeer’s most popular painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (ca. 1665, Mauritshuis Den Haag) had a

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<sup>8</sup> In his important book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (1964, New York: McGraw-Hill) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1994, p. 3.) Marshall McLuhan already recognized the totalitarian character of the upcoming global network: “Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.”

<sup>9</sup> Lev Manovich, *Media Art of Lee Lee-Nam*, 2013, unpublished.?? manuscript?? lecture?? or is it “forthcoming?”

common housefly crawling up her cheek? After all, since Peter Webber's film *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003) the seventeen-year-old housemaid Griet from Delft is a pop icon of unconsummated desire. Lee Lee-Nam's video bears the ironic title *Fly with Pearl Earring* (2012, 55 inch LED TV, 129 × 77 × 10 cm).



Fig. 1. *Obesity Mona Lisa*, 2009 (Video, 55 inch LED TV, 129 x 77 x 10 cm)

Fig. 2. *Fly with Pearl Earring*, 2012 (Video, 55 inch LED TV, 129 x 77 x 10 cm)

Lee Lee-Nam's subtle humor is also in evidence in playfully faked self-portrait of Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Pipe*, which is based on a real self-portrait (Saint-Remy, September 1898) that is today in the Musée d'Orsay, and which depicts the artist, hatless, wearing an unbuttoned coat in front of a swirling blue background. In Lee Lee-Nam's video work van Gogh is shown left-right reversed and holding a pipe. After puffing briefly on the pipe, tobacco smoke drifts upwards, past the artist's forehead and face with its austere expression, where it slowly disperses, and — like the thought bubble floating above his head — reveals van Gogh's source of inspiration for his painting *The Lunch Break: the sleepers* in the eponymous painting by the French painter Jean-François Millet.

In another work by Lee Lee-Nam Van Gogh is visited by a Korean painter colleague who asks him why he cut off his ear. Eventually, the two artists exchange paintings. Van Gogh hangs up the ink drawings in his room, and the Korean artist returns home to his country on horseback carrying Van Gogh's self-portrait. In the same way that many elements in Lee Lee-Nam's works assume a life of their own (fish, butterflies, etc.), and move freely from one discrete monitor to the next, cultural exchanges take place across all borders and epochs. This dissolution of cultural barriers and temporal constraints can be regarded as a leitmotif of Lee Lee-Nam's work.

Animation is clearly not a mystery to Lee Lee-Nam; he analyzes it through the very act of animating, and subsequently presents it to his viewers. To do so he operates with the principle of *electio* (from Latin *election*; English *selection*): the deliberate choice of the most beautiful and best motifs from classical art's repertoire. This strategy has been cultivated throughout art history since antiquity, especially in seventeenth and eighteenth century France, for instance, by Nicolas Poussin. In the traditional view this repertoire, the selection of the most beautiful and best motifs, enhances critical abilities, and should tutor future artistic practice.

There is no question that with his reworking of famous classical masterpieces Lee Lee-Nam does not create copies but new, autonomous works. He uses the originals as select material, which through subtle and sometimes radical defamiliarization seek as simulacra to question our habits of seeing and dealing with art. With the deliberate appropriation, with the ingenious use and disconcerting defamiliarization of his selected objects as well as their expansion, Lee Lee-Nam operates as a typical proponent of post-modernism; in his choice of technology and medium he proves himself to be a prototypical contemporary artist, who understands the present, and who interrogates the changing reception of art in the East and the West. That he includes us, the viewers, in this confusing game of defamiliarizing well-known objects, is part of his artistic concept.

So is it blasphemy or esteem when Lee Lee-Nam appropriates classic artworks of famous artists and expands and defamiliarizes them with his digital games? I would argue in favor of *highest esteem* in the sense of *electio* (selection), which artists throughout the ages have elected to practise, in competition with the originals that is marked by respect, to comment on and question what other masters before them have created. For Lee Lee-Nam it is about appreciation, about updating, and about the contemporary readability of historical works with universally valid themes. In this sense Lee Lee-Nam's works are media art, and not because of their technical characteristics: they analyze the changing reception of painting and sculpture, of art in general in the light of the new media.

Lee Lee-Nam's strategy of using technological media to "leave the flat canvas and pass over into three-dimensional space", and thus transcend the limits set by traditional sculpture, derives from his desire "to give back their light to the pictures, which have lost it by being stored and exhibited for decades, even centuries, in museums" (interview with Lee Lee-Nam). In view of the complexity of his oeuvre, it is inadequate and a reduction to classify Lee Lee-Nam simply as a "media artist." Lee Lee-Nam works with all materials and means of artistic expression — drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, clay, and pixels — and uses the special properties of each to transcend the constraints of purely digital media production as well.

For him, technological media are not an end in themselves, but means and tools which he and the collaborators in his studio use to enter into intense communication with the viewers of his works. Lee Lee-Nam's repeatedly professed goal, "to give back the light to the works," can be taken metaphorically as well as understood as a direct reference to the technology used. For his works do "shed a new light" on the old masterpieces, in both senses of the expression, not only because they make their colors glow with the new light of LEDs on the latest LED screens.

Lee Lee-Nam's engagement with the thematics of light is also signalled by the titles of his most recent works, created in 2014, which even include a video installation titled *The Birth of Light* (7 min 40 sec, 688.4 × 15.3 × 130.5cm). On eight glowing LED screens he presented well-known motifs taken from works by the French Baroque painter Georges de La Tour (1593–1652), in which a simple wax candle is the only source of illumination in his nocturnal religious paintings. In Lee Lee-Nam's digital reenactment La Tour's mysterious figures are frequently depicted left-right reversed in the flickering, animated candle light on the LED monitors. In one scene Lee Lee-Nam adds flashing stars of colorful fireworks. The birth of light stands here for the rebirth of art "in an age of darkness", as do three other works of 2014: *Born again Light*, *Language of Light*, and *Reborn Light*.



Fig. 3. *Born again Light*, 2014 (ink drawing)



Fig. 4. *Born again Light*, 2014 (installation 340 x 90 x 140 cm, fiberglass, motor, LED light)

For the installation *Born again Light* (340 × 90 × 140 cm, fiberglass, motor, LED light) Lee Lee-Nam chose Michelangelo's famous *Pietà* (1498/99) as his source material. This early work by the 23-year-old artist, today in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, was even considered by his contemporaries to be an important work. Like the artworks mentioned above — Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Jan Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and the self-portrait of Van Gogh

— the *Pietà* is one of the most admired works of Western art and also very well known in Asia. The material that Michelangelo used, marble, is digitally transformed by Lee Lee-Nam into a shimmering white Plexiglass sculpture, the surface of which reproduces the purity and smoothness of the original excellently. However, in Lee Lee-Nam’s magnificent reenactment of the sculpture, the dead body of Christ has mysteriously detached itself from the encircling arms of the Mother of God and now floats about six feet above her head. The body, captured in its original lying position is skilfully illuminated by LED spotlights in such a way that it throws very different shadows on the walls. The shadow on the back wall corresponds with the form of the body in Michelangelo’s sculpture; on the left-hand side wall the shadow is of Christ as a child. Thus in *Born again Light* the rebirth of Christ is a metaphor of the rebirth of light “in an age of darkness”.

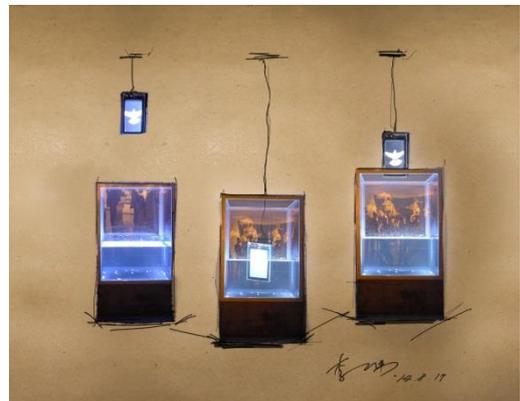


Fig. 6. *Reborn Light*, 2014 (installation, steel, glass, water, video, TV monitor)

Fig. 7. *Reborn Light*, 2014 (ink drawing)



Fig. 8. *Reborn Light*, 2014 (installation, steel, glass, water, video, TV monitor)

In his work *Reborn Light* (2014) (installation, steel, glass, water, video, TV monitor) Lee Lee-Nam also uses the metaphor of the rebirth of light. Viewers stand in front of a right-angled stainless steel structure with a central section made of glass two-thirds full of water. Above the surface of the water hangs a TV monitor on steel cables on which appears the image of a white

dove, filmed in slow motion, slowly beating its wings against a dark background. A mechanism, which is not visible to the viewer but whose electric motor hums loudly, gradually lowers the TV into the water and then raises it again, to the sound of lapping water and illuminated by a blue light. This work also employs extra LED lighting on the underside of the TV. When the monitor is raised the water dripping down produces waves that are mysteriously reflected on the walls of the darkened room.



Fig. 5. *Language of Light*, 2014

(installation, 600 x 220 x 300 cm, fiber-reinforced plastic, video, TV monitor, video projector)

In his large-dimension installation *Language of Light*, 2014, (600 x 220 x 300 cm, fiber-reinforced plastic, video, TV monitor, video projector) Lee Lee-Nam uses the world-famous sculpture of the *Venus de Milo* (ca. 100 BCE) which is in the Louvre in Paris. Multiple copies are made of the torso of the marble original in white Plexiglass and these thirteen figures, together with copies of the lower half of the Venus, are arranged in a tight group. In the exhibition room the figures stand with their faces to the wall, so that viewers can only see them from the back. For Lee Lee-Nam “the Venus sculptures represent mankind bereft of light.” In the darkened room with a black floor the tightly knit group of sculptures serve as a gleaming projection screen. On their backs Chinese characters appear that form the proverb “to fall into one’s own snare”. In the course of the video the characters, which were painted with black ink, dissolve from the bottom upwards as though they had been immersed in water. Then different characters appear on the sculptures’ backs which mean “a light upon every soul.” In the foreground of the installation an older TV set stands at one side, and characters appear on the screen which mean “Who am I?” Here, too, the characters dissolve, leaving the white screen blank. In Lee Lee-Nam’s view, the light of awareness that comes from outside turns people back to the real question: Who are we? It is exactly in this sense — as the source of inspiration for a new awareness — that Lee Lee-Nam wants his work to be understood.