



Lee Bul

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Ontologies of Decorative
Beings and Cyborgs*
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Leather patchworked appendages, spilling beaded body cavities, embroidered adornments on luminous textiles, and sequins decorating decaying flesh – these are a few of the relational-material compositions that have shaped Lee Bul's practice over the past decades. As representations of bodies and body parts, the artist's early body of work is defined by symbolic configurations of the feminine body-politic, laden with critiques of global power structures, as well as those pervasive in South Korea, the androcentric, patriarchal nation-state where she was born. Largely known for performance pieces and sculptural installations, retrospectives foreground her early work as troubling ideals of womanhood centred around wedding ceremony and childbirth.¹ *Abortion* (1989) featured her own naked body suspended from the ceiling of an arts centre bound by rope and a harness, a commentary on the violence of the country's abortion ban.² Another infamous performance, *Sorry for suffering – You think I'm a puppy on a picnic?* (1990), saw the artist wearing soft, stuffed textile sculptures resembling alien, fleshy, extruding limbs. Worn in performance beginning at Gimpo airport, the work documented Lee's journey to Tokyo and continued there. It provoked questions about women's bodies, public spectatorship and the surveillance gaze.

The boundaries between fleshy, unknowable interiors and the closed external body surfaces were further interrogated through the two works – "*Monster: Black*" and "*Monster: Pink*" (2011, reconstruction of 1998 piece), as free-standing sculptures developed themes of the monstrous, alien and the Other through symbolic representations of the female form. Richly informed by feminist readings that examine women's Otherness through the notions of the abject and the grotesque, art historian Jeon Hyesook describes Lee's series as exploring the 'conjunction and separation that occurs on the boundary, the in-between of the human (woman)-monster'.³ Lee's *Cyborg* series (1997-2021) reinterprets the concept of the Other, reimagining representations of women as human-machinic hybrids. Through enlarged, disabled body sculptures initially forged of cast silicone, polyurethane filling and paint pigments, and later from hand-cut polyurethane panels and coatings, Lee offers a meditation on the distortions of feminine ideals. Although not the first to explore this thematic, her cyborg bodies were among the most visible and most explicit manifestations of such thinking around the connections between domestic labour and the machine. She has invoked related questions throughout her work in exploring the material borders, juxtapositions and seams that she has physically sutured together using sewing techniques and textile materials.

Cyber-feminism emerges from the loom. Mapping the history of weaving through its associations with the womb, philosopher Sadie Plant retraces the invention of the computer and of the cybernetic machine as developing from techniques of weaving, most specifically with regards to the Jacquard loom which uses punched cards as a pattern programming instrument, allowing it to replicate textile patterns automatically. It thus offered an early model of automation by way of encoded instructions, influencing

Previous spread:
Sorry for suffering—You think I'm a puppy on a picnic? 1990. Performance still from 12-day performance, Gimpo Airport, Korea; Narita Airport, Meiji Shrine, Harajuku, Otemachi Station, Kojanji Temple, Asakusa, Shibuya, University of Tokyo and Tokiwaza Theater, Tokyo, 1990.
 © Lee Bul. Courtesy of the artist

the development of later information storage and computing systems.⁴ Plant's vivid description of the weaver as 'integrated into the machinery, bound up with its operations, linked limb by limb to the processes'⁵ illuminates a cyborg ontology, shaped through the hybridisation between the weaving human and the loom as machine. The textile materialities then, from the sutured surfaces of the soft sculptures, to the use of silks and velvets – woven fabrics – reveal that the processes of Lee Bul's career have always been encoded through cyborg thinking.

WOMEN AND THE SEWING MACHINE

Lee Bul was born in 1964 under the shadow of dictatorial regimes that shaped South Korean nationalism in the aftermath of the geopolitical partition drawn by US forces at the 38th parallel in 1945. Her mother, a Zainichi Korean, devoted her life to the anti-establishment, leftist movement, alongside Lee's father who was equally engaged in dissident activities.⁶ Their political allegiances alienated the family from normative life under Cold War ideologies, subjecting them to a life under constant surveillance by the state. Under a guilt-by-association mandate, the government restricted employment opportunities for Lee's mother after she was imprisoned for her political activities around 1976. Upon release Lee's mother was employed, mostly, as part of the piece-work garment industries, experiences that left a lasting material imprint on the artist's childhood memories.⁷

During the 1960s and 70s, under American suzerainty, the Republic of Korea (ROK) underwent rapid industrialisation. The garment and textile industries expanded significantly, driven by access to raw materials and intermediate goods supplied from American markets, and the development of credit and consumer culture.⁸ As an industry central to the nation's economic growth plan, the export-centred production was dependent upon low-wage labour and physically intensive working conditions. Women were central to these efforts, as their labour was 'mobilized [...] within the gendered, patriotic narrative that identified them as "industrial warriors"⁹. Meanwhile, their bodies and positions in society remained marginalised, in service to the phallogocentric nation-state built upon legacies of Confucian values which emerged as patrilineal and patriarchal relations. Materiality has always played a central role for Lee. Early on, she sought to subvert the conventions championed by art school education during which abstraction, minimalism, figuration and realism were the hegemonic languages. She offers that her initial experimentations with fabric, foam rubbers, and sequins were circumstantial, selecting what was 'near at hand';¹⁰ these circumstances were undoubtedly shaped by her family's and women's realities of labouring under authoritarian nationalism.

Reading Lee's earlier works through these histories prompts a reconsideration of her textile materialities and compositions, in relation to the connections between women's bodies, labour and nationalist agendas for reconstruction. *Sorry for suffering – You think I'm a puppy on a picnic* saw the artist wearing a full-body soft sculpture, composed of fabric padded with cotton filling. This sculpture was essential to the performance. Including multiple tentacles and hands sewn in different ways, it incorporated colourful reddish-orange dyed patterns on a beige ground, adorned with surface embroideries. Lee wore the costume throughout the twelve-day performance which travelled to Tokyo, performing a

movement from former colony to metropole that referenced the journey of the sewing machine, introduced to Korea via Japan's colonial project. The technology was imported into the peninsula during the Open Port Period (1876–1910) and later used by the Japanese colonial administration as a disciplining and vocational tool to train Korean women to work in the garment industry.¹¹ The role of women during the colonial period through to the ROK's era of rapid industrialisation was defined by such sewing machine labour. The monstrous appendages that decorate the surface of Lee's soft sculpture are not entirely alien, perhaps the human hands allude to the violence to which women were subjected through their invisible labour in the textile industry.

ORNAMENTAL WOMANHOOD

In the spilling bodily borders of *Plexus* (1997–98), the hardening of the surface is made visible in the representation of the leather torso. For Lee, the use of leather, silicone and polyurethane was a conceptualisation of the skin.¹² This sculpture series constructs the bisected upper-body torso of a female form from moulded leather, revealing the internal cavity filled with colourful, beaded wire tentacles, with jewelled, ornamental contours occupying the void. On the surface of the torso – the external shell – luminescent bead trims are sewn down, with more embellishments strung onto wired spirals. These beaded wires resemble floral patterns emerging from the ground, symbolising the woman's body as fertile with decorative ornament.

Anne Anlin Cheng posits Ornamentalism as a theory of yellow womanhood characterised by the 'entanglement between organic corporeality and aesthetic abstraction',¹³ suggesting that the figure of the yellow woman is made up of the entwinement between biological personhood and ornamental surface. In illuminating the history of this racialised and gendered figure, Cheng theorises an alternative ontological existence beyond the natural body of Anglo-European constitution. That is, racialised and gendered existence already excludes the yellow woman from the ontology of personhood as defined by the organic body. Rather than reclaim her agency through this framework, Ornamentalism asks us to attend to alternative modes of being and survival. Read through Cheng, *Plexus* does offer a representation of bodily borders, but instead invokes the amalgam of corporeal flesh and ornament, conceptualised through leather and aesthetic congealment. The skin itself is thickened with dyed glass and plastic material sutured onto the surface as a decorative armour.

RELATIONAL PARTS

For Lee Bul, the figure of the cyborg and her ensuing *Cyborg* series did not reflect the posthuman feminist horizon of Donna Haraway, who imagined a being that could supplant the patriarchal order. Instead, Lee's figures are partially inspired by representations in Japanese anime and manga, imbued with ultraviolent and dystopic tendencies, mythologised conceptions of femininity and techno-triumphalism. Suspended from the ceilings, the exhibitions displaying the *Cyborg* sculptures echo both *Abortion* – in which she tied her own body to the ceiling – as well as the factory assembly-lines of the industrial complex. A shared lineage among these pieces emerges through sustained interrogations of women's bodies, state power, industrialisation and labour. While we may read the *Cyborg* series as an imagining of a dystopian future

shaped by technological assimilation, as I have argued previously, Lee's work already anticipates the amalgamation of machine and body, figured through the sewing machine and the woman.

It is notable, then, that while discourses of techno-Orientalism project twentieth-century anxieties about Asian dominance onto notions of Asia as machine,¹⁵ Cheng argues that the yellow woman already anticipated this marriage of synthetic personhood prior to the imperial age and early encounters with the so-called Eastern Other.¹⁶ Retracing the yellow woman's existence through histories of porcelain and lacquer, Cheng highlights that the history of this figure reveals 'the crisis of the inhuman already inhering in the human',¹⁷ meaning that constitution of the human under Enlightenment philosophies was inherently shaped by the Other. Moreover, these philosophies also produced a gendered dichotomy, locating reason and rationality – coded as masculine – in the mind, and emotion – coded as feminine – in the body. Lee presents us with a figure that is clearly Othered, not only in her mechanistic form, but also through her disabled body, presented through repeated iterations of missing limbs and heads. The *Cyborg's* incomplete body questions, on the one hand, 'the myth of technological perfection',¹⁸ but also foregrounds femininity as constituted through the body – a labouring body.

Made between 2003 and 2004, the *Untitled (Anagram)* series comprises sculptures representing the once-missing limbs of the *Cyborg* pieces. As a linguistic term, an anagram refers to words formed by rearranging the letters of another word, new compositions created from the same constituent parts – suggesting a structure in which fragmentation and reconfiguration still relate to a cohesive whole. This notion resonates with Lee's sculptural patchworks, which are unified yet composed of movable fragments. Lee's *Untitled (Anagram)* series invites us to think about fragmentation and partiality in relation to completeness. The sculptures were made of hand-cut polyurethane panels on aluminium armature, covered in leather, sometimes with embossed and colourful designs and shades, which recall the memories of decorative surface and the garment industry. Etymologically, 'technology' derives from the Proto-Indo-European root *teks-*, meaning 'to weave' or 'to fabricate'.¹⁹ And so, these textile memories/materialities that run throughout Lee's expansive career invite us to reimagine the cyborg not as a futuristic abstraction, but as the contemporary woman under modernisation: the industrial warrior.

1 Jieun Rhee, 'From Goddess to Cyborg: Mariko Mori and Lee Bul', *n.paradoxa*,
vol.14, 2004, p.9.

2 In April 2019, South Korea's Constitutional Court ruled that the country's
abortion ban was unconstitutional and mandated the legislature to revise
the law by the end of 2020. When the National Assembly failed to enact
new legislation by the deadline, abortion was officially decriminalised on 1
January 2021. Human Rights Watch, 'South Korea's Constitutional Right to
Abortion', Human Rights Watch (website), 9 June 2022, available at [https://
www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/09/south-koreas-constitutional-right-abortion](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/09/south-koreas-constitutional-right-abortion)
(last accessed on 18 April 2025).

3 Jeon Hyesook, 'Woman, Body, and Posthumanism: Lee Bul's Cyborgs and
Monsters', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol.23, no.1, 2017, p.33.

4 See Sadie Plant, 'The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics',
Body & Society, vol.1, no.3–4, 1995, pp.45–64.

5 *Ibid.*, p.51.

6 See Sohyun Park, 'Reconsidering Lee Bul: the laugh of the Medusa or the
politics of the metamorphosis into a monster', in *Lee Bul: Beginning*, ed.
Marici Lab Space and Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul: Seoul Museum of Art,
2021, pp.149–65, pp.150–52.

7 For further reading on the textile industries see Seo Young Park, *Stitching the
24-Hour City: Life, Labour, and the Problem of Speed in Seoul*, Ithaca, NY:
Cornell University Press, 2021, p.55.

8 Dennis McNamara, 'Reincorporation and the American state in South Korea:
the textile industry in the 1950s', *Sociological Perspectives*, vol.35, no.2,
1992, pp.330.

9 See Christopher DeWolf, 'Hong Kong's War Ruins, Hidden in Plain Sight', avail-
able at [https://zolimacitymag.com/hong-kongs-war-ruins-hidden-in-plain-
sight/](https://zolimacitymag.com/hong-kongs-war-ruins-hidden-in-plain-sight/) (last accessed on 2 December 2024).

10 Lee Bul in an interview by Kim Seung-duk, *art press*, no.279, May 2002, p. 41.

11 Jaeyoon Yi, 'Textbooks and textiles: fashion in East Asia, 1920–1945',
International Journal of Costume and Fashion, vol.15, no.1, 2015, pp.89.

12 See L. Bul in an interview by Stephanie Rosenthal, 'Lee Bul: "My Life Is Very
Strongly Connected with the Modern"', *The Artro: Platform for Contemporary
Korean Art*, 22 June 2018, available at [https://www.theartro.kr/eng/features/
features_view.asp?idx=1662&b_code=31](https://www.theartro.kr/eng/features/features_view.asp?idx=1662&b_code=31) (last accessed on 3 April 2025).

13 Anne Anlin Cheng, 'Ornamentalism: a feminist theory for the yellow woman',
Critical Inquiry, vol.44, 2018, p.427.

14 Ahn, 'Lee Bul: a postmodern woman-warrior with a double-edged sword', p.24.

15 For further reading see David S. Roh, Betsy Huang and Greta A. Niu,
'Technologizing orientalism: an introduction', in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining
Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang
and Greta A. Niu, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015, pp.1–19.

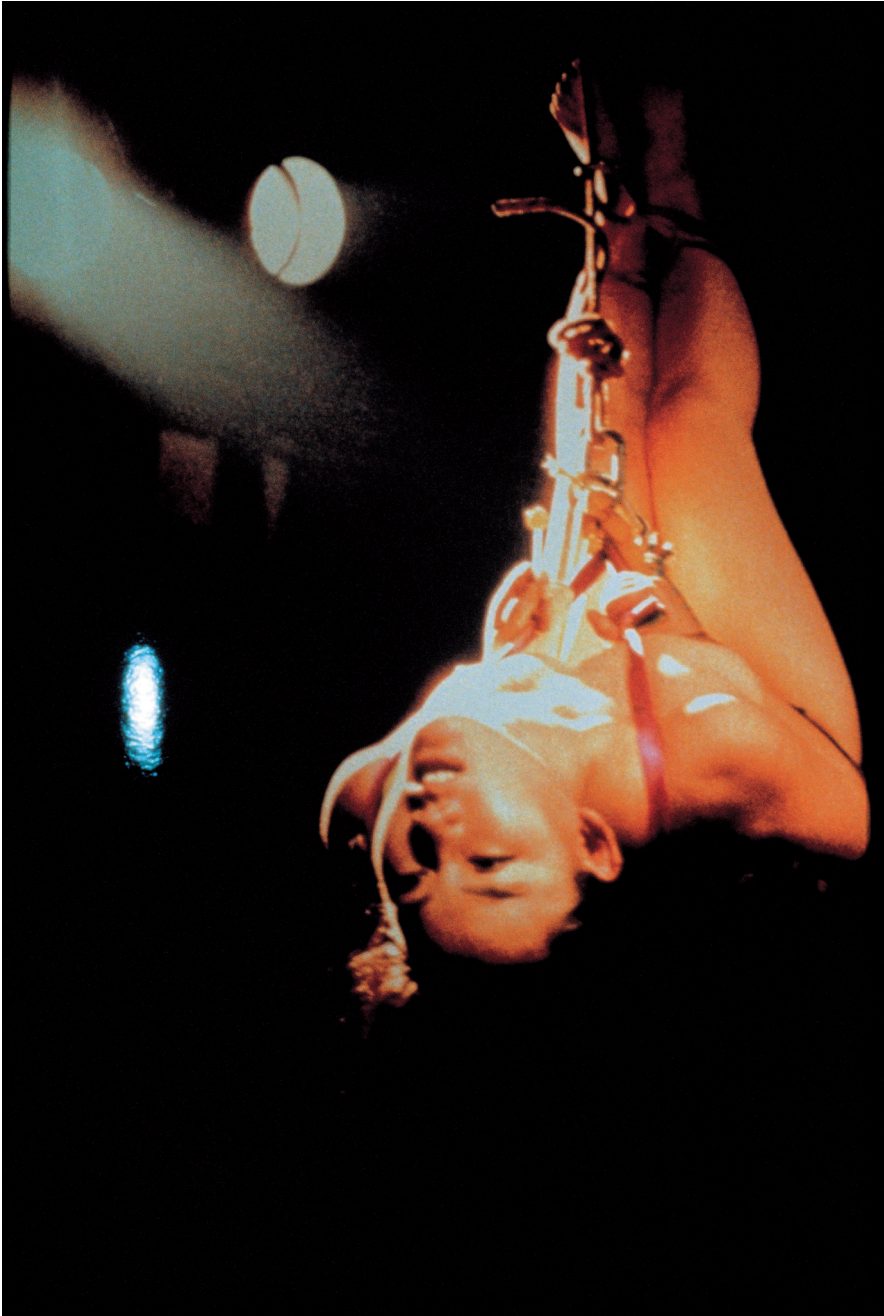
16 A.A. Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p.129.

17 *Ibid.*, p.129.

18 J. Rhee, 'From Goddess to Cyborg', *op. cit.*, p.10.

19 'Technology', *Online Etymology Dictionary* [https://www.etymonline.com/
search?q=technology](https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=technology) (last accessed on 3 April 2025).

Abortion, 1989. Performance
still from the 1st Korea and Japan
Performance Festival, Lobby Theatre,
Dong Soong Art Center, Seoul, 1989





Monster: Black, 2011 (reconstruction of 1998 work) Fabric, fiberfill, stainless-steel frame, sequins, acrylic paint, dried flower, glass beads, aluminum, crystal, metal chain; 217 x 187 x 171 cm. © Lee Bul. Photo: Jeon Byung-cheol. Courtesy of the artist. Collection of Leeum Museum of Art



Monster: Black, 2011 (reconstruction of 1998 work) Fabric, fiberfill, stainless-steel frame, sequins, acrylic paint, 210 x 210 x 180 cm. © Lee Bul. Photo: Jeon Byung-cheol. Courtesy of the artist. Collection of Daegu Art Museum



Plexus, 1997-1998. Leather, velvet, sequins, beads, wires, glass and steel vitrine
170 x 80 x 60 cm. Collection of Leeum Museum of Art. © Lee Bul. Courtesy of the artist. Private Collection



***Cyborg W1-W4*, 1998. Cast silicone, polyurethane filling, paint pigment. Dimensions variable. Studio view of *Cyborg W1-W4* in production, Seoul, 1998. © Lee Bul. Photo: Yoon Hyung-moon. Courtesy of the artist. Collection of Art Sonje Center**



Studio view of *Untitled (Anagram)* series, Seoul, 2025. © Lee Bul. Photo: Jeon Byung-cheol. Courtesy of the artist

