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## Disclosure in the performance of Lee Bul

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In the 1960s a well-known South Korean pop singer scandalized the nation by arriving at the Kimpo airport in Seoul wearing a skirt whose hemline rose too high above the knee. This one woman's lascivious display of the patella region incited authorities to make laws that would deter any member of the female

**disclosure** in the performance of Lee Bul by min sook lee

population who might be tempted to enact a copy-cat crime. Police were issued standardized rulers with which to measure the acceptable distance between hemline and knee. Women caught with illicit hemlines were taken to the local police box and family members were called to escort the malcontents home. The



# Jagged juxtaposition of absurdity and oppression in this story seems an appropriate backdrop for looking at the work of South Korean artist Lee Bul.



Her installations and performances play with similarly incongruous realities – drawing on and disrupting the authority of a cultural history, while playfully and rebelliously asserting her own subjectivity.

On graduating from Seoul's prestigious Hongik University in 1984, Lee Bul discovered that the mainstream Korean art world was as closed to and intolerant of women as society at large. After working for a number of years with more traditional sculptural forms and finding that, due to her gender, her work was consistently ignored or dismissed, her practice gradually expanded to include performance and installation as well as a variety of soft sculpture works, such as the many wearable pieces that are integral to her performances.

By 1989, with her performance *Abortion*, in which she was harnessed upside down, naked before a squirming audience, she was considered to be in the forefront of avant-garde art in the metropolises of Tokyo and Seoul. Bul's work consistently breaches psychological, social and political taboos while providing provocative homages to fear, pathos, beauty and humour. As one of the only contemporary Korean artists whose work directly confronts, questions and dismisses the society's abysmally one-dimensional constructs of feminine beauty and identity, Lee Bul's voice is considered a highly radical one at home.

On a recent visit to Canada, Bul exhibited and performed at A Space, Toronto's oldest artist-run space. In her four-part, twenty-minute piece titled *Laughing*, the artist moved through the gallery, performing in front of or in relation to three installations that served as backdrops. Throughout her performance Bul threads a continuum between the fixed objects, her own motion and our perception. She enters the territory of the witness and proves it to be borderless. The performance began in front of a wall-piece titled *Technicolor Life*. The piece is made from two photographs: one of Lee Bul wearing a gas mask is split in two by the central image of a cluster of traditionally robed Korean dolls (of the type Korea began to manufacture for sale after the Korean war). In front of this work Bul serves up an anomalous version of the traditional Korean fan dance. Wearing the elaborate and colourful *humbo* of the dancer and a large, black rubber gas mask, she plies the fans coyly, wilfully destroying and

reconstructing this archetypal Korean and feminine form of cultural expression. Then, moving to the wall installation titled *Alibi* (consisting of seven backlit silicone hands on acrylic shelves, the hands pierced by decorative pins and holding butterfly-wing fragments), Bul offers a response to Cho Cho San, the opera character whose tragic/redemptive qualities include loyalty, subservience and self-abnegation. With her head encased in white gauze she provides a revisionist enactment of the death throes of the renowned operatic heroine. This death is a dance of jerky kowtows, unco-ordinated movements and flailing limbs. Finally, her head hangs limp, hairpins piercing the gauze that stretches across her open mouth. Hairpins being instruments common to rituals of both beauty and self-mutilation, the symbolism provides a dramatic reminder of women whose suffering finds expression through the wounds they inflict on themselves.

The performance then shifts. No longer at a remove, reinterpreting historical traditions or cultural icons, Bul now addresses the audience directly. She stands facing us, pulls out a pink balloon and begins to blow and blow and blow. We anticipate the explosion; childhood fears and excitement at the prospect of the bursting balloon are drawn from the reservoirs of our memory. Watching, we involuntarily take in as much air as Lee Bul heaves out and, sooner than expected, the balloon bursts with a pathetic boom. In the emptiness that follows the explosion, Bul silently removes her clothes and stands naked before us. Her physical presence is a stark contrast to the third untitled installation. Its large wood frame is a mock closet in which hang soft-sculpture versions of a female torso and truncated limbs (Bul's own) as well as an assortment of fantastic dresses, contemporary accessories and gaudy trinkets. Standing before us with no adornment, no secrets and no room for exotica, Lee Bul begins to laugh. The sound reaches a crescendo, filling the room, and in the throes of this laughter, tears stream down her face. Her flesh shudders and shakes. There can be no mistake – this sound is erupting from this naked body and watching, listening, a flood of images, questions, associations arise. Lee Bul reveals herself – at once an object and a subject, infinite and incomprehensible, simple and direct, everything and nothing – a happy subversive.

Lee Bul – Page 18: *Alibi* (detail, 1994), seven silicone hands on acrylic shelves with butterflies, pins & crystal beads, backlit by halogen light, photo by Gilberto Prioste / Opposite: various views of *Laughing*, performed at A Space (1994), photos by Eun-Joo Chun / Opposite, upper right: view of installation at A Space (1994) showing *Alibi* and *Technicolour Life*, photo by Gilberto Prioste