

From Goddess to Cyborg: Mariko Mori and Lee Bul

Jieun Rhee

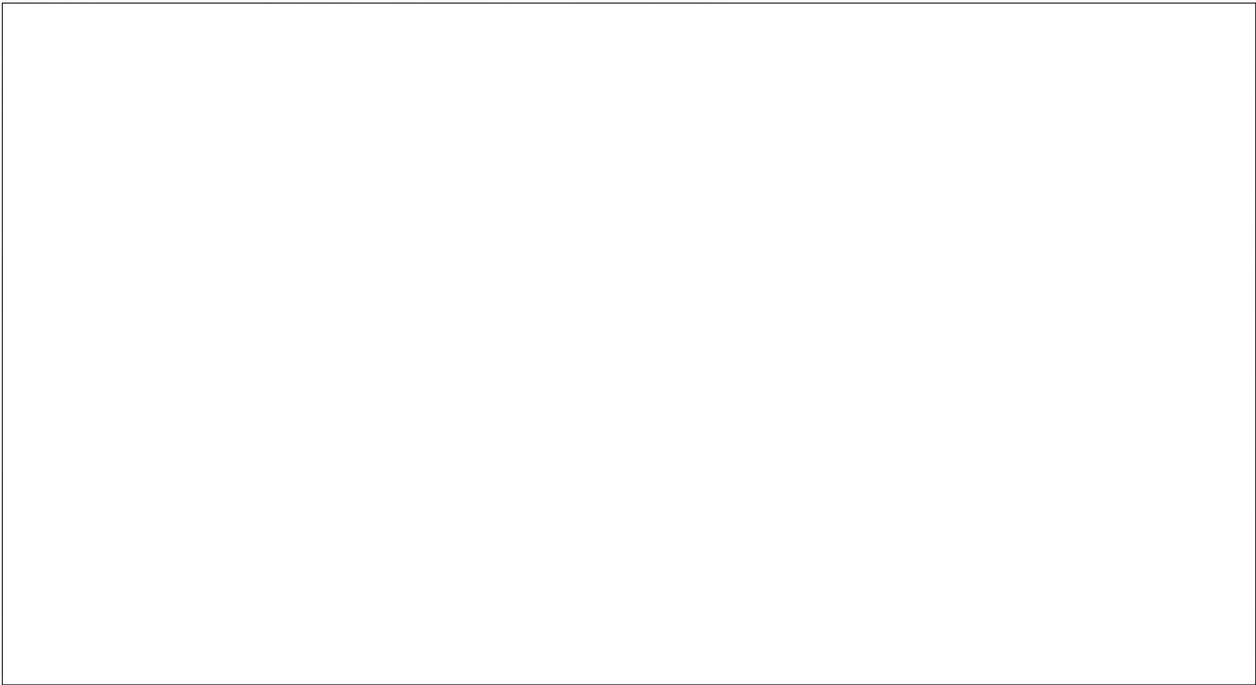
In her celebrated essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', Donna Haraway dismissed the notion of an essential unity that founds the "*natural*" matrix of woman. According to her, '**there is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women** [together].' '**The myth called "us",**' she argues, is only skin-deep, a mask that covers the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.¹ Accordingly, we can think that phrases such as "*women of color*" or "*Asian women*" similarly bear the burdens of political, historical and cultural complexities. When we see the notion of a united sisterhood called "*woman*" as an illusion, we can also confront the fictions of "*Asian women*" that have captured the imagination of many Westerners: on the one hand, that of the demure, yet sexually charged geisha, goddess, and on the other hand, that of the submissive, yet threatening cyborg.

During the past decade, the new discourses of feminism called "*third wave*" have acknowledged poly-vocal possibilities, embracing eclectic, and often contradictory differences in race, class, and sexuality. Different from the first and second waves which strived for women's suffrage and equal rights or the '**reconstruction or elimination of sex roles**'², third wave's engagement with sexuality and identity as a '**tactical subjectivity**'³ allegedly opened a

new interface between the boundaries and borders of diverse social realities. But in reality, the authors of the third wave feminism publish mainly in Western languages and they are often criticized for the apparent academicism aloof from the social and political reality of non-Western countries.

Haraway suggested that '**women of color**' might be interpreted '**as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities and in the complex political-historical layerings of her "biomythography"**.' She concluded her essay with the famous quote, '**I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess**' and by endorsing the figure of the cyborg's post-gender, post-racial possibilities.⁴ How, then, might her notion of cyborg be interpreted in a contemporary Asian context? What kinds of possibilities – or problems – in particular, develop in the dual roles of goddess and cyborg as they appear in contemporary Asian art?

With these questions in mind, this article attempts to read the works of two contemporary Asian women artists, Japanese artist Mariko Mori and Korean artist Lee Bul against Haraway's cyborg manifesto. These artists are both leading figures in the Asian contemporary art scene, who have employed and investigated images of both the goddess and the cyborg as icons of Asian femininity in their art.



Left: Mariko Mori *Play with Me* (1994) Fuji supergloss print, wood, pewter 10' x 12' x 3' Right: Mariko Mori *Birth of A Star* (1995) 3D Duratrans print, acrylic, fluorescent lights, 70.9" x 47.2" Photos: Courtesy of artist and Deitch Projects, New York

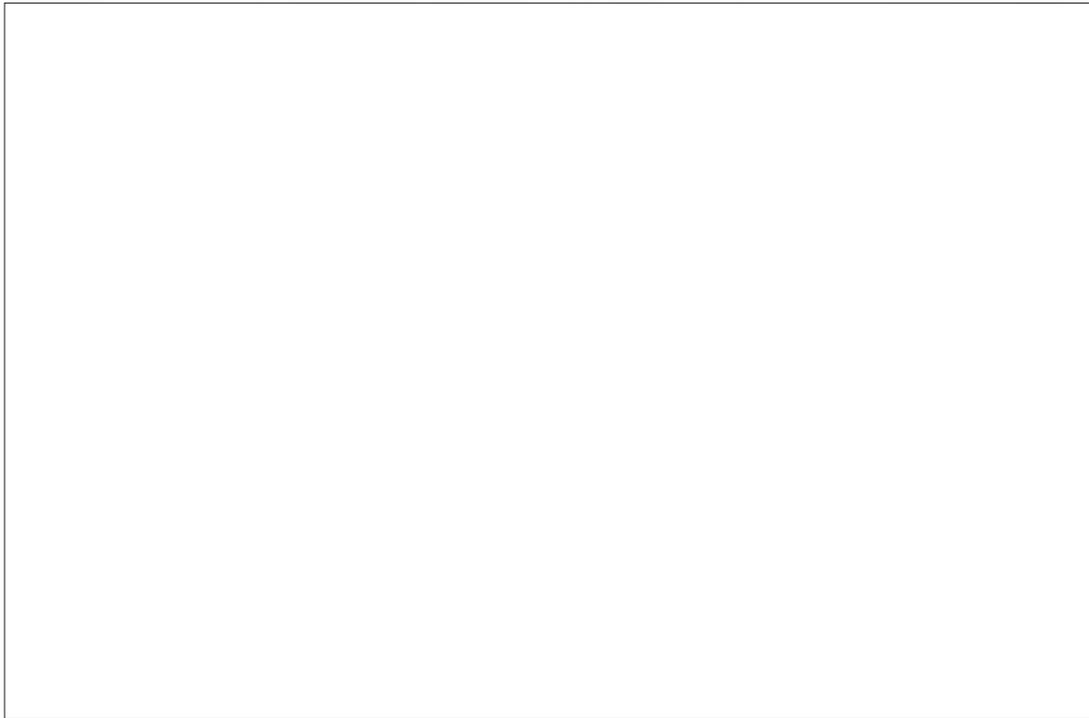
Born in 1967, Mariko Mori studied fashion design at Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo and worked as a model until she went to London in 1988 to study art. Upon graduating from Chelsea College of Art in 1992, she moved to the USA and entered the prestigious Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Mori's works range from three-dimensional video installations, performance videos, and digitized photographs, to pseudo-scientific objects, such as the solar transmitting device called *Himawari* (meaning sunflower), the invention of Mori's father who is an engineer, and other gizmos that she produced with the help of international team of engineers in her studio in Tokyo and New York.

Mori's early works mainly consist of photographic images of herself, striking a pose in elaborate costumes. For example, *Play with Me* (1994) reveals Mori's projection of a cyborg fantasy set against the backdrop of cosmopolitan Tokyo. Standing in front of a video game store in a cyborg costume, Mori is a playmate waiting for a customer who will buy the game and play with her. The intertwining of sex, commerce and technology is clear here; the cyborg Mori wears a highly sexualized outfit – her breasts protrude from her cyborg body in the manner of Jean-Paul Gaultier's costume for Madonna or the much earlier sexy female robot of Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1926).

If Lang's cyborg was seductive and dangerous, Mori's rendition of this machine-woman is more submissive and amiable. In contrast to the fully-grown female body revealed under the cyborg costume, her hair divided into two ponytails reminds us of that of a schoolgirl, the stereotypical heroine in Japanese animation.

In an interview with Dike Blair, Mori herself acknowledged that she was a fan of *anime* (Japanese neology for animation) and *anga* (meaning cartoon books).⁵ In contrast to Western cyborg stories, the image of cybernetic technology in *anime* seems to be no threat to human beings. Just like the famous Japanese *anime*, *Sailor Moon*, in which a group of cute schoolgirls turn into goddess-warriors who save the world against villains, Mori envisions a powerful princess-warrior or a cyborg heroine embodied in an otherwise ordinary young woman. Mori's aspiration towards this kind of cyborg transformation is also revealed in her other works such as *Subway* (1994) and *Birth of a Star* (1995).

Subway shows a narrator-model (the Japanese-Korean neology for the girls hired for promotions) in a commuter train. As part and parcel of the developed consumer culture of a capitalist society, this girl is always already a cyborg: an expendable commodity worker always ready for conversion into another company's dress to fit another and different mission. But under the cyborg's cheap costume lurks the



Mariko Mori *Subway* (1994) Fuji super gloss (dralfex) print 27" x 40" x 2". Courtesy of artist and Deitch Projects, New York

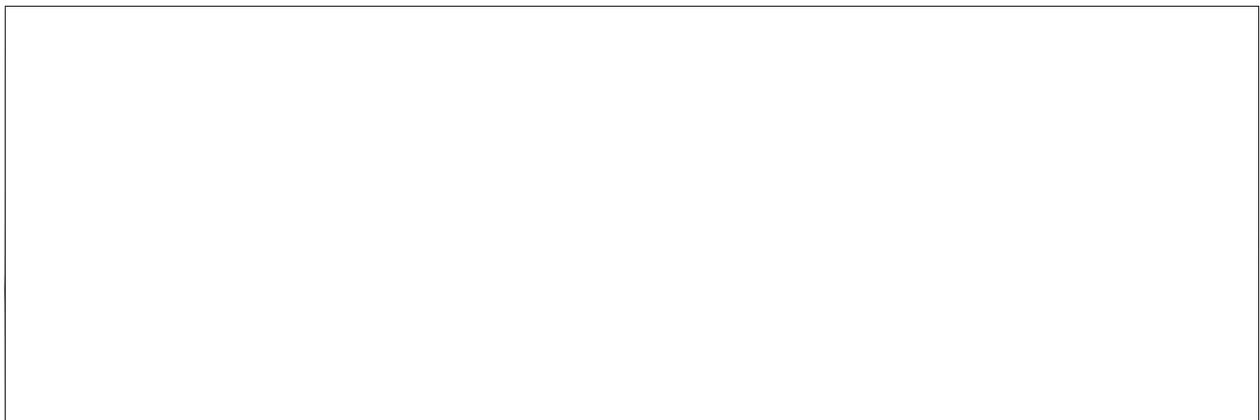
immense power of transformation. As the tired girl in *Subway* pushes the button on her wrist, she becomes the heroine of a search-for-a-star TV show: the same plot as *Birth of a Star*.

Among other works *Nirvana* (1996-97) is perhaps so far Mori's most spectacular transformation. This time, the future is the past. The three-dimensional seven-minute video installation shows Mori's rendition of a traditional Pure Land Buddhist "*welcoming descent*" scene. On a distant shore of a landscape found next to the Dead Sea in Israel is a colorfully decorated space ship, implying the arrival of some otherworldly beings. Soon, Mori appears dressed as

Kichijōten (the Japanese female deity of abundance) on a pink lotus pedestal surrounded by six Teletubbie-like creatures playing a variety of musical instruments.⁶ With the aid of the 3-D glasses that viewers are given to wear, the illusion is created that Mori floats out into the audience throwing a wish-granting jewel and singing phrases such as '*kamisama nee, aitai*' (I want to meet you, deity) or '**Take me to the heaven**'.

Mori's use of seemingly traditional iconography from Pure Land Buddhism, however, lacks one of the most important elements of its mythology. According to art

Mariko Mori *Nirvana* (1997) video stills from 3-D video. Courtesy of artist and Deitch Projects, New York.



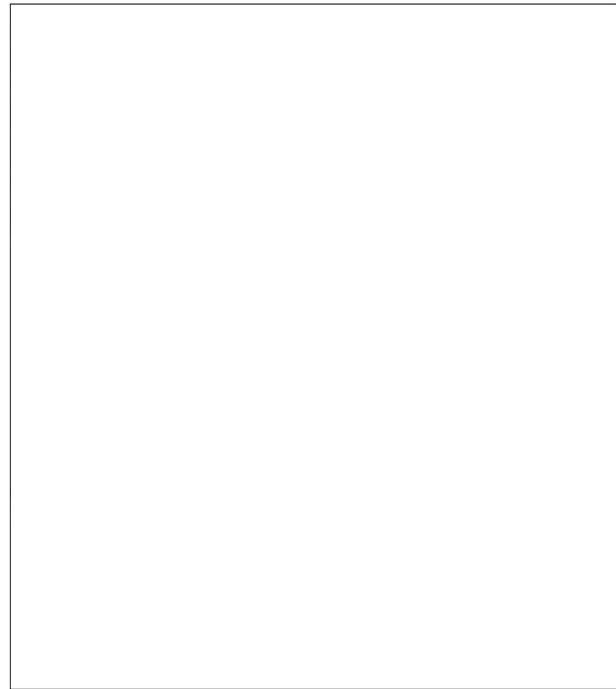
historian Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, Mori substituted the male protagonist Amida Buddha with a lower-ranking female deity, Kichijōten. Is Mori striking back at patriarchal Buddhist traditions by replacing Amida with a female deity? Though this might be one possible interpretation of the video, Ten Grotenhuis warns that this may also be one of the **'over-interpretations'** and quotes Mori's own statement in *Bijutsu Techō*:

'When I saw Kichijōten at Yakushiji I was deeply moved... I want to make figures [like that Kichijōten] come to life in the present day... Today supermodels like Naomi Campbell have become symbols of beauty. I want to attract [that same kind of attention] to bodhisattvas.'⁷

Mori's interest in the Buddhist deities seems motivated not by an explicitly feminist or egalitarian politics, but by their visual beauty alone. To the contemporary artist Mori, the traditional image of a Japanese female deity is just a reference to her work which is comparable with that of a Western supermodel. Being digitized, synthesized and hybridized, Mori's own goddess becomes a cyborg that transgresses the boundaries of East/West, male/female and past/future.

Most Western critics have praised Mori's innovative use of electronic media. Richard Dorment in *Daily Telegraph* called the visual effects of Mori's work as **'high camp, gorgeous excess and blatant gimmickry'** and read its idea as **'both serious and original'**.⁸ On the other hand, Mori's religious subjects have been criticised for their superficiality. For example, Norman Bryson pointed out the risk that her work could be **'completely swamped by the imagery and the aims of contemporary mass media [...] capitulating to capitalist narcissism on a truly cosmic scale in a Madonna-style self-deification'**.⁹ Interestingly, by contrast, many Japanese commentators kept rather silent about the religious theme she appropriated, and instead took issue with Mori's techno-futuristic rendition of it. Fumio Nanjo, the curator of the Japan Pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale, expressed his surprise when Mori was conferred an award for young artists at the Biennale. He diagnosed the major factor of Mori's success as a kind of exoticism that meets Western expectations of the Japanese; positioning it not as the expectation that an exotic geisha-goddess would be a surprise, but that of a technology-oriented cyber-goddess.¹⁰

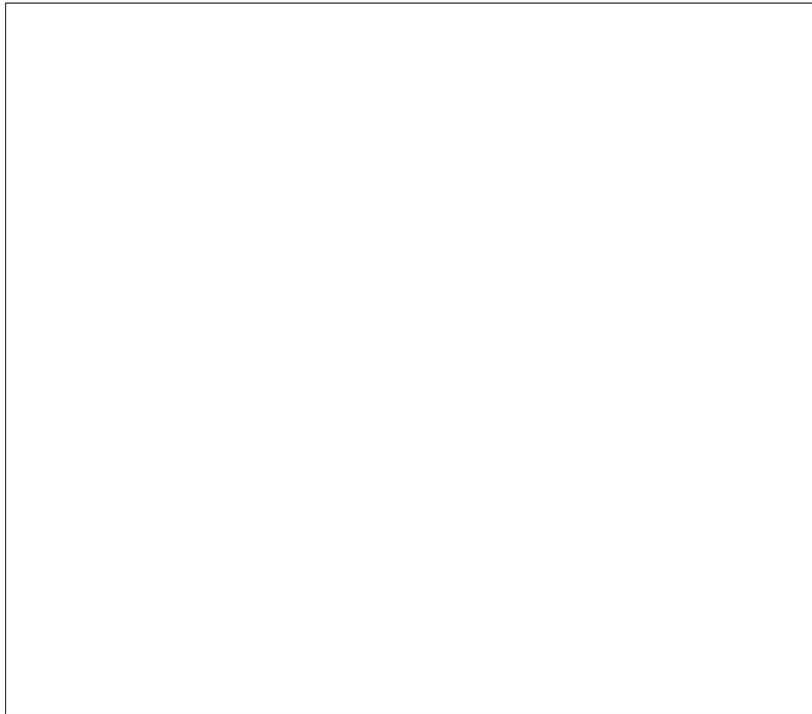
The international success of Mori's serene deities and friendly cyborgs reveals that the deep-rooted illusions of Asian femininity are still potent. In Mori's imageries which employ both religious culture and space-age technologies, we witness the intricate fusion of the seeming binaries of East/



Lee Bul *Sorry for suffering –You think I'm a puppy on a picnic?* (1990) 12-day performance, Kimpo Airport, Narita Airport, downtown Tokyo, Dokiwaza Theater, Tokyo. Photo: Courtesy of Artist.

West, technology/nature, and future/past. Floating freely above these terms, and defying their periodisation (historically) or any essentialism (in race, gender or class terms), yet feeding the expectations of the Western audience who still want to see the fantasy of the Other, Mori's digital body have become a cultural as well as a technological cyborg.

If Mori, because of this, still portrays or maintains more conventional notions of Asian femininity in her work, Lee Bul explores femininity and the female body in more radical terms. Born in 1964, Lee graduated from Hong-Ik University majoring in sculpture. In 1989, just two years after graduation, Lee surprised the Korean art community with her nude performance, *Abortion*, in which she suspended herself upside down from the gallery ceiling completely naked. During the performance, she narrated her physical and emotional scars from her own experience, interspersed with popular song lyrics. The performance ended when a group of audience members who thought Lee was putting herself in danger dragged her down to the floor. The radicalism of her early performances carried over into subsequent performance photos as well, in which she depicted herself in a wedding gown wiping her bottom with a piece of newspaper, or staging a Korean **"fan dance"** wearing traditional costume and a gas mask.



Lee Bul *Hydra (Monument)* (1998) Photo print on vinyl, air pumps, 600 cm height x 450 cm diameter at base. Installation view, Rodin Gallery, Samsung Museum, Seoul, 2002. Photo: Kim Hyun-soo. Courtesy: Samsung Museum and Artist.

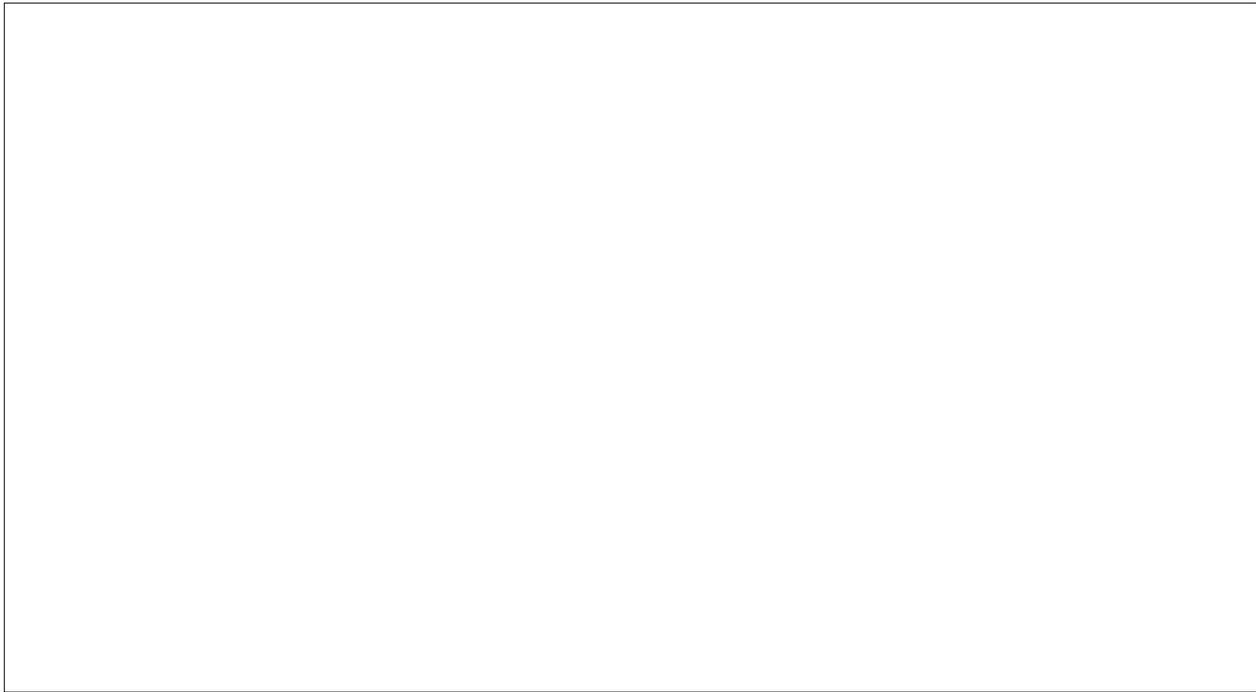
These works exhibit clear political concerns and social contexts, especially in their sarcasm towards patriarchal notions of womanhood centered around the wedding ceremony and childbirth, as well as their critique of the deep-rooted military politics and newly commercialised folk culture in Korea.

The images of mothers and brides in her performances quickly evolved into that of monsters. In her twelve-day street performance, *Sorry for Suffering – You Think I’m a Puppy on a picnic?* (1990), Lee clad herself in a stuffed monster outfit, and took a walk through the airports and the downtown centers of Seoul and Tokyo. The limbs of the monster look like internal organs and the skin resembles red flesh: together, they present an image of a woman inside out and reveal the abject blood and flesh under the perfect skin. Lee’s departure from the conventional image of female body continues in *Hydra* (1994) a series of twelve meter-long inflatable balloons bearing the photographic image of the artist on the surface. Wearing a cornucopia of beaded ornaments, feathered lingerie studded with doll heads, fishnet stockings and boots, Lee’s posture is both sexy and daring. Her white-powdered face reminds of the stereotype of the docile oriental women such as the “*Madame Butterfly*” or *geisha* girls in Western fantasies. Yet, the hybrid image of traditional and

popular notions of Asian woman, combining the stereotype of geisha with the kitsch *cliché* of the Asian woman warrior often found in B-grade Chinese martial arts films, is more a criticism of the Orientalist fantasy than the production of another object for its gaze. The bunch of white lilies and whip she holds in one of the series also indicates her sarcastic comments on the demure wife/didactic mother image of the “*appropriate*” woman in the traditional Confucianism.

On the other hand, *Hydra* combines the monumentality of its gigantic size with its monstrous imagery. The shape of the balloon resembles a phallic monster with feelers. However, it can be only fully erect if the viewers constantly pedal the air pumps, which in turn reveals Lee’s full size portrait. In Greek myth, the hydra is the nine-headed serpentine monster killed by the legendary hero Hercules. The zoological hydra, by contrast, is a fresh-water polyp which uses its poisonous sting-laced feelers to catch its prey. It is also famous for its incredible capacity to regenerate itself when its body parts are cut off.¹¹ With the ability to regenerate and substitute the lost parts, the hydra might also be considered an animal kingdom cyborg.

In her next project, Lee’s monsters become even more cybernetic. Unlike Mori’s amicable and girlish cyborgs, Lee’s *Cyborg* series made from 1997 presents only fragmented



Left: Lee Bul *Cyborg Blue* (1997-98) Cast silicone, paint pigment, steel pipe support and base, 160 cm x 70 x 110 cm. Right: Lee Bul *Cyborg Red* (1997-98) Cast silicone, paint pigment, steel pipe support and base, 160cm x 70 x 110 cm. Both works in collection: Ssamzie, Seoul. Photos: Yoon Hyung-moon.

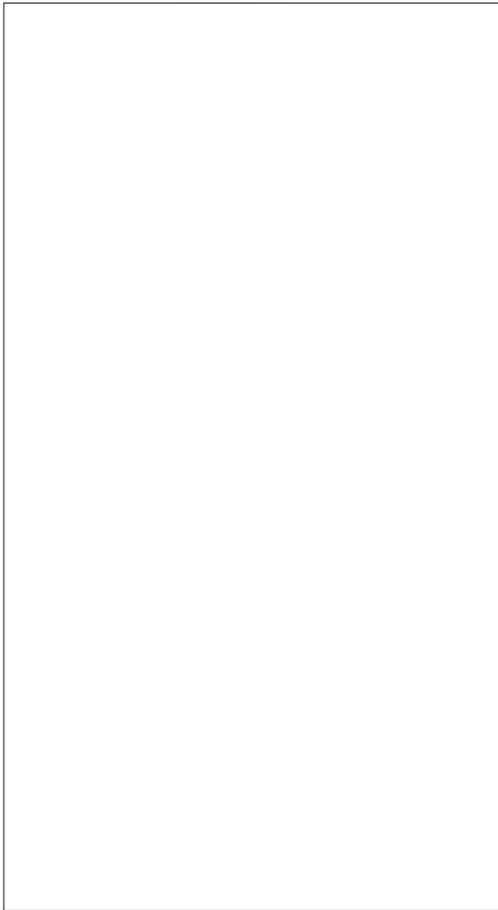
cybernetic bodies. These figures, which are often headless torsos with only one arm and one leg, reveal the Korean artist's dystopian view of cybernetic technology, in which technology is both violent and already obsolete. Lee has acknowledged the importance of Haraway's Manifesto in her thinking.¹² But unlike Haraway's endorsement of cyborgs, Lee reserves her optimism for learning from the mistakes in technology: **'my cyborgs are all missing organs or limbs, so they are incomplete bodies in a sense, questioning the myth of technological perfection'**.¹³ Her early cyborgs are almost identical twins called *Blue Cyborg* and *Red Cyborg* (1997-98). Supported by steel bars and mounted on a pedestal, these florescent coloured objects show apparently exaggerated feminine features; protruding breasts and hip, and thin waistlines, just as the cyborgs that we have seen in science fiction animations and movies.

Lee also acknowledges that **'the original conception for [her] cyborgs began with animation images, especially Japanese anime and manga'**,¹⁴ which are quite popular in Korea as well. For example, in *Ghost in the Shell* by Shiro Masamune, we can find similar images of Lee's cyborgs with their bodies connected with wires and cables.¹⁵ Being a hybrid of machine and human, the cyborgs in *anime* might transcend the borders between human and machine, but

certainly, the features of these popular culture's cyborgs are not **"post-gender"** as in Haraway's projection. The Japanese and Korean *anime* portray cyborgs as ultra-violent and dystopian beings, yet they have aspects of the mythical ideas about femininity by representing the cyborgs as young, as teenagers, and even as vulnerable girls.¹⁶

Also, according to Lee, **'the masters of cyborgs are always men. It is the men's desire to seen feeble, girlish body in cyborgs'**. The development of technology might erase the border between men and women, Lee argues, but she **'wanted to express that there still remains men's bias on the traditional notions of femininity'**.¹⁷ And another question seems important here as well; how about their race? Would cyborgs be post-racial?

Interestingly, Lee found her cyborgs to be **'Western'**. She argues that her cyborg idea **'is to invoke archetypal images of women, art-historical representations of femininity, particularly in Western art history...by rendering these cyborgs in those timeless iconic, feminine poses'**.¹⁸ In fact, the features of the highly sexualized cyborgs in Japanese *anime* and *manga* – with blue eyes and yellow hair – are closer to that of Caucasian than Asian women. Is Lee's cyborg, then, the Asian version of Occidentalism? The material Lee uses is silicon, routinely used in plastic surgery



Left: Lee Bul *Cyborg W6* (2001) Hand-cut polyurethane panels on FRP, polyurethane coating, 232 x 67 x 67 cm. Installation view, Rodin Gallery, Samsung Museum, Seoul, 2002. Collection: Samsung Museum of Modern Art, Seoul. Photo: Kim Hyun-soo. Courtesy: Samsung Museum. Above: Lee Bul *Amaryllis* (1999) Hand-cut polyurethane panels on aluminum armature, enamel coating, 210 x 120 x 180 cm. Collection: Arario Gallery, Chonan, Korea. Photo: Rhee Jae-yong.

because of its compatibility with the human body. If we consider the plastic surgery boom in some Asian countries, and the aspiration for a bigger nose, eyes, and breasts, Lee's cyborgs might read as the objectification of desirable Western bodies as much as for a futuristic women-warrior.

Her subsequent cyborgs from 1998 are all white, made of hand-cut polyurethane panels on aluminium armatures. As art historian Tae-hee Kang points out, they recall museum pieces from classical antiquity.¹⁹ Hanging from the galley ceiling, however, these cyborgs are not the objects of worship, but appear like petrified armour exhibited in a museum or morgue.

Lee's cybernetic fantasy soon gets its nightmarish evil twin in her subsequent *Monster* series. Like the monsters in the Hollywood movie *Aliens*, Lee's monsters resemble the forms of parasites that can rapidly grow inside the human body and soon take over their hosts. Lee continues to use white-colored polyurethane panels to create intricate organic forms. However, the aesthetic feature of the white urethane coating soon erases the wildness of these creatures and tames them, turning them into just another museum piece.

In 'A Cyborg Manifesto', Haraway proposed to see '**women of color**' as a cyborg identity. Using Audre Lorde's term, Haraway defines this cyborg identity as a '**Sister Outsider**' who is regarded as the enemy of the first-world workers and first-world women, and '**the preferred labor in the industries and sex market**'. Equipped with literacy, Haraway argues, these cyborg authors do not write their myth of origins. Instead, they '**subvert the central myths of origins of Western culture**'²⁰ by crisscrossing their identities with the Western binaries such as nature/culture and human/machine.

Employing and exploring the stereotypes of Asian women, and the fantasies of the sexualized cyborg, Lee and Mori perform what Haraway calls '**cyborg writing**'. Choosing goddess and cyborgs as agency, they reveal the '**fusions of outsider identities**' that respectively reflect and betray Western fantasies of Asian femininity. However, the complex layers of the political and historical contexts of Korea and Japan defer our conclusion. Although both countries experienced the problems of modernization as Westernisation, and the ensuing conflicts between

nationalism and internationalism, because of their opposing positions in the colonial period – Japan as colonizer, Korea as colonized – and the different stages of capitalism in each country, the locations/context of these works reveal subtle yet clear differences in their representations of Asian femininity.

Mori's self-fetishization in her amicable cyborgs and serene goddess reveals her utopian dream of transformation that transcends the conventional boundary of East and West, by hybridizing Western fantasies of Asian girls with the postmodern Japanese dream of cyber world. In contrast to Mori's undisputed, hybrid identities that smooth out the borders between East and West, Lee discloses the conflicts on the borders by tempering the non-threatening cyborgs with her monsters that seduce, and at the same time revolt the Western gaze. Lee's hybridization does not aim to secure the interface between the borders. Instead, as a strategic pose, Lee's cyborgs and goddesses bring to the surface the complexities of the borders and constantly refuse to be pinned-down as an Asian femininity. Departing from the essentialism of goddess and the gender-free, post-racial cyborg, Lee introduces a wider spectrum of femininity into recent feminist discourses.

In contexts of the historical, cultural and political complexities of Asia, neither Lee's nor Mori's cyborgs are free from the gender and race as Haraway envisioned. However, this incommensurability of Asian femininity, I argue, can be the performative force that sets forward third wave discourses in feminism beyond Western binaries.

Jieun Rhee received her Ph. D. in art history at Boston University. She writes on contemporary Asian art for Korean and international journals including *Oriental Art*, *Wolgan Misool* (Seoul), and *Art in Culture* (Seoul). Dr. Rhee is the editor of *The Journal of Art Theory and Practice* in Seoul, Korea. She teaches art history, theory and criticism at Seoul National University and Myongji University in Seoul.

Notes

The initial version of this essay is my conference paper 'From Goddess to Cyborg: Contemporary Asian Women Artists' was delivered at the 92nd Annual Conference of College Art Association in Seattle, U.S.A, February 2004 in the session, 'Third Waves: Contemporary Feminism/Contemporary Art. I thank the session chair, Elizabeth Adan at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for the inspiring session and her support in writing this paper.

1. Donna Haraway 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twenties Century' in Donna Haraway *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991)
2. Rita Alfonso and Jo Triglio 'Surfing the Third Wave: A Dialogue Between Two Third Wave Feminists' *Hypatia* vol. 12, no. 3 (Summer 1997) <http://iupjournals.org/hypatia/hyp12-3.html>
3. Chela Sandoval *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) p. 59
4. Donna Haraway 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twenties Century' pp. 174-5 and p.181
5. Dike Blair 'We've Got Twenty-Five Years: Interview with Mariko Mori' *Purple Prose*, no. 9 (September 1995) pp. 96-101
6. I am heavily indebted to Professor Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis at Boston University for the iconographic identification of the figures in *Nirvana* and other connections to Pure Land Buddhist belief. Quotations from her are drawn from her conference paper 'Visual Salvation in the 21st Century' presented in the panel 'Creativity from Destruction: Japanese Pure Land Eschatology in its Social and Aesthetic Dimensions' at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, March 2000, San Diego, California
7. Mariko Mori Interview in *Bijutsu Techô* Vol 51 no. 775 (September 1999) p. 96
8. Richard Dorment in the exhibition review 'Magical Mystery Tour to the 21st Century: Mariko Mori, Sepentine Gallery, 30 June-9 August 1998' *Daily Telegraph* (London) July 1998, quoted in Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis p. 9
9. Norman Bryson 'Cute Futures: Mariko Mori's Techno-Enlightenment' *Parkett* (Winter 1998/99) p. 77
10. Fumio Nanjo quoted in Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis p. 8
11. see Soyeon Ahn 'Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior With a Double-Edged Sword' *Lee Bul*. exhibition catalogue (Seoul:Rodin Gallery, 2002) pp. 21-22
12. Lee Bul in Hans Ulrich Obrist 'Cyborgs and Silicon-Korean Artist Lee Bul about Her Work' *Lee Bul*. exhibition catalogue (Seoul:Art Sonje Center, 1998) unpagged
13. *ibid*, unpagged
14. *ibid*, unpagged
15. Hae-jung Lee 'Contemporary Art and Japanese Amination' *Art in Culture* (September 2002) pp. 78-85
16. Lee Bul in Hans Ulrich Obrist 'Cyborgs and Silicon-Korean Artist Lee Bul about Her Work' unpagged
17. 'Interview with Lee Bul' *Women Dong-Ah* (July 1999)
18. Tae Hee Kang 'Lee Bul's Makings of Body: How do you wear your body?' *Wolgan Misool* (2003, February)
19. *ibid*. Professor Kang also made the analogy with a Greek goddess statue
20. Donna Haraway 'A Cyborg Manifesto' pp. 174-5