

Lee Yil: Dynamics of Expansion and Reduction: Selected Writings on Korean Contemporary Art

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- 1 Conceived as part of the on-going “Art Critics of the World” series, a publication of anthologies organized by the International Organization of Art Critics (AICA) to celebrate and introduce texts by critics “who best represent their countries” and yet, remain internationally under acknowledged, *Lee Yil: Dynamics of Expansion and Reduction* is an important addition to the growing studies on modern and contemporary art of Korea. It is the first major publication in English devoted to the Korean critic and art historian Lee Yil (1932-1997), who is best known as a key proponent of *Dansaekhwa*, or Korean monochrome painting. Lee began to fully engage in art criticism in the early 1960s, when he took part as the commissioner of the Paris Biennale in 1961 while studying at the Sorbonne. As one of the few critics who had keen awareness and understanding of the “local” and “international” art and its discourses, Lee became one of the most influential and prolific writers in Korea. The anthology is based on a comprehensive two-volume publication of Lee Yil’s writings, first published in 2013 in Korean. Selected and translated texts are similarly organized in two parts: the first section includes a collection of essays on aesthetics, theory, and history of art; and the other, a compilation of more brief, monographic writings on the works by individual artists. Covering the period between the 1970s and the early 1990s, the compiled texts reveal underlining themes and concerns that the critic engaged with throughout his career, such as the issue of “re-discovering the tradition”, “representation of Korean aesthetics”, and the “mediation between the West and East”. They also offer valuable insight into the variety of contemporaneous American, European (especially French), and Japanese discourses Lee referenced. It is worth noting that the book’s title is taken from an essay written by Lee for the inaugural issue of the magazine published by the experimental collective known as the Avant-Garde Group (or A.G.), which Lee founded together with critic Oh Kwang-su and ten other artists in 1969. Considering the diversity of roles Lee played as a critic, educator, commissioner, and an art historian, who not only wrote, but organized and supported a number of

important collectives that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, the book may seem limited in its scope, focusing primarily on *Dansaekhwa* and Lee's texts on the movement's leading artists. Having said this, it nonetheless serves as an important contribution to the growing initiative to make primary documents from Non-western countries more internationally accessible.