On Reflection

After the opening last year of the Lee Ufan Museum – a collaboration with the architect Tadao Ando on Naoshima Island, Japan – and ahead of his largest retrospective to date, at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, **Lee Ufan** talks to *Melissa Chiu* about his five decades as an artist, writer and philosopher

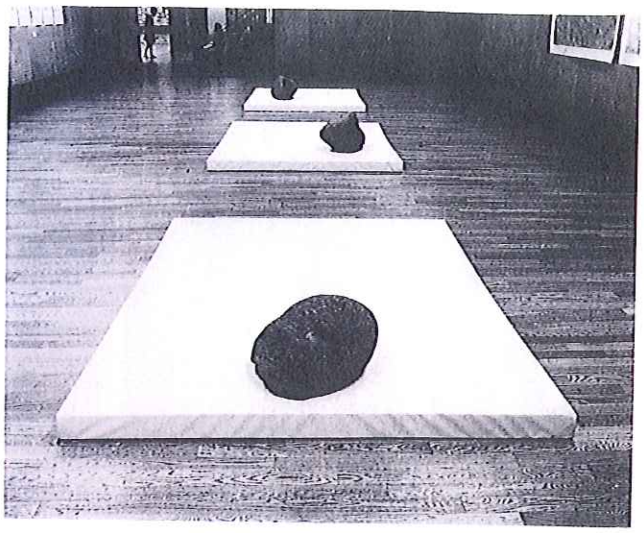
Relatum – a signal
2005
Steel and stone
Steel plate: 3×260×240 cm
Stone: 1×1.2×1.2 m
Installation view 2010
Lee Ufan Museum,
Naoshima, Japan

Lee Ufan photographed at his studio in Kamakura, Japan
2010
I ended up in Japan by sheer chance. My uncle was not well, so I went to visit him there and he told me I should stay and study, so I did.

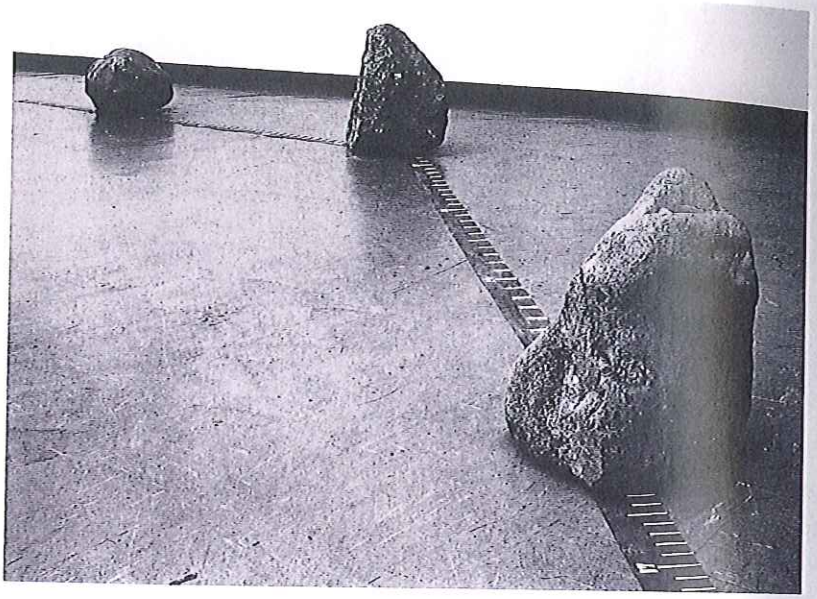
Since the late 1960s, Korean-born artist Lee Ufan – who lives and works in Paris, France, and Kamakura, Japan – has been an influential painter, sculptor, writer, art critic, teacher and philosopher. He was a key figure in the Mono-ha movement (from the two Japanese words *mono*, meaning thing, and *ha*, school) in the late 1960s and early '70s in Japan, where he moved in 1956. Originating from Mono-ha's interest in highlighting the relationships between artistic elements and the spaces around them, Ufan's sculptures are created from simple juxtapositions of natural and industrial materials, while his paintings and watercolours involve quiet confrontations between pigment and surface. Parallel to his sustained artistic process, he has continued to write critical essays and short texts about subjects ranging from philosophy and art to cooking, flower arranging and poetry. Before the opening of his first US retrospective, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York this summer, art historian Melissa Chiu spoke to Lee Ufan about his life and work.

MELISSA CHIU You've been a seminal figure for international art, particularly the development of Modernism in East Asia. Although you were born in Korea and lived there until you were 20, your work as an artist and critic is perhaps better known in Japan, largely because of the role you played with the Mono-ha movement of the late 1960s and '70s. What do you think led to the development of Mono-ha in Japan?
LEE UFAN (VIA TRANSLATOR SUMIKO TAKEDA) The Mono-ha movement began around 1967 and lasted until about '74. At the time, there were major social changes occurring in the US – the hippie movement, for example – as well as Earthworks and Minimalism in art. In Italy there was Arte Povera and in the UK, Anti-Form. Modernism was being criticized and new values were being explored. In France there was the May '68 revolution, and in Japan the Anpo movement arose as a resistance toward the Japanese-US Security Treaty. The existing structures were being turned upside-down, and this had an impact on literature, art and music. Modernism in these contexts was about expressing what one was about, but the Mono-ha movement was not about identity. It had to do with what to make and what not to make, and the clash of the two. The art work we created was criticized for its lack of skill. We used manufactured materials, such as glass, sheet metal or electricity, combined with natural materials, such as dirt, rocks and water. I use the Japanese word *chutohampa* to describe it, which means unresolved, incomplete or not polished. So you're neither here nor there; it's the meeting of the two – oneself and one's interaction with these materials, both industrial and natural.
MC In an essay you wrote, you described Mono-ha as a movement that 'disturbed ordinary perceptions and preconceived ideas about what is real or not real'. That brings to my mind an approach towards materials that was probably very new in Japan, and certainly internationally, at that time. Can you talk a little bit more about this approach to materials, which I think is the essence of the Mono-ha movement?
LUF Right before Mono-ha emerged there was a breakdown in the identity of Japanese artists. Rather than using things and space as materials for realizing their ideas, artists tried to bring out the mutual relationships of their materials and the spaces surrounding them. Step-by-step they became more conscious of the media they were using.

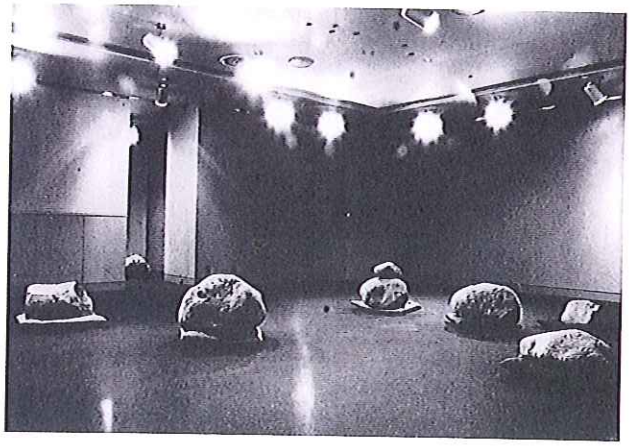
Mono-ha was not about new ideas; rather, it looked at what to do with this broken identity in Japan in the postwar period.



Relatum
1971
Canvas and stones
Installation view
Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum
The Mono-ha movement was not about identity. It had to do with what to make and what not to make, and the clash of the two.



Relatum
1969
Stones
Installation view
National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
My work may seem simplistic – there's a small amount of sculpture, a little bit of painting. Culture should not be about raising the gross national product.



Relatum
1970
Stones, cushions and lights
Installation view
Pinar Gallery, Tokyo
There are things about Korea that I both love and detest. I grew up in a home that was very traditional. We had a lot of art works and furniture, so I have a certain nostalgia for the things that were around me as I was growing up.

c In accounts of Japanese art, Mono-ha always comes on the heels of e Gutai movement that emerged in the late 1950s, and whose manifesto pressed their interest in the beauty of destruction, ruins or decay. hat relationship, if any, did Mono-ha have to Gutai?

JF There is no direct relationship: Gutai was more orientated toward experimentation, whereas Mono-ha was a protest against Modernism. Gutai ve us the courage to experiment, but within the context of the breakdown identity, Gutai had nothing to teach.

c But if Gutai had less to teach, then why do you think – in the West least – it has received a lot more critical attention than Mono-ha? Does is have something to do with the performative nature of Gutai?

'F That's a very good point. There are links between Gutai and Mono-ha ıen it comes to performance. I don't mean to deny Gutai's relevance. It was driven by new ideas, and doing things that were dynamic and attractive. The Gutai group was a community, and they worked with other groups, such as the Zero Group. They were better funded and had the support of influential critics. Mono-ha wasn't recognized by the critics – our recognition came from Europe. It was not about new ideas; rather, it looked at what to do with this broken identity in Japan in the postwar period. And so Mono-ha began with a very clear concept in that respect. Compared with Gutai, we had far less financing, and there were fewer people involved. It was not a group that would pull its forces together to do something dynamic. It was very different in nature, and that's reflective of the times. It consisted of individuals who did their own thing, and in fact, if we did get together at all, we had arguments and fights. That's the way it was.

Images this page courtesy: the artist

MC Much of my work as an art historian and curator, especially in the past few years, has been to look at art history with a global emphasis. Mono-ha, like Gutai, was not a movement that existed in a vacuum, but rather one that was linked to other movements across the world. How connected did you feel to other art movements that were going on outside of Japan?

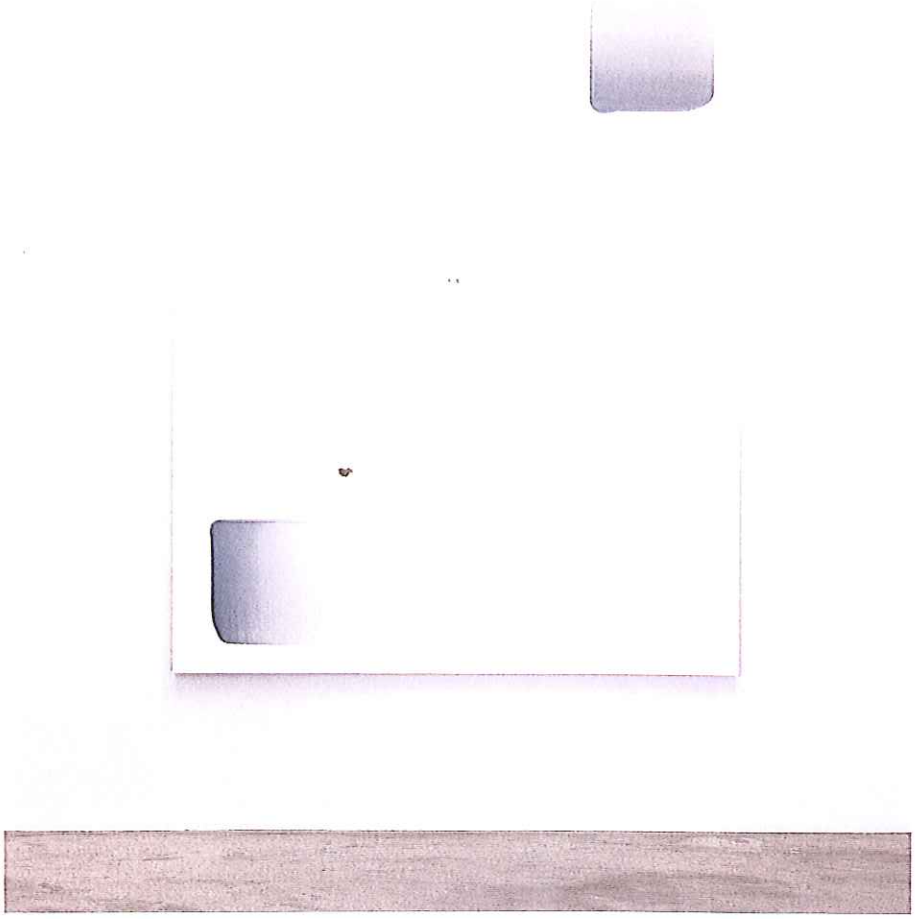
LUF In 1967 or '68 Japan was not very open. It was a period of economic growth in the country, but there was still poverty, and therefore it was not an information-rich society. It was difficult to get information. Outside of the art world, there was a movement against neo-colonialism. The Anpo movement reacted against American imperialism. Because the information wasn't so readily available, we often misunderstood what was going on in the rest of the world. It wasn't until I went to Europe for the first time for the Paris Biennale in 1971 that I was able to get more information and find out about what was going on both in the US and Europe.

MC Your writings have played such an important role, not just within Mono-ha, but also throughout your career. Why did you choose to take on this role of writer and artist, or critic and artist?

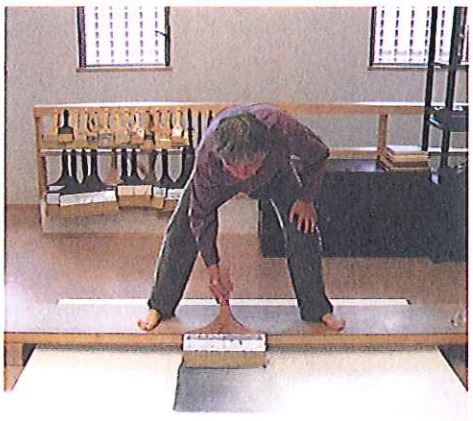
LUF When I moved to Japan from Korea, I was a foreigner, an outsider. No critics supported my work. Out of desperation, I wrote about myself. I gave lectures and did whatever was necessary. That's one reason. The second reason was that I had studied philosophy, so I was theoretical in my thinking, and when I began working with other people with similar thoughts there were no critics to support this larger group, and so I had to explain what it all meant – it really was an act of desperation. Somehow these essays piled up, and resulted in a number of books. Amongst my friends in Mono-ha, there was a need for these texts. I still don't believe myself to be an art critic, but writing does help me clarify my ideas. There may not be a tight correlation between what I write and my work, but it gives me better context, which I believe makes my art work that much richer.

MC You've lived outside of your home country, Korea, for much of your life, both in Japan and in now in Paris. Can you tell me about your experiences of living abroad?

LUF I ended up in Japan by sheer chance. My uncle was not well, so I went to visit him there and he told me I should stay and study, so I did. But I met with discrimination there. They called me *Chosenjin*, which is a derogatory term for a Korean. Because I was not Japanese, and because my art and ideas had to do with the breakdown of the status quo, people believed that I was a bad influence on Japanese culture. The Japanese felt that it was not a role for an outsider. I was told that if I fought with critics I would certainly

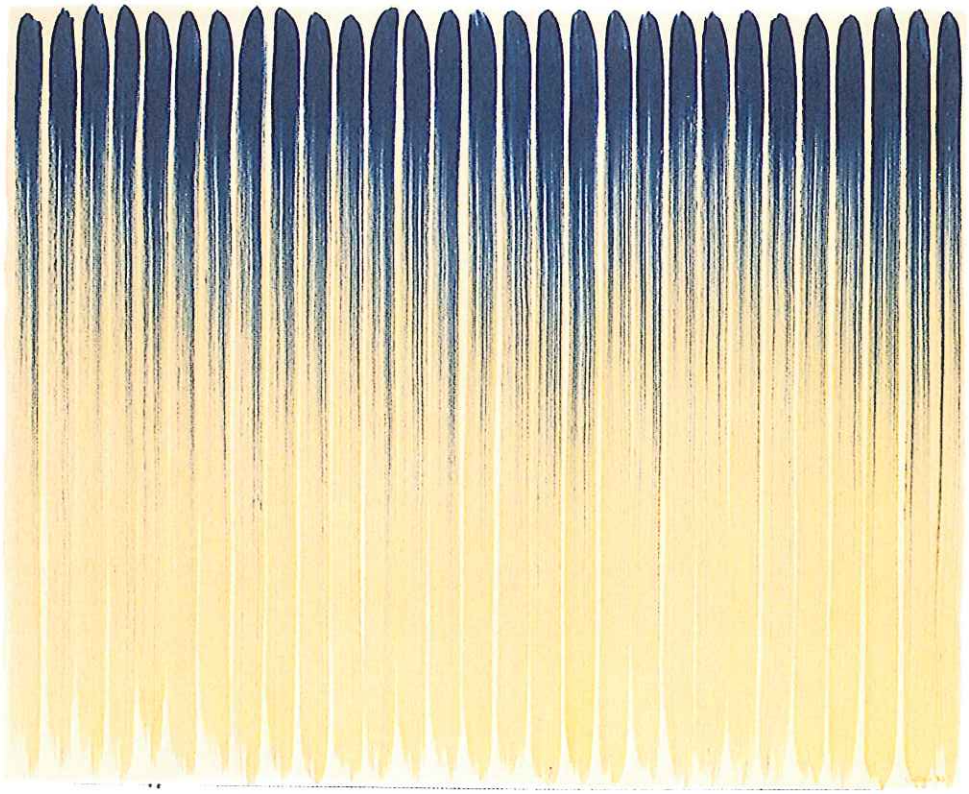


Dialogue
2010
Oil and mineral pigment on canvas
2.3×1.8 cm
There were similar looking art works that occurred in Europe and America. Interesting things emerged in Japa because of the lack of information, and we were groping in the dark with local concepts.



Lee Ufan painting in his studio in Kamakura, Japan
2010
I only spend three or four months a year in Japan; I spend the remaining time in Europe, and, more recently, in America.

Writing helps me clarify my ideas. It gives me a better context, which makes my art work that much richer.



From Line
1974
Oil on canvas
1.8×2.3 m
I've been wandering around Europe for 40 years, and – fortunately or unfortunately – I've never had a retrospective in Japan

be thrown out, so I had to be careful. When I had the opportunity to be part of the Paris Biennale, I met artists from outside of Japan and realized that I could be more active in Europe, and in fact, I originally gained a following in Germany. I had shows there, and was provided with a place to live, but I never ended up living there because I was considered Oriental, a derogatory word. So again I was criticized, and there I was, alone once more. I have never had any support from a country or a nation. I feel like I've had to fight by myself, to this day. But being lonely I think has given me inspiration and courage. I have a lot of friends in these countries now, so it doesn't seem so important anymore whether I'm 'Oriental' or 'Asian'.

MC You've had a long-standing interest in Korean antiquities, and you were generous enough to donate a number of them to the Musée Guimet in Paris. When we spoke a number of years ago, after the exhibition of your donated works, you said that living in Paris helped you understand that it was good for Korean culture artefacts to be displayed outside of the country, so that people could learn more about the history and traditions of Korea.

LUF There are things about Korea that I both love and detest. I grew up in a home that was very traditional. We had a lot of art works and furniture, so I have a certain nostalgia for the things that were around me as I was growing up. At that time, they weren't recognized as being important as art objects. I began to collect them in the 1960s and '70s. At the time these things were practically free and readily available. So even with very little money, I was able to collect them. I really wanted this collection to go to a place where many people would see it. The Musée Guimet is an Asian museum, and I thought that was a good place for them. Paradoxically, when I made the donation, the Korean newspapers criticized me because they believed that these items were taken from Korea, where they should belong; they thought I was selling out my country.

MC When I last visited your studio in Kamakura in Japan, about 50 kilometres southwest of Tokyo, I was struck by what a beautiful, serene environment you've created there. Can you describe your daily practice?

LUF I only spend three or four months a year in Japan; I spend the remaining time in Europe, and, more recently, in America. I also go to Korea a few times a year. When I return to Japan from these short stays, I want it to be a time for me to sort things out in my mind, to have some quiet time, but that can't always be. Whether I'm in Paris, Germany or New York, my lifestyle is not so different. I wake up in the morning, I go for a walk, I might get some bread, I check my schedule. I may not make drawings while I'm on the road *per se*, but I do explore ideas. At home, I try to make art every day. It's important to keep my hands working so that I can continue to work in an uninterrupted manner; I think psychologically it's good for me to always take that action toward making work.

MC You described some of the complexities of being an Asian artist in Europe. I'm aware that in recent years though, you and your work have been increasingly recognized outside of Asia. I saw your exhibition at the Museé d'art Moderne de Saint-Etienne Métropole in 2005, and it's now the eve of the opening of your retrospective 'Marking Infinity' at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Can you tell us a little bit more of what we might expect at the Guggenheim exhibition? Are there some key themes or issues that you felt very pertinent for audiences here in America to recognize?

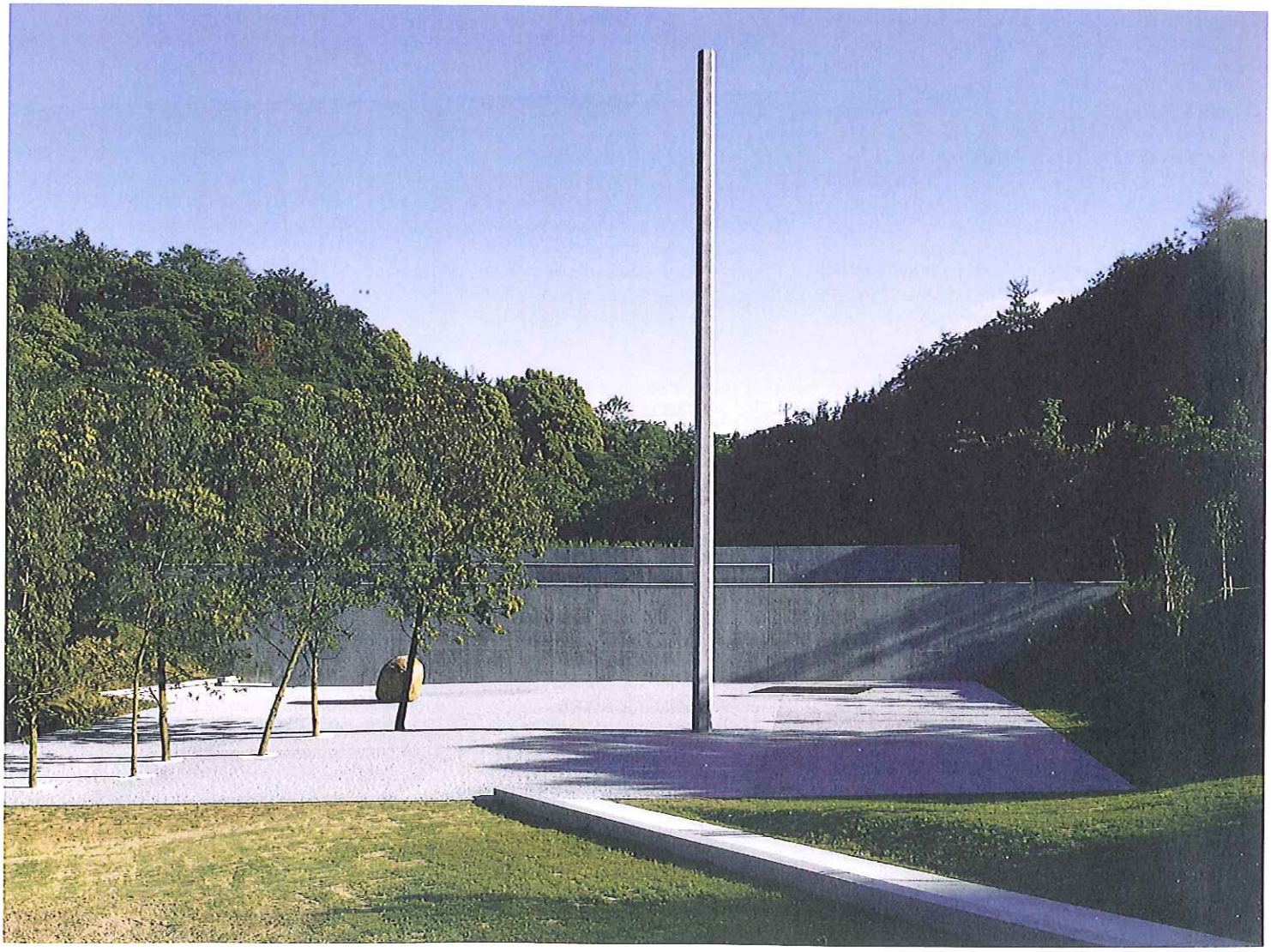
LUF I've been wandering around Europe for 40 years, and – fortunately or unfortunately, as the situation may be – I've never had a retrospective in Japan, though I've had opportunities to have gallery shows. This is my biggest retrospective to date. My work has to do with myself, but also with my relationship to the other. It has to do with making, but not making. My work may seem simplistic – there's a small amount of sculpture, a little bit of painting. Culture should not be about raising the gross national product. I am critical of corporations and the endless types of manufacturing and production that occur, and humans wanting to aggressively realize whatever it is that comes to their minds. It's okay to lower the GNP and think about nature. If we had done that, perhaps the Fukushima nuclear reactor accident would never have occurred. It's important to think about holding back and stopping to think, to be quiet, and to think of ourselves as part of the universe. Humans shouldn't be at the centre of it. And we should be more reflective about who we are and what we do.

MC Do you have a message that you would like to convey to those who may or may not know your work?

LUF I would like people to see in my work a statement about what's happened with the earthquake, the tsunami and the nuclear reactor. It's not that I can help in the recovery effort, but I want to say that what occurred in Japan recently should never happen again. My work is simple, but there is energy and power that one feels through my sculpture and paintings, and it's physicality that I'm dealing with. In this day of computers, it's about information and the processing of information, but that alone is not enough. People are part of nature, and there are environmental issues we need to consider. I would like Americans and Europeans to set their eyes toward this aspect of physicality. By physicality I don't mean just the body itself, but with the body and the relationship between the space and air and so forth. In my exhibition, whether you like it or not, one should feel the air and the vibration within. I want there to be a feeling of healing, and I hope that people will receive some hints of that, through seeing my work. ●

Dr. Melissa Chiu is Museum Director and Vice President, Global Art Programs at Asia Society in New York, USA. She has organized nearly 30 exhibitions of artists from across Asia; her books include Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China *(2007),* Chinese Contemporary Art: 7 Things You Should Know *(2008),* Asian Art Now *(Monacelli Press, 2010, co-authored with Benjamin Genocchio) and the anthology* Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader *(MIT Press, 2011, co-edited with Benjamin Genocchio).*

Lee Ufan's first US retrospective, 'Marking Infinity', opens at the Guggenheim Museum in New York on 24 June and runs until 28 September. A solo exhibition of his recent paintings and sculptures is on view at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria, until 18 June; his work can also be seen in the exhibition 'The World Belongs to You' at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy, until 31 December. A selection of English translations of his writings from 1967 until 2007 are compiled in the book The Art of Encounter, *which was published by Lisson Gallery in 2007.*



Relatum-Point, Line, Plane
2010
Concrete, iron and stone
Installation view
Lee Ufan Museum, Naoshima, Japan
I would like people to see in my work a statement about what's happened with the earthquake, the tsunami and the nuclear reactor. I want to say that what occurred in Japan recently should never happen again.