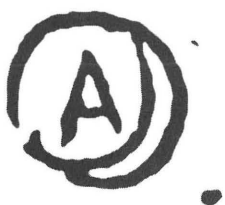


N T R I O
S I B L E
T I O N

Yi Sang's Experimental Poetry in the 1930s
and Its Meaning to Contemporary Design¹



This article bridges east and west by introducing to the western design community the experimental poetry of a Korean avant-garde poet Yi Sang (pen name, Hae-Kyoung Kim, 1910-1937). His experimental poetry from the 1930s, his use of space-time perception and his design sensibilities all contribute to meaning in contemporary design. While many researchers in Korea have investigated his poetry, relatively little insight has been developed regarding his methods and goals for his poems. Trained as an architect, it is my assumption that his strange and often incomprehensible poems from the early 1930s should be interpreted not in the context of textual or literary theory as often supposed, but in the context of visual texts found in such fields as architecture, graphic design and typography. His poetry consists of persistent space-time conceptions as shown in the domain of modern visual arts. By decoding Yi Sang's logics on poetry, we may find how the underlying concept of modern design in the 1930s was encountered by a Korean poet. The 1930s are a legendary period when Korea began to absorb western modernism into its culture, even though it arrived indirectly through Japanese intervention. While this article investigates signs and their inner logic of Korean response to the aesthetic modernism of the 1930s, I argue that even though western modern culture forcefully affected Korean modernists, Yi Sang's creative mind moved beyond modernism and toward deconstruction.

BEYOND POETRY

Nearly six decades have passed since the Korean avant-garde poet, Yi Sang (pen name Hae-Kyoung Kim, 1910-1937) died. Recognized as a genius² and a modernist poet, who wrote experimental poetry in the early 1930s when Korea was under the rule of imperialist Japan, many literary scholars have agreed that his poetry coincided with the development of radical aesthetic conceptions and practices of Korean literary modernism of the 1930s. These expressed intellectual attitudes towards an aesthetic purity for poetry through language refinement as it responded to the emergence of urban daily life.³ Thus the major research on Yi Sang's works have shed light mainly on literary meaning, style and its structure; sometimes on psychoanalytic aspects, when he broke down conventional usage of language, attempting to express "stream of consciousness" and address latent sexuality more effectively.

But these efforts are so limited that they often fail to afford plausible interpretations to Yi Sang's poetry. As a result, most of his early poems still remain incomprehensible. This unintelligibility is largely due to the complex nature and diversity of his talents and practices, which literary approaches have neglected. He is not a man to be confined only to the domain of poetry, but is a man of versatility: as an architect⁴ or a graphic designer and typographer.⁵ Without recognizing such a creative versatility, it is impossible to decipher his enigmatic work.

The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly, to uncover how Yi Sang's time-space conception or his design sensibilities were related to his experimental poetry. This essay proposes that his strange and apparently incomprehensible poems written in the early 1930s should be interpreted not merely in the context of literature, but also in the context of visual arts such as architecture, graphic design and typography. As we shall see in the following discussion, his poetry consists

of persistent time-space conceptions as shown in the domain of modern visual arts. Secondly, this article introduces Yi Sang's works to those outside Korea. By decoding his logic on poetry, we may figure out how the underlying concept of modern design in the 1930s was interpreted by a Korean artist. During this time, western modernism began to be absorbed into Korean culture, though it arrived indirectly through Japanese influence. While the influx of western modern culture has forcefully affected Korean modernists, Yi Sang's creative mind moved beyond its origin in modernism toward deconstruction.

There is profound evidence that Yi Sang made poems to be interpreted as

“the text of the **VISUAL ARTS.**”

First, early in his career, his sensibilities were developed as a painter. (During high school, he learned western painting from Hee-Dong Ko, who practiced western style paintings for the first time in Korea.) As early as 1931, he was recognized in the *Korean Art Exhibition* for a self-portrait. He also made highly compressed illustrations for serials in newspapers and magazines (*figure 1*). Secondly, while attending the most rigorous polytechnic high school in Seoul, his ambitions shifted from painting to architecture. (This was a practical move as the only option to continue painting or drawing in the higher educational system at that time in Korea was within architecture.) After graduation, from 1931 to 1933, he became an architect and worked at the department of architecture of the Japanese government-general.

Thirdly, most of Yi Sang's experimental poems now classified by Korean literary scholars as incomprehensible were produced during his early period as an architect. They were published in the Japanese-language architectural journal, *Korea and Architecture (Chosen to Kenchiki)*. It was during his career as an architect that most of his experimental work developing logics in poetry were established. Thus, “An

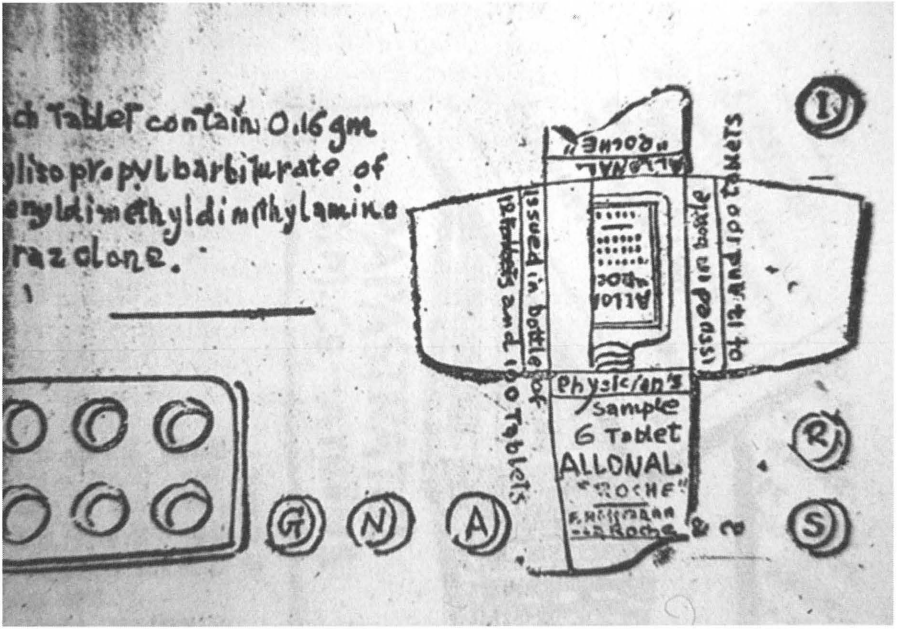


figure 1: An illustration drawn by Yi Sang, Cho Kwang, September, 1936.

Eccentric Reversible Reaction” (July, 1931), “Bird’s-EyeView” (*Chogamdo*, August, 1931), “A Memorandum on Line” (from No. 1 to No. 7) series, “A Plan for Three-Dimensional Angle” (*Samchagak Sulgaedo*, October, 1931) and “An Unlimited Hexahedron in Architecture” (*Kunchuk Muhan Yukmyeongakchel*, July, 1932) were not only published in *Korea and Architecture*, but also consisted of architectural lexicons in terms of their titles and contents. Furthermore, fifteen serialized Korean-language poems of “Crow’s-Eye View” (*Ogamdo*), presented in a Korean newspaper, *Korea Central Daily News* (*Chosun Joongang Ilbo*) in 1934, were ones extracted from his notebooks,⁶ made before his resignation as an architect of the Japanese government-general.

Fourthly, such a connection is palpable as he often mentioned dictums from the German Bauhaus leader, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s book, *The New Vision*,⁷ in the preface of *Korea and Architecture*, where he published his experimental poems. At that time, as an architect, he participated in the editing process of the journal. The fact that he absorbed the principle of “a dynamic-constructive system of forces”⁸ from *The New Vision* is very important, in that it offers some clues to understand what he attempted in his poems. The following preface written in the August 1933 issue of *Korea and Architecture* illustrates how he grasped the idea:

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy –

We free ourselves from the thousand-year-old error of art, originating in Egypt, that only static rhythms can be its elements. We proclaim that for present-day perceptions, the most important elements of art are kinetic rhythms. Biological construction is a form of life phenomena, and it is the basic principle of all human and cosmic development.

The notion of kinetic rhythms in the preface above was originally developed by the Russian constructivists and is related to the futurists' notion of the "dynamic." From the futurist idea that the notion of repose – the static – should be broken down to put forward the dynamic as a principle of artistic creation. The "Realist Manifesto" of Gabo and Pevsner asserted that art must be guided by space and time, eliminating physical mass as a plastic element, while Moholy-Nagy proclaimed a manifesto of "The dynamic-constructive system of forces" in *The New Vision*. It meant that what must be developed was the dynamic construction (vital constructivism and force relations), in which the physical was to be employed merely as the carrier of forces, not the static physical construction of material and form relations. This is why Yi Sang broke down the unity of the linear structure of poems and viewed the linguistic mechanism as constructive elements. His poems are visual texts, experimenting with words in cooperation with diagrams and numerical charts.

Finally, based on the theoretical influences mentioned, Yi Sang actually transferred the idea of abstraction and the dynamic-constructive system of forces into graphic design. This was especially true when he designed covers for the architectural journal, *Korea and Architecture*, for which he was awarded both the first and the third place in its 1929 annual competition. The first place cover design showed an absolute surface treatment through abstraction (*figure 2*). Another cover embraced activation of space, constructed within forces actually at tension by a series of lines, which in turn were constructed within the space as active force (tension). He was eliminating any ornamental surface treatment and using physical mass as a plastic element. He emphasized dynamic construction in graphic representation. Both covers are significant in that no one has achieved similar effects until, at least, the 1960s in Korea. Now let us focus on what he actually did in his experimental poems and how they reveal meaning in contemporary design.

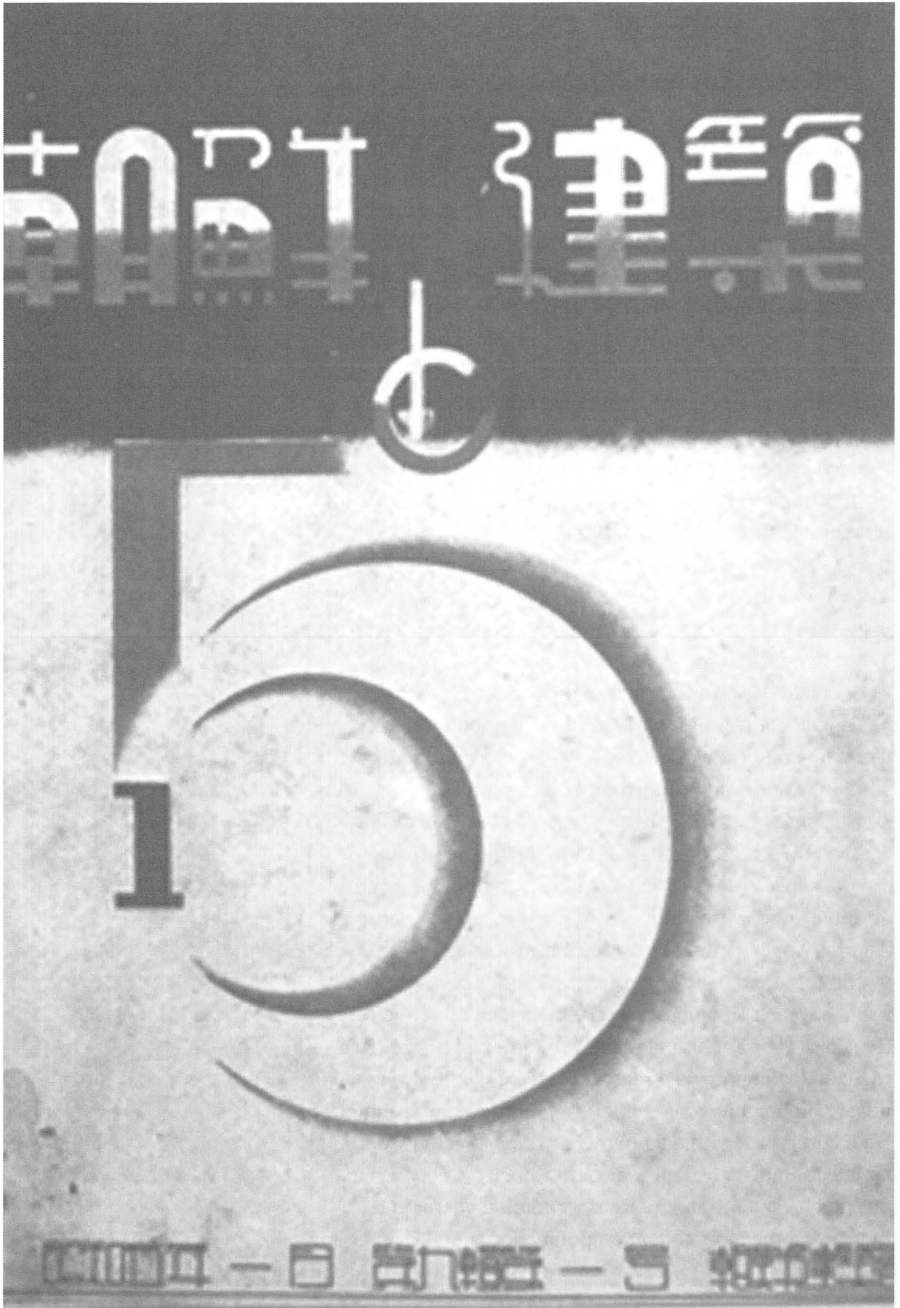


figure 2: A cover design awarded first place in the competition of *Korea and Architecture*, 1929.

INTERPRETING YI SANG'S EXPERIMENTAL POETRY

The major characteristics of Yi Sang's poetry lie in the pursuit of three different processes of dialectic, opposition and reunification within its form and structure. The first is opposition and reunification of image and word, the second is of letters and visual devices such as diagrams and numerical charts within the text and the third is of different streams of dynamic force created within the image itself.

The first approach, opposition and reunification of image and word, was initially brought forward in the poem, "A Memorandum on Line No. 1" from "A Plan for a Three-Dimensional Angle," released in an October 1931 issue of *Korea and Architecture*. The derivative concepts were explained only with literal language in poetry, like "An Eccentric Reversible Reaction" (*Korea and Architecture*, July 1931) and "A Memorandum on Line No. 4" (*Korea and Architecture*, October 1931). Let us uncover the meaning of "A Memorandum on Line No. 1"⁹ (figure 3).

The overall structure of "A Memorandum on Line No. 1" is constructed by dots on x-y coordinates numbered from 1 to 0, which is accompanied by verses that consist of words and phrases. The pictorial image created by numerals and dots at the beginning seems like plain coordinates of a hundred pillars for a schematic architectural construction, thereby suggesting a definitely fixed structure within the axis x and y. This is merely a concrete object revealing geometric spatial order, which neither require any literary explanation nor permit accidents within a definite space. However, such an order is gradually deconstructed by the following verses.

Verse 1, "the cosmos is of power by power," completely negates the suggested pictorial image: now it dissolves into an infinite space from its physical immovability in three-dimensional space. Then Yi Sang presents the verse 2, "People throw away numbers," as a precondition for the

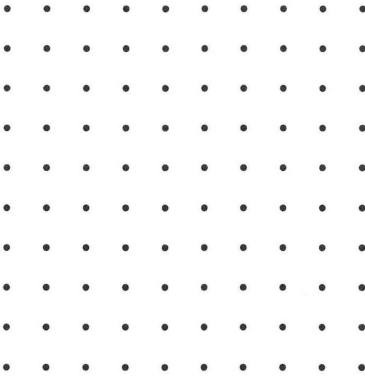
A MEMORANDUM ON LINE NO. 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
1	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
2	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
3	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
4	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
5	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
6	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
7	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
8	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
9	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
0	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

- ① (The cosmos is of power by power)
- ② (People throw away numbers)
- ③ (Quietly make me a proton of an electron)
- ④ Spectol
- ⑤ axis x, axis y, axis z
- ⑥ The control over velocity etc. for example, if the light does in fact travel at 300,000 km/sec it is not impossible for an invention of man to run away at 600,000 km/sec. Take that and multiply it millions and millions of times then a man can see the evidence of millions and millions years' prehistory. Do we call that the infinite breakdown? An atom is an atom is an atom. Does physiological metabolism mutate? An atom is not an atom is not an atom is not an atom. Is radiation a breakdown? People have to know the thing that can save eternal eternity is not life but light.
- ⑦ The smell of taste and the taste of smell
- ⑧ (The birth through the desperation of the three dimension)
- ⑨ (The birth through the desperation of movement)
- ⑩ (If the earth is an empty house the feudal days will yearn earnestly with tears)

figure 3: "A Memorandum on Line No. 1"
Korea and Architecture, October, 1931.

next deconstruction. The following figure shows a transformation of the image caused by discarding numerals from the coordinates.



Following the verse, the above figure leaves only the relationship between anonymous dots, like unsettled particles. One can see this as a result of some accident within absolute order. In other words, a negation of “fixed substantivity” by the coordinate, is related to the subsequent verse 3, “Quietly make me a proton of an electron,” showing how the verse is related to the notion of matter and human existence: not only is it a negation of the Newtonian mechanical model of the universe which assumes material particles, the so-called “atom as the basic element of the universe,” but in effect, also the deterministic ego-centrism of Cartesian philosophy.

Yi Sang was fully aware of quantum physics, which represented new ideas about existence in modern physics, replacing Newtonian-classical physics. At the turn of the century, physicists began to address the question of the ultimate nature of matter experimentally. They discovered several phenomena connected with the structure of atoms, which were indispensable to classical physics. They were able

to probe deeper and deeper into nature, uncovering one layer of matter after another in the search for its ultimate elements. Thus the existence of the atom stood at the start of a line of discoveries: of extremely small particles, including its constituents (the nuclei and electrons) and finally the components of the nucleus (the protons and neutrons) and many other “subatomic particles.” In the 1920s, further discoveries by Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg and others revealed that particles were nothing like the solid objects classical physics had supposed: subatomic units of matter were very “abstract entities” and had dual aspects. Depending on how we look at them, they appear sometimes as “particles,” sometimes as “waves;” and this dual nature is also exhibited by light which can take the form of electromagnetic waves or particles: “quantum theory.”

This notion of quantum theory was obviously expressed in verse 3, “Quietly make me a proton of an electron.” by which Yi Sang attempted a new self-declaration that expressed himself, not as a crystallization of “atomic being,” but as a “quantum being” (with dual characters of particles and waves) that silently travel at the imperceptible speed of light. This verse suggests complete negation of the deterministic concept of self by Descartes. The modern concept of self derived from Descartes is, in its extreme, represented by reason, and here all philosophical objects are considered an establishment of existence of autonomous reasoning. This means that there is fundamental division between “I” and the world – the spirit/matter dualism: in Descartes’ philosophical proposition of “I think, therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*), “I” points out that itself is a wholly conscious being and depicts an autonomous and isolated being.

Through juxtaposing opposite verses 4 and 5, Yi Sang ascertained that the single key to perceive quantum being can only be the “spectral apparatus” (Spectrol in verse 4) that arranges spectral effects of light in the order of wavelength, not the Euclidean geometry that has x, y, z coordinates (verse

5). Next, verse 6 has something to do with the principle of relativity which is a complement of the quantum theory. Indeed, soon after the formulation of the quantum physics, modern physicists found that incorporation of quantum theory and theory of relativity was necessary in order to fully explain nuclear phenomena. They realized that every description of natural phenomena involving velocities close to the speed of light needed to take account of the principles of relativity. This was because they found that protons, electrons and neutrons, which had replaced the previous nucleus and myriad of particles in the state of sub-atoms, moved so fast that their speed comes close to the speed of light. Einstein's theory of relativity brought forward an explanation about the "relative time and space" of the moving particle which had to be conceived as a dynamic pattern, a process involving the energy which manifested itself as the particles' mass. The theory of relativity tells us that time and space are not separated but correlated as a four-dimensional continuum and, if different observers move at a different speed in the same case, all cases can be considered to be discrepant. Here, all measurements carried out in time and space lose absolute significance. This new notion was well captured in Yi Sang's other poem, "A Memorandum on Line No. 5" (*Korea and Architecture*, October 1931) as follows:

When a man runs faster than light can he see the light? He can see it, he marries twice in the vacuum of age, Or is it three times? He runs faster than light... (omitted)

Therefore, if a man runs faster than light, as in verse 6, "prehistoric evidences" will be visible through transcendence of time and space. Thus he suggested that matter consists of something which is both a particle and a moving wave, through the verses "an atom is an atom is an atom" and "an atom is not an atom is not an atom..." Next, he

noted that “movement,” driven by the light, forces the human into infinite time and space, undoing the absolute meaning of the self. In such a case, according to the theory of relativity, two events which are seen as occurring simultaneously by one observer may occur in different temporal sequences for other observers. This notion was dramatically captured in verse 7, “The smell of taste and the taste of smell,” which means that all measurements involving time and space lose their absolute significance. Now he finds out that, as in verse 8, the ultimate destination of this breaking-down process is emptiness or nothingness by manifesting, “If the earth is an empty house the feudal days will yearn earnestly with tears.”

At this stage, Yi Sang had to resist all sorts of prejudice concerning existing language, significance and subsistence. Because he realized that, at the deepest level, understanding matter was no longer derived from direct sensory experience, ordinary language, which had taken its images from the sensory world was no longer adequate to describe the new vision. So he had to abandon more and more of the images and concepts of ordinary language.

This self-awareness was realized in the second step of Yi Sang’s poetry. He began to see words as holding formative visual elements, rather than things that have literal significance, and proceeded to replace the literal language with the developing visual language. Among fifteen serialized Korean-language poems of “Crow’s-Eye View” (*Ogamdo*), presented in a Korean newspaper *Korea Central Daily News* in 1934, “Poem No. I” (*Shi che i ho*), “Poem No. II” (*Shi che i ho*) and “Poem No. III” (*Shi che sam ho*) are good examples in this context. These poems, unlike those which previously employed literal language to explain diagrams as in “A Memorandum on Line No. 1,” now function as images themselves. (For instance, see “Poem No. I of “Crow’s-Eye View”¹⁰ in figure 4.)

CROW'S EYE VIEW: POEM NO. 1

- ① Thirteen kids make a mad dash down the street.
(if the road is a dead-end alley, that's appropriate.)
- ② The first kid says, "It's scary!"
And the second kid says, "It's scary!"
And the third kid says, "It's scary!"
And the fourth kid says, "It's scary!"
And the fifth kid says, "It's scary!"
And the sixth kid says, "It's scary!"
And the seventh kid says, "It's scary!"
And the eighth kid says, "It's scary!"
And the ninth kid says, "It's scary!"
And the tenth kid says, "It's scary!"
- ③ And the eleventh kid says, "It's scary!"
And the twelfth kid says, "It's scary!"
And the thirteenth kid says, "It's scary!"
- ③—① Among the thirteen kids gathered there are only scary kid and scared kids
(Actually, it was better that they were there for no other reason.)
- ④—① If one among these kids is a scary kid, that's o.k. too.
If two among these kids are scary kids, that's o.k. too.
- ④—② If two among these kids are scared kids, that's o.k. too.
If one among these kids is a scared kid, that's o.k. too.
- ⑤ (Even if the alley is a through-way, that's appropriate.)
If thirteen kids don't make a mad dash down the street, that's o.k. too.

figure 4: "Crow's-Eye View: Poem No. 1"
Korea Central Daily News, 1934.

In verse 1, the phrase of "...make a mad dash down the street" and that of "a dead-end alley" are in antagonism, not only in terms of structure, but also of significance, which form a further oppositional set with the final verse 5. For example, "a dead-end alley/a through-way alley" and "...make a mad dash.../...don't make a mad dash..." correspond to the basic factors of opposition. Stated in verse 2 is the scared kids from "the first kid" to "the thirteenth kid," and in a separated verse 3 there are three kids from "the eleventh kid" to "the thirteenth kid." *Figure 5* shows such a relationship in diagrammatic view. What can be brought to understanding through the figure is that Yi Sang's fundamental reason for the setup of the thirteen kids was to have an ideal array with respect to image. From the first kid to the tenth kid, ten kids are taken as a diagrammatically bigger unit of 1, and the rest of "the eleventh kid to the thirteenth kid" are considered as a proportional unit to 1. In summary, this is a similar method employed in the equation " $1+3$ or $3+1$ " from "A Memorandum on Line No.2" (see *figure 6*) while a diagram from "A Memorandum on Line No. 2," shows a series of oppositional units produced by 1 and 3 (see *figure 7*).

Such a diagrammatic approach was possible, because he was well aware of the basic principles of architectural proportion by virtue of knowledge of Euclidean geometry. Since classical Greek architecture, space separation commonly used in architectural proportion derived from the fact that the consecutive proportional length of a diagonal line to a side from a square is $1:\sqrt{3}$. Evidence of this fact is that the kids from the first to the tenth were positioned in verse 2, while three kids from the eleventh to the thirteenth were separated in verse 3.

As mentioned above, the image of nuclear fission in "Poem No. I" is more intensified in the literally composed "Poem No. II" and "Poem No. III." Especially in the case of "Poem No. II," the visible divisions achieved by typographic

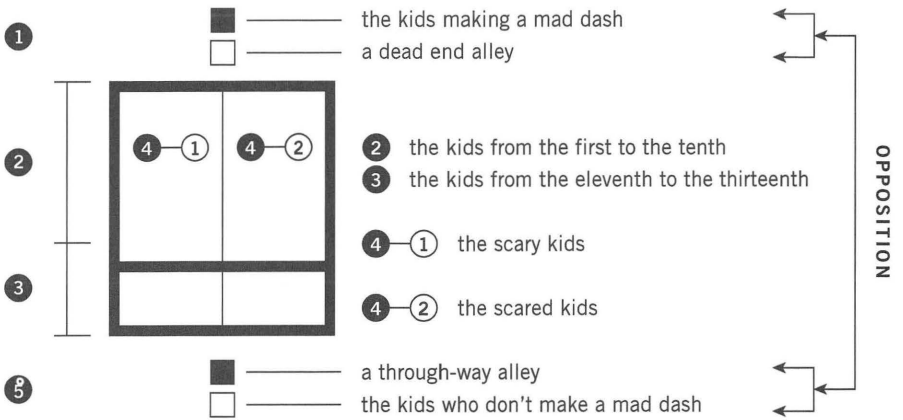


figure 5: A diagrammatic view of "Poem No. 1."

A MEMORANDUM ON LINE NO. 2

1 + 3
3 + 1
3 + 1 1 + 3
1 + 3 3 + 1
1 + 3 1 + 3
3 + 1 3 + 1
3 + 1
1 + 3

point A on a line
point B on a line
point C on a line

$A + B + C = A$
 $A + B + C = B$
 $A + B + C = C$

intersection A of two lines
intersection B of two lines
intersection C of two lines

3 + 1
1 + 3
1 + 3 3 + 1
3 + 1 1 + 3
3 + 1 3 + 1
1 + 3 1 + 3
1 + 3
3 + 1

(...omitted)

*figure 6: "A Memorandum on Line No. 2,"
Korea and Architecture, October, 1931.*

1 + 3
 3 + 1
 3 + 1 1 + 3
 1 + 3 3 + 1
 1 + 3 1 + 3
 3 + 1 3 + 1
 3 + 1
 1 + 3

3 + 1
 1 + 3
 1 + 3 3 + 1
 3 + 1 1 + 3
 3 + 1 3 + 1
 1 + 3 1 + 3
 1 + 3
 3 + 1

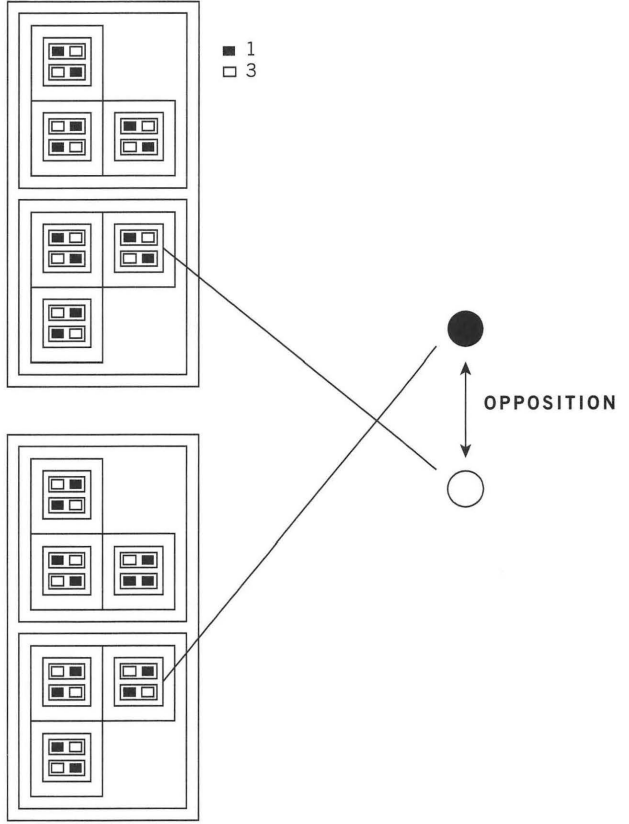


figure 7: A diagram showing a series of oppositional units in "A Memorandum on Line No. 2."

spacing were removed to adopt an endless repetitive structure by employing automatic descriptive technique (so-called automatism) of surrealism as follows:

POEM NO. 11¹¹

when/my/father/dozes/off/beside/me/i/become/my/father/
and/ also/i/become/my/father's/father/and/even/so/while/my/
father/like/my/father/is/just/my/father/why/do/i/repeatedly/
my/father's/father's/father's/.../when/i/become/a/father/
why/must/i/leap/over/my/father/and/why/am/i/that/which/
while/finally/playing/all/at/once/my/and/my/father's/and/
my/father's/and/my/father's/father's/ father's/roles/must/live?

As a result, we can now suppose that poetry of this kind was devised to convert visual images into a diagrammatical composition of literal language. Also, these are in line with the content of “A Memorandum on Line No. 1,” which signified continuous breaking down of absolute substances. Certain scholars argue that Yi Sang’s repetitive use of synonyms by means of “~’s~’s/~of~of” in the poems written in Japanese was meant to mimic Japanese dadaists like Kitasono Katue in the 1920s. However, this is an absolutely superficial and erroneous over-simplification that merely compares the similarities in the literary style of European and Japanese dadaists. Rather, it could be said that while the avowed Japanese dadaists only imitated their Western counterpart, Yi Sang reached the apex of dadaism by his own original means.

For example, European dadaists laid emphasis upon the “law of innumerable construction” as their most valued target of pursuit. Originally, dada artists objected to standardization through integration of the anarchist attitude and organic posture. For this, dada poets investigated both “illogical chance composition” exploring semantic disorder and “logical and extra-logical compositions” examining

various kinds of semantic coherence. The former approach was typically manifested when a dadaist, Tristan Tzara, proclaimed in his “Recipe for a Dadaist Poem,” which recommends:

Take a newspaper. Take a pair of scissors. Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem. Cut out the article. Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag. Shake it gently. Then take out the pieces one after the other. Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.¹²

This recipe functioned not only as an experiment for creating “illogical chance poetry,” but also formed a consciously bizarre anti-recipe, demonstrating the limitations of dogmatic literary conventions. Collaborating with Richard Huelsenback and Marcel Janco, Tzara also created the “simultaneous poem” – a form of “chance poetry” composed of randomly juxtaposed texts in different languages which the three authors read simultaneously accompanied by various noises.

The latter approach, “logical and extra-logical compositions,” was typical in Kurt Schwitters’ “Logically Consistent Poetry.”¹³ The nature of absolutely logical poetry suggests that such poetry must be made of “unequivocal” materials: words. As a unique figure in dada circles, Schwitters rejected his former aesthetics of imitations in favor of an aesthetics of the material. This is one of the reasons why he founded his *Merz* art, which meant “the adjustment of one element to another.” He used cloth, cardboard, machine parts, iron, wire, old pieces of furniture, rope, newspapers and rubbish of any kind, adjusted these different materials to each other, and fixed their relationship by nailing, gluing and pasting them together to form a relief-collage. It was intended to dissolve the cultural norms according to which materials have their logical purpose.

Despite their different approaches, there is no doubt that dadaists in general intended to search for “a rule for nothingness.” In 1919, Tzara suggested in his Note on Poetry that a poet should “learn to recognize and gather the traces of force... engraved on crystals... [and] in clouds... Give each element its integrity, its autonomy, conditions necessary for the creation of new constellations.”¹⁴ In the same way, Schwitters identified dada art as purposeless, but as a balance attained through the evaluation of its parts. In much the same way, Hans Arp called for an art which would be “anonymous... like the clouds;” which would offer “a balance between heaven and hell; and which would not wish to copy nature... [but] produce like a plant.”¹⁵ Therefore, in an attempt to fulfill their ideals, dadaists all seem to have advocated a balanced, organic poetry following its artistic ideals, while accepting that a poetry giving “autonomy” to all of its elements could not evince the impersonal and “purposeless” anonymity of dada’s plastic works. As Arp concluded, dadaist poetry should have to allow “a nose to appear in a square,” which means that there should be a compromise between formal perfection (a square) and expressive freedom (a nose). In reality, however, it is important to note that the dada poets’ works ultimately failed to exemplify this organic ideal. In other words, dadaist poetry was not able to “gather the traces of force...engraved on crystals... [and] in clouds and failed to create a balance between heaven and hell,” and grow “like a plant” – no nose in a square. Dada poets only produced two opposite modes of rule for nothingness: the rule of absolute illogical chance as seen in Tzara and others; and the rule of absolute logical order as seen in Schwitters.

However, as I already mentioned, in Yi Sang’s poetry we can find that continuous autonomy is produced through a concrete structure in conflict, and accidental factors hidden by clouds are sprung out, which eventually resolve to an unlimited possibility. His poetry, although composed

of geometric diagrammatic images, was not itself an absolute one. His poetry deconstructed the square by an exquisite nose, clearly a process of growing organically like a plant. Such achievement had no exact precedent. His poetry predicted the true image of “concrete poetry:” that is, ideogrammatic poetry practiced by a group of Brazilian poets in the 1950s, which allowed adoption of dynamic structure with graphic space as a structural medium as well as a multiplicity of concomitant movements.

The best example of such features can be found from the confrontation of abstraction and the counteraction within the structure of the pure graphic image, which is the third characteristic of Yi Sang’s poetry. “Poem No. IV” from “Crow’s-Eye View” (see figure 8) put stress merely on the visual form consisting of numbers and dots, whose basic motives for the image had been originated from “A Memorandum on Line No. 1.” It was based on an upside down image of “Diagnosis 0:1,” from “An Unlimited Hexahedron in Architecture” (*Kunchuk Muhan Yukmyeongakche*) published in *Korea and Architecture*, July 1932 (see figure 9). Here, Yi Sang seems to pursue methods of integrating the previous experiments by virtue of pure graphic image without the assistance of literal language. At the outset, the visual image from a finite coordinate in “A Memorandum on Line No. 1” had been itself a typical model of absolute substance, existence and space, which was subject to negation or deconstruction. In other words, it was an image intended to represent substance and existence, Newtonian space of Euclidean geometry and separated time concept, and Cartesian concept of absolute self. And the image was dissolved by the successive verses in words. But here in “Poem No. IV,” he abstracted all the concepts manifested from “A Memorandum on Line No. 1.” The fact that the interim experiment headed towards these procedures had already appeared in “Diagnosis 0:1” reveals a possibility of tracing his attempts to hold original thoughts only with

the graphic language and not the literary language. By counter-tracing his flow of thought manifested in “Diagnosis 0:1,” we can find answers to the meaning of “Poem No. IV.”

In “Diagnosis 0:1,” it seems that Yi Sang imagined dots moving in space once fixed by numerical coordinates of “A Memorandum on Line No. 1.” He might have considered an image of numberless dots as his starting point. Then he replaced dots of the “infinite coordinates” by numbers 1, 2, 3... 9, 0. His ultimate experiment was to set “1” and “0” as the basic factors of opposition and bring about spatial changes generated by dots (“•”). It is a very complicated relative form having an opposing structure and a vibrating system in terms of image and content. The overall shape of the poem is equipped with at least three modes of opposing structures (*see figure 10*).

Now consider what is taking place within the inner structure. Firstly, the disposition of dots in the space of infinite coordinates assumed in “A Memorandum on Line No. 1” has generated a new space in conjugation with many different combinatorial methods. At first, “0” is placed in newly created spaces by dots in the infinite coordinates, with the exclusion of the first row, and dots continuously disrupt the combination of numbers of each row. These disruptions successfully create new combinations in each row. For instance, the original combination of ten numbers from 1 to 0 proceeds to the alteration into ten types of combination formed by nine numbers with the help of dots until the next one is reached, and finally restores the altered combination to the original one of 1 to 0. This is easily explicable with a diagram (*see figure 11*).

Analyzing *figure 11*, the initial combination constructed by ten numbers from 1 to 0 is disrupted into ten different combinations by a single dot within the structure, and again, accurately restored to a unity of ten numbers. The direction of motion leads us to the same result in the

opposite case as stated in a phrase of “An Eccentric Reversible Reaction:” “two types of beings, affection by time,” which was the very first poem Yi Sang published in *Korea and Architecture*.

In conclusion, “Diagnosis 0:1” was a visual poem that concerned two types of beings affected by time, namely “0” (10) and “1” and that which illustrated how one combination (1), confirmed by 10 basic elements (0), is re-disrupted into ten (0) combinations by a single dot (1). We must notice the fact that number “0” and “1” have nothing to do with literary allegory. They themselves have profound philosophical significance. Up until now, scholars have brought forward various explanations on what “0:1” really means: in its extreme, it is considered a sexual denotation of female and male genitals, based on the sheer literal shape of a hole and a stick; or sometimes as an opposition of emptiness and existence. These interpretations, however, only penetrate the literary significance that number carries in literary imagination, and no speculation was made on the role and interaction of 0 and 1 as an individual being in a whole structure. In summary, “0:1” draws the flow of dynamic energy between two types of endlessly altering, inseparable eternal beings, which reminds us of the state of the “Tao” of Taoism and the “Zen” of Buddhism.

Next, it seems that Yi Sang used subtitle, “A problem concerning the patient’s condition,” as a carrier to transfer such a philosophical notion into rather conventional literary form. Given that he had originally derived the basic elements of formative images from “A Memorandum on Line No. 1,” it is likely that he added the last verse, “Diagnosis 0:1” and its poetic signature, “As above Physician-in-charge Yi Sang,” after his plastic experimentation completed. What he, as a “physician-in-charge,” suggested after the diagnosis of the patient is obvious: the being cannot be isolated from the observer; rather it always alters in relation to time and space; so the patient we consider is in no way a patient; or

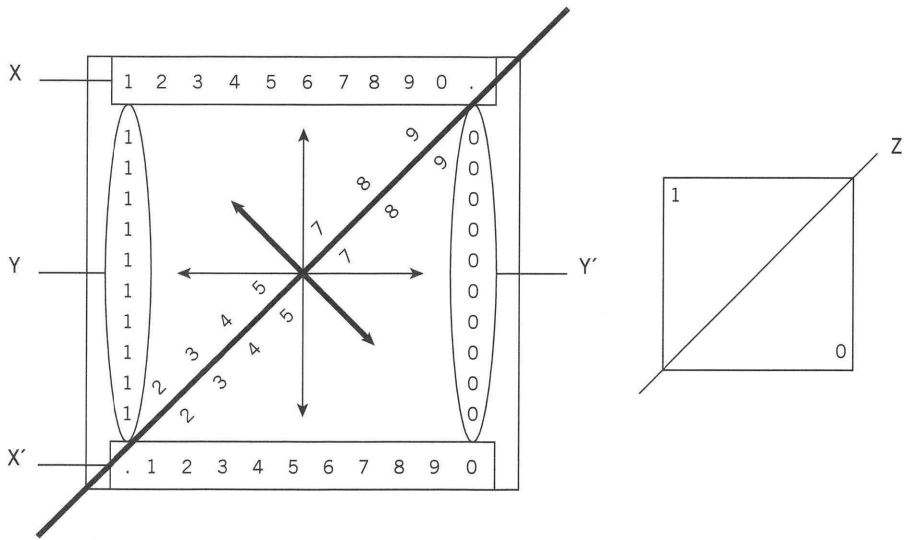


figure 10: A diagrammatic view of "Diagnosis 0:1."

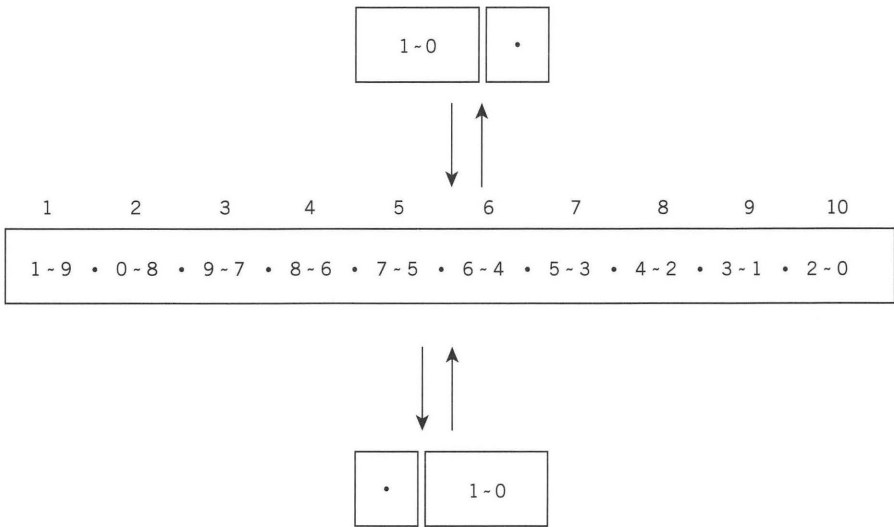


figure 11: A diagram showing ten different combinations and the direction of internal disruption in "Diagnosis 0:1."

the normal and the abnormal is dependent upon where the diagnostician stands.

However, it seems that Yi Sang might have felt dissatisfaction at the image projected in the final stage of laying down subtitle, diagnosis and signature. This is because, the final image of the poem "Diagnosis 0:1" might have seemed much too "normal" to him. Therefore, in an attempt to emphasize the patient's condition, he felt the need of some visual treatment. He upturned the number arrays of the poem in "Poem No. IV" of "Crow's-Eye View," which produced a great success. He not only visualized the concept of negation, but also integrated the movement toward infinite time and space and the disruption of absolute self.

THE REVOLUTIONARY NATURE OF YI SANG'S POETRY

The achievement of "Poem No. IV" is that, by potential movement of its dynamic structure, it permits meaningful confusion of an exquisite "nose" within the absolute order of a "square." This special feature of Yi Sang's poetry not only attained what dada poets were unable to grasp, but also can be traced back to the creators of modern concrete poetry organized by adoption of dadaism after the 1950s.

Concrete poetry succeeded in the visual investigation of nonlinear dada poetry. However, concrete poetry, unlike the autonomy that dadaists resigned themselves to balancing their conflicting desires for formal perfection, accentuated "togetherness of words." It utilized "graphic space" as a structural agent. In concrete poetry, words are not used primarily as an intentional carrier of meaning, but served as an aesthetic communication scheme and shared quality with an ideogrammatic graphic. As such, by adopting the pure visual "impression" derived by togetherness of words, concrete poetry carries the figure that converts the phrase into significance in terms of the characteristics of its montage image.

The best example of a successful montage is Seiichi Niikuni's "River/Sandbank," in 1974, which bears similarity with Yi Sang's "Poem No. IV." (see figure 12). Niikuni's poetry was composed from accurate and conscious visual observation unattained by dada poet's noisy "simultaneous poem" or "sound poem." It sentimentally visualized the features of a flowing river over a "delta" by means of placing "river" on the left triangle over "sandbank" on the lower right triangle. At this stage, we can discover the special features and radical nature of Yi Sang's "Poem No. IV."

It not only materializes all the visual elements possessed by concrete poetry from forty years ago, but also illustrates his transcendence of dadaists and modern concrete poets. As shown in the above discussion, he proved the very essence of the "dialectics of negation," which was capable of unifying both extreme ends of absolute chance and absolute order. Dada poets never hoped to attain it; they worked only in isolated extreme dimensions, despite their original intention to create a balance between them. This was finally realized in "Poem No. IV," generating "dynamic internal movement." On the other hand, we can just see the referential significance from the examples of concrete poetry. In Niikuni's "River/Sandbank," verbal words afford the movement in the slanted side of the lower right triangle. However, no direct verbal referents exist in "Poem No. IV," except its literary expressions of subtitle, diagnosis and signature. Only the relationship among the "abstract beings" – numbers and dots – exist.

In spite of all this, what is the reason for the amazing latent capacity of the new magnificent meanings derived from the abstract being? This could be attributed to the power inherent in the abstract form. But it is important to note that the abstract form Yi Sang used was not "the form of being" generally adopted by conventional abstract art. His abstract form was "the form of becoming" delivered by the flow of an ever-transforming energy – light – which he desperately desired. In other words, it was the possession

of such power that permitted no fixed abstraction. At the same time, it had a power of self-explanation. Such revolutionary nature has never before existed in any form of art and design until deconstructionist design theory and its actual practice became evident in the contemporary domain of visual arts.

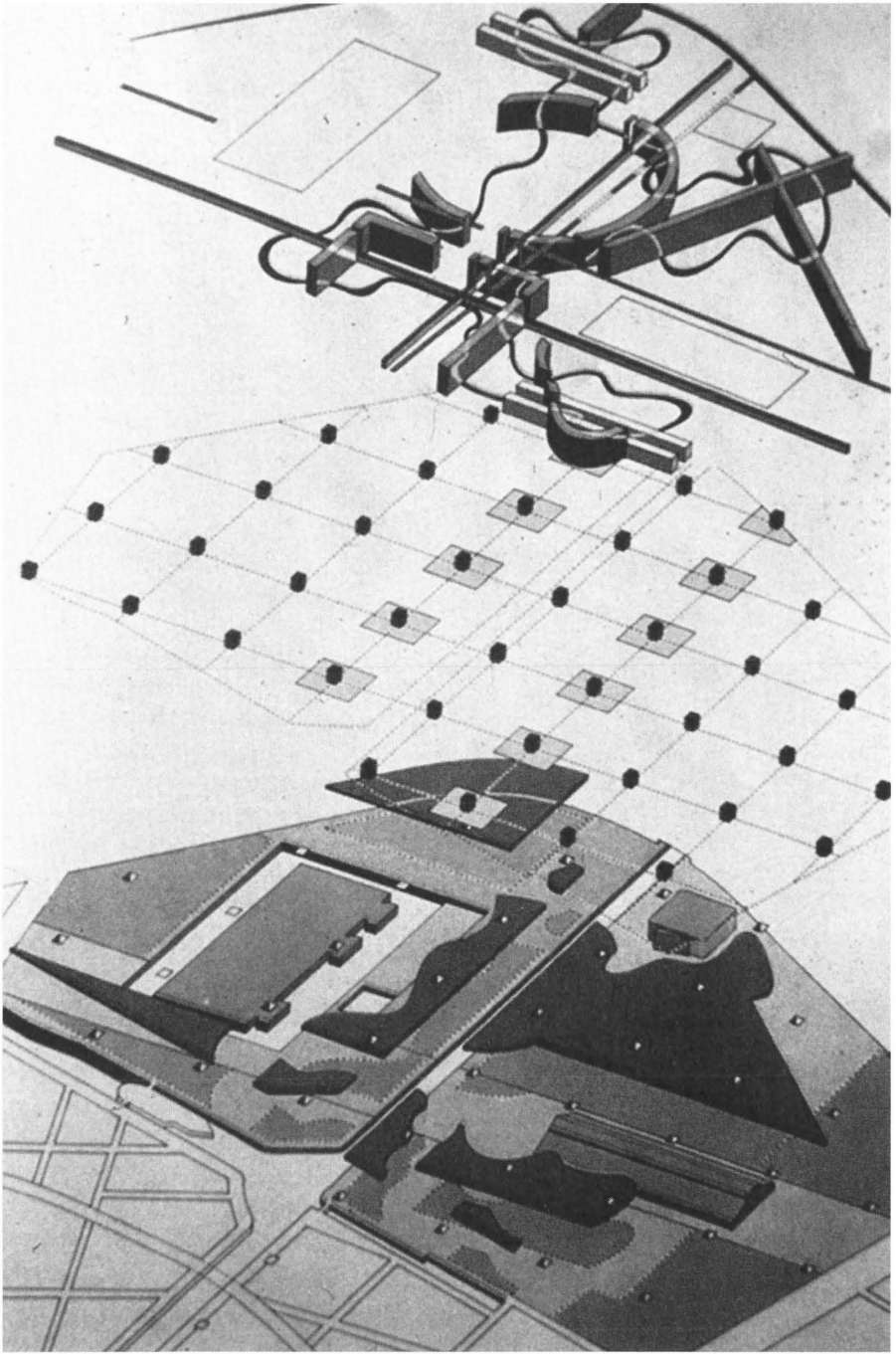
Today, the ultimate goal of modern design represented by deconstructionist architecture is taking place through dissociation of the architectural “telos” on structure and function. Deconstruction provides the frame in which it is possible to establish a distance from what has hitherto dominated architectural thinking. It allows for the unintended, in the sense of giving a place to that which cannot be predicted; a search no longer dominated by teleology. Architecture no longer organizes space as a function or in view of economic or techno-utilitarian norms. Of course, these norms are taken into consideration in deconstructionist architecture, but they find themselves subordinated and re-inscribed such that they no longer command the final word. For this, deconstructionist architects utilize various strategic concepts such as de-centering, dissociation, disjunction, dislocation, incongruity, discrepancy and discontinuity.

At the outset, deconstruction was launched as a philosophical idea that, as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida first developed, assumed that language has the ability to stir up the position of power that is present within the text. It originated from his claim that language cannot function as a sign without being considered as the relationship with other presences, showing that the text never exactly means what it says or says what it means.¹⁶ It is precisely this assumption that Derrida set out to subvert by insisting on the non-self-identical nature of the linguistic sign, its involvement in an unlimited signifying process (or what he named *différance*) which cannot be arrested by any such limit.

Différance is a kind of strategic neologism compounded by two verbs “to differ” and “to defer.” In brief, what it

signifies is the fact that meaning can never be accounted for in terms of punctual self-presence; that language is not only – as Saussure argued – a “differential” structure of contrasts and relationships “without positive terms,” but also that meaning is endlessly deferred along the chain of linguistic substitutions and displacements that occur whenever we seek to define what a given term signifies in context.¹⁷ In a sense, those “aesthetics of absence” in the visual arts and literature may be portrayed as a style of anti-essentialism or anarchic nihilism which rejects any affirmation of texts, visual or otherwise. However, it implies that the human being himself is assumed to have individually different meaning and relative subjectivity, and that there exists the omnipresence of figural language in the texts. The message of “Poem No. IV” lies here. Its overall structure of grid and of numbers and dots leaves opportunities for chance, formal invention, dynamic transformation. This architectonic power of “Poem No. IV” reminds us of the deconstructionist architect Bernard Tschumi’s plan for the “Parc de la Villette” built in the 1980s (see *figure 13*). It has over thirty fire-engine red constructions of enameled steel, located every 120 meters on a grid. Named “folies,” those structures deconstruct the semantics of architecture, but maintain the omnipresence of figural language in an architectural text (structure) (see *figure 14*).

Coincidentally, Yi Sang captured this power of omnipresence in the 1930s. However, it was too early to understand and accept his revolutionary scheme at that time. In this sense, “Poem No. IV” might be a diagnosis on the limited eyes of the people who blamed him for insanity, as serialized poems of “Crow’s-Eye View” were being released. When he ceased his high level intellectual experiments and was forced to use plain language in the style of a novel, it must have been the surrounding ignorant eyes that led him to mental imprisonment – more tragic than the colonization of Korea by Japanese imperialists.



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figure 13: Bernard Tschumi's architectural plan for the Parc de la Villette: superimposition of lines, points and surfaces, 1985.

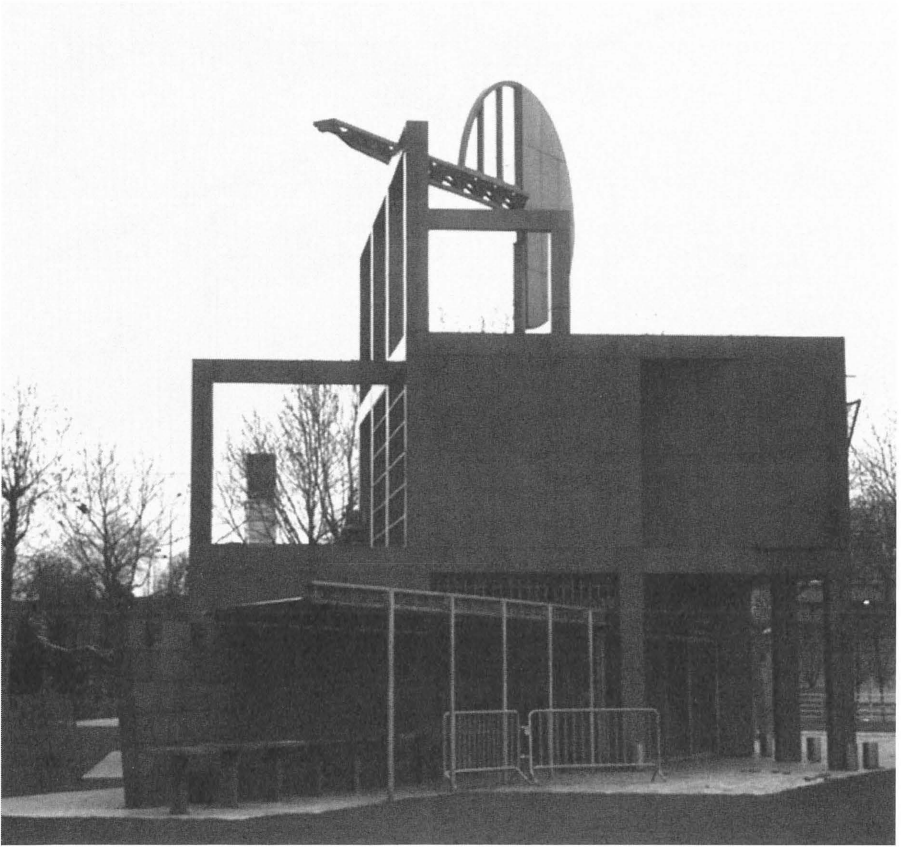


figure 14: An example of "folies" at the Parc de la Villette by Bernard Tschumi, 1985.

In conclusion, Yi Sang's eccentric poetry was the fruit of his intellectual experiment that dug deep into human existence or self with respect to the new world that modern physics had revealed at the beginning of the twentieth century. His works transcended western dada's anti-tradition and, furthermore, even transcended modern concrete poetry. In addition, pushing the limits of the aesthetics of modernism, his experimental poetry was the powerful text of visual arts that carried visual space and time toward deconstruction. Understanding his poetic vision will stimulate us to re-examine our knowledge of art and design as the twentieth century closes.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 "An Eccentric Reversible Reaction" is the title of Yi Sang's first poem published in the July 1931 issue of the Japanese-language architectural journal, *Korea and Architecture*. The translation presented here is my own.
- 2 Yi Sang often called himself a genius. His short story, "Wings" (*Nalgae*) originally published in 1936, reveals such self-consciousness as follows: "Do you know about the genius who ended up a stuffed animal? I'm cheerful. At times like this, even love is cheerful. Only when my body flutters with fatigue is my mind as clear as a silver coin. When nicotine is absorbed into my worm-infested guts, a blank sheet of paper is customarily prepared in my head. On that blank sheet I arrange wit and paradox, like stones on a *paduk* (go) board. It is a detestable disease of the common sense," quoted from the translation by Em, H. Henry. 1995. "Yi Sang's Wings Read as an Anti-Colonial Allegory." *Muae* 1, 105.
- 3 Kim, Yun-Shik. 1982. "Aspect of Modernism Poetry Movement." *Hankuk Hyundaeshi Ron Bipan* (Criticism on the Theory of Korean Modern Poetry). Seoul: Iljisa Press; Suh, Jun-Seob. 1988. *Hankuk Modernism Munhak Yeongu* (A Study of Korean Modernism Literary). Seoul: Iljisa Press.
- 4 Kim, Jung-Dong. 1982. "An Unspreaded Yi Sang's Wings: Dream toward Architect." *Madang*, January, 185-193. This essay is helpful to catch a glimpse of Yi Sang's biographic sketch toward architect.
- 5 Recently a brilliant research on Yi Sang's poetry has been initiated by Sang-Soo Ahn. He examined the poetry of Yi Sang from a typographic perspective for the first time. He believes that Yi Sang should be considered the first Korean to undertake typographic experimentation based on the following categories of practice: 1. disregard for text spacing; 2. elimination of punctuation; 3. symmetrical structure; 4. reversal of text; 5. directional play of numbers; 6. pictorialization of lettering; 7. linguistic collage using signs and dingbats; 8. dot-picture compositions; 9. manipulation of typeface and type size; 10. diagrammatic mode of thought. Ahn, Sang-Soo. 1995. *A Typographic Study of Yi Sang's Poetry*. Seoul: Hanyang University (Unpublished Ph.D dissertation).
- 6 Yi Sang initially planned to publish a series of thirty "Crow's-Eye View" poems in the newspaper. But only half of the poems were released, due to strong objections from both the newspaper's staff and the readers. A Korean literary critic, Yun-Shik Kim, explained that Yi Sang had planned to extract thirty poems out of 2,000 poems from his working notes written in 1932. Kim, Yun Shik. 1992. *Theory of Korean Modern Literature and Thought* (*Hankuk Hyundae Munhak Sasangsa Ron*). Seoul: Iljisa, 22.

- 7 Early in 1928, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy wrote *Von Material zu Architektur* (München: Albert Langen Verlag), which was based on his educational experience and lectures at the Bauhaus between 1923 and 1928. In 1930, a revised English edition was published under the title *The New Vision* (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam). It is assumed that Yi Sang perused it between 1930 and 1931 when he began his career as an architect. In this research vein, Hye-Sil Choi first discovered the *The New Vision* was connected to Yi Sang's Prefaces for *Korea and Architecture*. Choi, Hye-Sil. 1991. *A Study of Korean Modernism [in the] Novel in the 1930s*. Seoul: Seoul National University (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation).
- 8 In 1922, Moholy-Nagy published, in collaboration with Alfred Kemny, the principle of "a dynamic-constructive system of forces" (Sturm No. 12). See Moholy-Nagy's *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist*. New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 49.
- 9 The translation presented here is my own.
- 10 Translated by Kathleen L. McCarthy. Ma, Kwang-Soo. 1995. "Sperm Cells in a Scary Mad Dash!" *Muae* 1. New York: Kaya Production, 112.
- 11 Lew, K. Walter. 1995. "Selected Poems of Yi Sang." Translated by Walter K. Lew. *Muae* 1. New York: Kaya Production, 80.
- 12 Tzara, Tristan. 1963. *Lampisteries précédées des sept manifestes dada*. Paris: Pauvert, 64.
- 13 Schwitters, Kurt. 1970. "Logically Consistent Poetry" in Richter, Hans. 1970. *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 147-9.
- 14 Tzara. *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 103-4.
- 15 Arp, Hans. 1966. *Jours effeuillés*. Paris: Gallimard, 183 and 306.
- 16 Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 17 Norris, Christopher. 1988. "Deconstruction, Post-Modernism and the Visual Arts." *What is Deconstruction?* London: Academy Editions, 10.

Figure 13 is reprinted from Dr. Andreas C. Papadakis' book *Deconstruction in Architecture* (Architecture Design, 1988)