PRESSBOOK

LEE Mingwei

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Lee Mingwei

LEE MINGWEI has been part of the contemporary art world for almost two decades. He first came to be known through his interactive projects, which require the visitors' active participation. Some of his projects have been published widely, amongst them the *Dining Project*, where a guest was invited to share a dinner with the artist in the gallery space, or the *Sleeping Project*, which the artist presented at the Venice Biennale in 2003, where a volunteer could share the night with Lee Mingwei in the Palazzo dei Prigioni.

Born in Taiwan in 1964, he moved to the United States as a teenager, and has been one of the most unpredictable and untypical artists of his generation. His work is a continuation and an expansion of the performance work that was initiated by pioneers in the field in the 1960s. In this interview, he discusses his projects, their meanings, and their impact.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER: Your background is in sculpture and textile art, so when did the crossover towards public art and performance take place?

Lee Mingwei: When I was studying textile art at CalArts (California College of Arts), I also studied architecture. Whilst working in these two fields, my concentration shifted towards a particular category called 'new genre public art'. The most inspiring teachers that I had at CalArts were Susanne Lacey and Allan Kaprow, who are two iconic figures in this field. Studying with both these professors, I realised that their way of approaching art-making and my way of approaching art-making was very much about ideas, about the ephemeral qualities of interactions and also about daily activities. That immediately made me feel very excited – the thought that art-making could be about such things: daily activities. That is when I crossed over into this new field and in fact, when I went to Yale for my MFA from 1995-1997 in the sculpture department, I focused on new genre public art and conceptual installation.

AAN: Many of your projects can be divided in two stages : a set interactive installation followed by lasting documentation. How is the documentation put together and by whom?

LM: For most of my one-on-one interactive installations, like the sleeping project, for example, I selected a person through a lottery to come with me and sleep in the gallery. For the dining project, again, I selected one participant through a lottery to come and dine with me at the gallery. With these types of experiences and installations, the documentation is always done after the fact.

I feel that if I have a photographer or a video camera in the space during the interaction, the experience might be tainted and also disturbed, because there is someone recording it. Consequently, I am very much aware of the anonymity of the participants, yet I am trying to keep a sense of intimacy. The way to deal with documentation in these kinds of circumstances is to hire a photographer or a videographer after the actual experience and do a mock-up interactive experience with one of the participants. Usually, I do not have any problems having one or two of the participants coming back later to do the documentation.

AAN: When the participants come back, is there a discrepancy between what they say and what actually took place?
LM: The second experience with people is quite different, as they know it is a staged experience and also because there are three or four people present just for documentation purposes. I always keep it extremely short because usually – like with the sleeping project – the person has already spent eight to 10 hours with me. These photo sessions – I really see them as photo sessions – last approximately half an hour and since they are usually just photo images, the conversation part is not that important and is not recorded. To answer your question, yes, they are very different from the original experience.

AAN: Have certain projects turned out differently from what you had anticipated?
LM: It is interesting that you ask about the expectation for these one-on-one experiences, because when I started doing these projects, the first time someone came and shared the night with me, I certainly had an expectation of how this night would go. However, when this person actually arrived, the evening just went in a way that I never ever expected. It got me a little wound up and nervous. The next evening, I literally could not do it because I knew it was going to be so different from what I expected. Somehow after calming myself down, I realised the only way I could do projects like these (one-on-one interactive experiences) was not to have any expectations at all, and whatever happened was the experience. I should not have any expectations of a person. Once I accepted this, I just needed to follow the course of the project, then everything was fine. I felt much more relaxed and simply experienced what happened.

AAN: From your perspective, when do you consider a project successful?
LM: So far, I feel all the projects have been relatively successful. I gained quite a bit from these type of experiences, meaning that I feel I have grown internally. Most people, who experience these projects first hand, often come back to me and share how they felt and how they had changed after a particular experience. It is not that I am expecting people to change, rather it is more 'come and experience that particular project and see what happens after that'. From this point of view, I think the projects are relatively successful.

AAN: Have you had any projects that you felt were a complete failure?
LM: I certainly have one out of probably 28 projects I have done that I rarely talk about. It has nothing to do with the participation partner, because it was not a one-on-one experience. The reason why I do not talk about this particular project is because when I designed the environment for this installation, the final product was just so far away from what I wanted! I do not know what happened. At the opening, I just thought this was really not a very good project. The people nevertheless enjoyed the installation, but for me, it was not a fulfilling experience.

The project was called *Away from Home* at the Wexner Art Center. It was basically environmental design for people to go in and to feel relaxed. I planned for about 50 living trees for the environment. I also added a room that people could go in and smell the fragrance of natural pine from the trees. However, something went wrong with the communication, because when I arrived instead of 50 living trees, they had placed scented bags of artificial pine fragrance and there was absolutely no sight of any trees! I was quite shocked! I was told that because of budget issues, the project could not be done as I had initially envisioned. That was a major disappointment.

LETTER WRITING PROJECT (1998-2008) by Lee Mingwei. Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: George Hirose

AAN: Is one of your major concerns with the one-on-one projects the quality of the participants? How do you make sure the participants are really serious and not simply wasting your time?
LM: I always feel that when I present a project, there are always some people who truly enjoy it and gain something from it. At the same time, there are always going to be some people who come in, think it is fun, and leave. That is perfectly fine by me, as if I present a beautiful meal to somebody who is not hungry, then that meal is not going to mean anything to them. On the other hand, if I have a piece of bread and I give it to someone who is extremely hungry, then this piece of bread means so much to that person. Therefore, it really depends on the participants, how they want to relate to my work and how open they are to experiences.

AAN: What is the key priority within these projects? Your experience of the participant's experience, or getting somebody closer to art?
LM: It may sound really strange, but I try not to have a goal in my projects. Once I have a firm idea, like I want X, Y, and Z, there is a sense of hierarchy and I try not to do that. Personally, I hate people telling me what to do, what to expect, and what to know. When I do a project, I often do it first of all for my own peace of mind and if somebody finds it interesting, that is great. If they cannot see it the way I see it, then that is also fine with me.

AAN: You mentioned earlier that you had grown because of these projects. Has your vision of the world changed since doing these projects?
LM: I certainly realise that every human being or every person who interacted with me has a very interesting story behind them. Often, they just seem plain and ordinary people, but each time I focus attention on them something magical happens and they become such interesting characters. By learning from them in terms of their life experience, I also gain a part of what they have learned and that makes me a richer person. It all sounds very positive, but there is also a part of it that sometimes makes

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THE TOURIST (2001-2008) by Lee Mingwei. Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Anita Kan

me stop doing projects like this, because it becomes so draining psychologically. Also, emotionally I become overwhelmed with their stories and their experiences to such a point that after each one of these projects, I just shut down for about three to four weeks. I would go and stay in a monastery digesting what I experienced and getting ready for my next project.

AAN: Does the conversation flow both ways?
LM: I certainly hope that it will flow both ways. If it is just going one way with the participants telling me their lives and their emotions, without me sharing my part of it, then it is somehow like a therapy session – which is definitely not what I want to do with the project. I am not a trained psychologist and not interested in a therapeutic session. I want it to be a mutual exchange – not just me listening. I want them to listen to my stories, too, and share mutual experiences.

AAN: Since some of these sessions last several hours, have certain friendships developed out of it?
LM: Probably out of all the experiences, I have two or three people that have stayed in touch. Two of them have become some of my dearest friends. For most of them, after the participation, the relationship terminates right there. Sometimes when I fly and I have somebody sitting next to me, we have a very intense conversation for the next three hours or so, but we never see each other again. These three hours are quite meaningful to me and it does change me – having these conversations with complete strangers.

AAN: Do other people rely on your projects? For example, sociology researchers would probably be tremendously interested in your work.
LM: I have not come across that yet. I agree with you because I do see a sociological and an anthropological element in my work. However, I have not come across scientists in these fields that have found my work intriguing.

AAN: In the last few years, the art market has done extremely well financially. Considering the type of work that you do, how do you support yourself knowing that your work is not what would generally be referred to as 'commercial'?
LM: Ninety-five percent of my projects are funded by museums or institutions and they are all commissioned through museums. Consequently, the commission fee is definitely a major part of my way of living.

GUERNICA IN SAND (2005-2008) by Lee Ming Wei. Courtesy of Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, Australia. Photo: Anita Kan

I also lecture at universities. Another element is grants and there is an institution in Taiwan that has been very generous in terms of supporting my shows and also purchasing my work. Basically, they have been giving me a stipend each year just to live and I do not have to do anything in particular for that institution. I am very grateful to these institutions and to people who believe in my work. I am definitely not wealthy, but I do not have to worry where my next rent is going to come from. This gives me the peace of mind to create projects that are not made for commercial galleries.

AAN: What are you actually selling: photographs, documentation?
LM: Photographs and images. Interestingly enough, all large installations were sold. There are very advanced and brave collectors and institutions that were willing to put up with my work, and purchase something that is very much about the experience and the ephemeral quality of it.

AAN: Some people will find it difficult to categorise your work and will even go as far as to question how you could call it 'art'?
LM : I always try not to define what art is and what art might be. I think that one of the most exciting things about contemporary art is that we are trying to do something that is out of the ordinary. If I can create something where I say 'this is art' that would mean that people have done it already and that it is already classified as art. This is really not that interesting for me. I am more interested in doing something that I feel is personally refreshing to me. Whether other people consider it art or not, is very much a secondary thought. I will leave it to the eye of the beholder, and I am sure there are people who will say that dining with somebody is not art – that is fine. However, there are people, on the other side, who see it differently. I let people decide and it is not for me to say whether it is art or not.

QUARTET PROJECT (2005-2008) by Lee Mingwei. Courtesy of the artist and Albion Gallery, London and Lombard Freid Projects, New York. Photo: Anita Kan

AAN: Over the past six years, Asian art has gained in recognition across the world. Do you feel that considering your background (having been born in Taiwan) that you have benefited from that 'hype'?
LM: My work does not circulate in that kind of market. From what I know, it may have affected me, but I do not feel that it has had an immediate effect on the type of work or the type of institution that works with me.

'I think that one of the most exciting things about contemporary art is that we are tyring to do something that is out of the ordinary ...'

AAN: You have been the initiator of the *Male Pregnancy Project*. Could you say a few words about it?
LM: This is a project that I have rarely talked about, because it is not a project that I physically experienced. It is a web project and it is a collaborative project with Virgil Wang, who is the web master for Cornell Medical School. The collaboration came about years ago when we were both doing a panel for the Museum of Modern Art. At the time, both of my sisters were pregnant. I said that I really wanted to experience what it felt like to be pregnant, and he said that perhaps we could do it with the web – so that is what we did. It is a continuous web project. When you go on to www.malepregnancy.com you can still see the heartbeat of the child and the discussions we had. Because of this project, I was invited back to Taipei to have a week-long seminar with the medical ethics community and anthropologists, who are very intrigued with the possibilities of male pregnancy. That is the positive effect of this project. The negative effect was somebody actually found out where I lived and threatened to throw a bomb at me, because I was trying to do what God did not want me to. That project is continuing in the web world, and, as far as I know, the research for male pregnancy is very close to realisation: within the next seven to 10 years, this may very well happen in the real world.

AAN: Your most recent solo exhibition took place earlier this year at Albion in London with a project entitled the *Quartet Project*. Can you describe it?
LM : The Quartet Project at Albion was based on this idea of 'one point five generation', which refers to people who were born in a foreign country and immigrated to America before they turned 15 years old. In my case, I was in the United States when I was 13 and I really was able to incorporate the American culture with my own Taiwanese culture. I am completely bilingual and bicultural in that sense. This project is addressing the idea of being one point five. I need to be a little bit further away to dissect who I am in order to know who I am. In order to talk about the idea but not to look into it too closely, I used Dvorjak's *American Suite*, a quartet composed in the 1890s. He was very much inspired by African-American spiritual music and his own nostalgia for Czech folk music. For this project, I used the second movement. The space is very dark and when people enter, they see four flickering lights coming from behind four different screens. If they want to go and see what is playing on the video screens behind, they touch a motion sensor, which turns off a particular instrument visually and auditorily. So what you hear is a 'broken' quartet. If you go close to the first violin part, it stops,and once you move back to the centre of the room the instrument starts to play again. Once you move sufficiently away from one particular instrument, you are able to see/hear all four again. That is when you have a complete picture of the experience. I think if you get close to something, then you really miss the essence of that particular object or person.

AAN: Looking back on all your projects, do you see a sequence?
LM: I do see a pattern. After I do the one-on-one experience project, the next few projects will often be pure installation, or just an installation where I set up the rules of the game, and people can go and experience it. After a while, I begin to think about a one-on-one project again. It seems to be a psychological pattern.

OLIVIA SAND