

carolee thea

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The Sleeping Project: Valet, 2000. Wood, 70 x 18 x 27 in.



The Shrine Project, 2000. Mixed media, interactive installation installed at the Taipei Biennial.



The Sleeping Project, 2000. Mixed Media, interactive installation.



The Letter-Writing Project, 1998. Wood, glass and paper, 114 x 67 x 91 in. Interactive installation at the Fabric Workshop and Museum.

Lee Mingwei: Sharing Experience

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By Carolee Thea

The condition of being in a world of accelerated time, of emergent technologies, of actual or fictional reality, of local and global inputs has overloaded and undermined our subjective relations. Consequently we experience a distancing from the real, a distancing from self and from others. Some artists have developed modes of engaging the viewer that depart from traditional straight forward politics of "visibility." They often include spaces for performance in which audiences can respond to concepts underlying the exhibition sites for staging participants' desires and discomforts, along with the problematics of a moment not yet named within the culture.

Born in 1964, the Taiwanese artist Lee Mingwei creates situation apparatuses where both the artist and participants, through invention, play, and transformation, may together produce affect and meaning that touch on personal and interpersonal relations. As in Kaprow's Happenings, His work is strongly rooted in an understanding of the importance of breaking down the boundaries that exist between art and life. But it is also based on spiritual and intimate interactions between people in private communication. Lee's work enables the participant to bypass his/her predetermined designations and mediations while subtly suggesting a more expansive model for communicating.

Lee Ming Wei grew up under the training of a Ch'an (Zen) Buddhist monk, within a discipline whose core teaching emphasizes the transitory nature of the material world. He received his BFA in 1993 at the California College of Arts and Crafts with honors in textile design and earned an MFA in sculpture at the Yale School of Fine Arts in 1997. Even his student work combined strategies of interactions within a constructed scenario. While still at CCAC, he created his first interactive work. Through photographic documentation, Money for Art tracks the cycle of nine small sculptures the artist made by folding \$10 bills while at a cafe. Making sculpture was a significant component of Lee's work during this period, and his discovery of art as a currency of exchange through this project marked a significant shift in his practice as an artist -- from private to public.

In 1997, InteractExchange --The Dining Project, his first project at the Lombard Fried Gallery, traveled to the Whitney Museum. There, each evening, Lee invited a different museum visitor, chosen at random through a lottery system, to dine with him. He prepared an Asian meal, and both he and his guest were seated on a specially created dining platform. During the meal, he engaged the guest in conversation and recorded the exchanges, which were then replayed quietly as hushed and abstracted background sounds. At the Whitney he also produced The Letter-writing Project, in which he invited a visitor to enter one of two booths and write a letter he or she had been meaning to write--as a way of exploring gratitude, insight, or forgiveness. The letters were either mailed or left for others to read. This project was repeated in 1998 at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. At the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in June 1999, the artist created The Living Room, whose basis was hospitality and collecting. Lee wanted to offer museum visitors the hospitality which was once a part of this house -- with staff, members, and others intimately connected to the museum taking on Mrs Gardner's role as host in a specially created living room within the museum.

For the Taipei Biennial in September 2000, Mingwei created The Shrine Project, in which he constructed seven elevated shrines and then placed them in a circle. Each week, he invited seven participants to display their own "sacred objects" on the translucent glass platform of the shrines. Visitors were able to ascend and contemplate the meaning of the sacred ----however they might conceive of or experience it in their lives and the lives of others.

In November 2000, at the Lombard Fried gallery in Chelsea, I was given the chance to



The Living Room. 2000. Mixed media installation at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

All photo credits courtesy of Lombard Freid Fine Arts.

participate in Lee's Sleeping Project. In this piece, he completely transformed the gallery space into a dormitory-like setting, with two elongated beds on wheels and 18 night stands, one for each participant enlisted to sleep in the gallery with the artist. The monastic sparseness of the space and the repeated elements reminded me of Brancusi's modules in *Endless Column* or *Alley of Chairs* in Targu Jiu. Lee's work entails the deconstruction of expectations and attempts to rearrange the artwork/viewer relationship through an experience of sharing. Yet *Sleeping Project* went beyond expectations and tested the artist's endurance and trust more than any of his other projects, since the 18 intimately sequential and vulnerable meetings were unique and idiosyncratic. The instructions were simple: to arrive at 9 p.m., interact or not with the artist, sleep over, and bring objects to leave on display on a night table for the duration of the exhibition. The gallery was now a place where viewer and viewed were significantly transformed. Two elongated beds on wheels and night stands were present not only to be observed but to be activated by our experience. Lee's night stand was neat, with things that offered initial fodder for conversation, for example a picture of his grandmother 1920 medical school graduating class in China. For the artist, sharing is at the very core of his social dialogue with the Western community. His work, like an "object of exchange," telescopes one action or event into another. With the participants, he projects a timeless continuity while subtly deconstructing the frames of our existing expectations. We talked, exchanged histories, danced, listened to music, ate almonds, drank mineral water, changed for bed, and slept. Two weeks later, before the *Sleeping Project* was dismantled, I returned to view the installation. The 18 nightstands, now set around the perimeter of the gallery, had each become the simulacrum of a persona in a story; like a three-dimensional scroll, they collaborated to tell a larger story that transcended any one episode.

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