

CICC Currents

A bimonthly publication of
the Chinese Information and Culture Center
New York, New York

July/August 1998

Service with a Wink at the Whitney



Lee Ming-wei's minimalistic settings throw the focus on human interaction.

At the advice of a professor, artist Lee Mingwei moved to New York after receiving his MFA from Yale University. Less than a year later, Mr. Lee's Way Stations was selected to inaugurate a new series of small-scale contemporary projects at the Whitney Museum. The exhibition--Mr. Lee's first museum show and the first-ever presentation of a Taiwanese artist at the Whitney--consists of two installations entitled "The Dining Project" and "The Letter-Writing Project." In the words of curator Eugenie Tsai, both of these installations are "process-oriented, not object-oriented," as Mr. Lee "aestheticiz(es) familiar rituals . . . and . . . heighten(s) our awareness of the potential for change that underlies the activities of our everyday lives."

For "The Dining Project," visitors to the Whitney are invited to fill out a card with their name, phone number, and the day they would be available to meet with Mr. Lee for dinner. After selecting his guest by lottery, Mr. Lee prepares that person an Asian meal which the two share in the Anne & Joel Ehrenkranz Gallery after the museum has closed. Their conversation is recorded and played back for visitors the next day, so they can gain a sense of what this private meal might be like should they choose to volunteer. Mr. Lee stresses, however, that the conversation is in no way scripted and, in keeping with his background in Chan

Buddhism (known as Zen in the West), he seeks to emphasize the paramount importance of the moment. By dining within the museum, he endeavors to challenge traditional notions of art and call into question the boundaries that separate the aesthetic from the quotidian.

Interestingly, the origins of “The Dining Project” trace back to its earlier incarnation last year (then entitled “InteractExchange”) at the Lombard-Fried Fine Arts gallery, when as part of that show he randomly selected and first met Ms. Tsai and also Mr. David A. Ross, director of the Whitney, as his dinner guests. But not all of Mr. Lee’s guests are members of the art world: while at the Whitney, he has dined with a twelve-year old girl, a grandmother in her seventies, a tourist from Milwaukee who works in the meat-packing industry, an editor of pornographic magazines, a Pakistani taxi driver who had been an art historian before coming to New York, and a bulimic who wanted to partake in the process in order to confront her illness.

The other half of the exhibition, “The Letter-Writing Project,” also focuses on personal introspection, again calling upon visitors to participate. “I set up a platform, a stage,” Mr. Lee explains, “but without the people taking part the project would never work.” Creating a space for private contemplation, Mr. Lee installed two freestanding booths and, providing stationary and writing utensils within them, he asks that people take the time to write those letters to people living or dead which they “have always intended to write but have put off with excuses.” Drawing once again upon his Buddhist beliefs, Mr. Lee asks that the letter writers reflect on notions of gratitude, insight, and forgiveness. These letters can either be displayed for others to read or addressed and sealed.

To date, the response has been overwhelming, with an average of 150–200 letters being written each day, about half of which are addressed and mailed out; the other half consists of letters to the deceased or those with whom people have lost contact. Many of these letters have been shattering confessionals asking for forgiveness, such as one from a man to the girl he raped forty years ago and one from a mother explaining the circumstances of her abortion to the son she never knew. For those letters to the dead, Mr. Lee is in the process of constructing ten paper lanterns in the shape of the writing booths. Once the show has concluded he will fill the lanterns with those letters, float them out on a river, and burn them in a cathartic ritual inspired by similar traditions in Southeast Asian culture.

Lee Ming-wei’s *Way Stations* will be at the Whitney Museum of American Art (located at 945 Madison Avenue) through July 19, 1998.