

# Review: "Lee Mingwei and His Relations" at Taipei Fine Arts Museum

BY DARRYL WEE | AUGUST 09, 2015



Lee Mingwei, *Mending Project* (2009) Installation view: Lombard Freid Projects, New York. Photo: Anita Kan (Courtesy the artist and Jane Lombard Gallery)

The airy, open-plan layout of the [Taipei Fine Arts Museum](http://www.tfam.tapei.gov.tw/MP_119012.html) proved to be an ideal backdrop for Taiwan-born, New York-based [Lee Mingwei](/artists/5281-lee-mingwei)'s homecoming mid-career retrospective. Leading an appreciative crowd through the cavernous atrium, where a handful of spectators had been leisurely poring over the delicate cloth objects and stories associated with them stored inside handmade paulownia wood boxes in his installation "Fabric of Memory" (2006), Lee gestured for the visitors to remove their shoes before entering the gallery proper.

There, the audience was treated to a performance accompanying his new site-specific piece, *Our Labyrinth*, which was apparently inspired by his experience while traveling in Myanmar of observing people remove their shoes before entering a temple or pagoda, and the pristine, sanctuary-like spaces within these buildings that were meticulously looked after by volunteers. Two dancers silently swept a mixture of rice, grains and seeds along a winding path created in their minds starting from both ends of the gallery, creating a temporary space of reflection and solitude in the middle of a crowded, public space.

Curated by Mami Kataoka of the Mori Art Museum, which hosted the first and original version of this show in September last year, "[Lee Mingwei](/artists/5281-lee-mingwei) and His Relations" situates the artist's practice not merely in the context of the history of relational art, but also of the idea of "relationality" more generally, as seen in predecessors as varied as Hakuin, D. T. Suzuki, Yves



Klein, John Cage, Allan Kaprow, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, as well as Taiwanese artists Michael Lin, Jun Yang, Wu Mali, and Wu Chien-Ying (the Tokyo version of the exhibition, naturally, had a slightly more Japanese focus that productively compared Lee's practice with that of Koki Tanaka and Tsuyoshi Ozawa).

Lee's take on participatory and relational art is based on an unconditional generosity of sharing experiences both quotidian and extraordinary with his audience, and notably lacks the hard-edged political slant of his Western contemporaries. Instead, he draws much inspiration from myth, legend, and folklore. For "Nu Wa Project" (2005), here represented by a painstakingly hand-painted kite adorning a wall of the gallery, Lee depicted the likeness of the ancient Chinese goddess Nüwa on kites, inviting the owner of each kite to inscribe his or her own

memories onto it before cutting the thread at some point in time to release Nüwa to the heavens that she allegedly helped to mend using five-colored stones — a gesture that represents a wish for peace on both heaven and earth.

If the sentiment strikes Western audiences as mawkish, Lee's work only helps to play up the emotiveness gap that is seldom addressed in a time when comparative surveys of contemporary art ambitiously cram West and East onto the same stage without attending to the cultural stereotypes that might helpfully distinguish the artistic production of one from the other.

Lee's American art education — he studied at CalArts in the early 1990s before getting his MFA at Yale — and fluency in two cultures, however, occasionally causes him to succumb to overly literal exercises in compare-and-contrast between so-called "Western" and "Asian" artistic practices. To wit: "Through Masters' Eyes" (2004) invited artists from Taiwan and the West to produce a "copy" of a painting by the early Qing dynasty Chinese painter Shitao: the Western artists mostly riffed off the general spirit and rhythm of the original, while the Taiwanese artists stuck to a literal mimesis in the spirit of a traditional Chinese art education. This comparative insight, enlightening as it may be, quickly becomes dull through its repeated iterations.

But Lee's practice is most striking when he moves away from these dichotomies altogether, establishing lineages and sympathies with important thinkers who have preceded him. His "Mending Project", for instance, turns D. T. Suzuki's affirmation that our existence is like "a single knot in a net" into a concrete, almost literal demonstration: Lee invites visitors to his exhibition to bring with them a cloth item that they wish mended, which are then displayed in the gallery connected to the colorful spools of thread attached to the walls that supplied the material necessary to repair them. This goodwill, judiciously dispensed in acts of touching generosity, also invokes the rituals of gift giving in indigenous cultures as described at length by Marcel Mauss, Lewis Hyde, and others.

In an Asian museum context, where relational art has not achieved the same widespread institutional recognition of Tino Sehgal at the Guggenheim or Marina Abramovic at the MoMA, one suspects that Lee's softer, more disarmingly intimate brand of relational art has found a setting where complex philosophical ideas can be imbued with a fresh, infectious joie de vivre, and a simple excuse to rejuvenate our jaded sense of social interaction in public spaces.

For "Sonic Blossom" (2013), Lee recruits music students from the local university to wander through the gallery, delivering or "gifting" one of Schubert's Lieder to delighted audience members who are suddenly chosen from among the crowd. At his best, Lee's own presence is entirely dissipated within a network of collaborators, agents, and proxies — in the least sinister sense of those words — in what he calls "an egalitarian exercise in sharing between strangers."

*" (/artists/5281-lee-mingwei) (/artists/5281-lee-mingwei) Lee Mingwei (/artists/5281-lee-mingwei) and His Relations: The Art of Participation" runs through September 6, 2015 at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.*

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