

Projects 80 : Lee Mingwei, the tourist : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 25-November 24, 2003

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projects 80 lee mingwei: the tourist

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If contemporary tourism is constituted by networks that exceed the ambit of distinctively mapped cultures and nations, the question arises as to how the traditional binary oppositions of host and guest, local and foreigner, rooted and routed are being redefined today. *The Tourist*, a project by Taiwan-born artist Lee Mingwei for The Museum of Modern Art's Projects series, probes the idea of tourism as a radical form of cosmopolitanism. Participants acting as tour guides have been conducting visits with the artist to places significant to them around the five boroughs of New York, an enterprise that is a matter less of discovery than of negotiating identity with reference to otherness. Put differently, this venture is, to use philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's turn of phrase, not "an experience that we have, *but an experience that makes us be*."¹ The experience in question is above all formative, and is inescapably bound to images, artifacts, ideas, myths, and stories that come from elsewhere. It is an experience impelled by the desire to share. As Dean MacCannell notes in his classic sociological study *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, the traveler's insistence that "you have got to see this" or "taste this" or "feel this" is "also the basis for a certain kind of human solidarity."² At the root of such solidarity lies the ability to rearticulate identity by keeping explicit ties with more than one place at a time. In this sense, tourists and locals are the crucibles of a new type of community that is not exclusively nationalist but cosmopolitan.

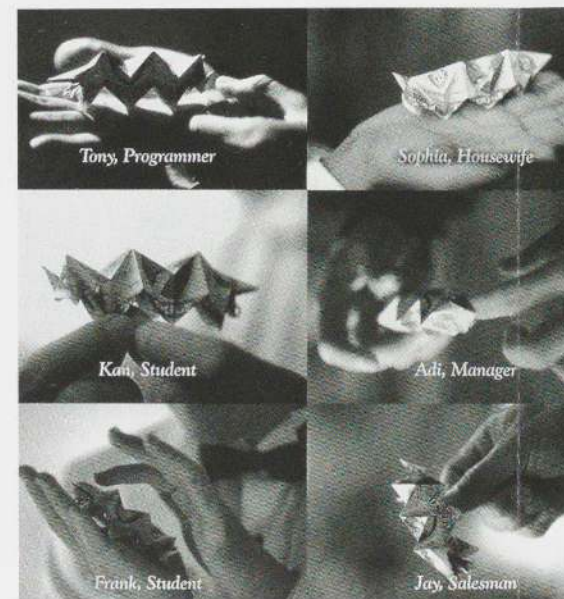
The term "cosmopolitan" refers to dwellers of the world, and includes the particular experience of exiles, immigrants, diasporic residents, students, nomads, and other border crossers, whose sense of belonging, or of "home," is constructed in the process of voyaging or relocating to one part of the world while preserving attachments to another. Born and raised in Taichung, near Taipei, Lee's cosmopolitanism predates his first trip outside Taiwan. Indeed, it stems from Taiwan's syncretic, cross-cultural Asian and Western influences culled over the course of centuries of European incursion, Chinese and Japanese annexation, and American protectionism. But Lee has also traveled extensively. Among other, later, journeys, he moved at the age of twelve with his family to the Dominican Republic, where he lived in a hybrid community of Taiwanese Dominicans in Santo Domingo. Bearing double citizenship he immigrated to the United States, where after studying biology at the University of Washington in Seattle and architecture and textiles at California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, he moved to the East Coast, completing his graduate work at Yale University with a focus on "new genre" public art.

The idea of multiple habitation and transnational fellowship became, for the artist, linked to his sense of a wider mode of belonging. It is not surprising that travel has implications for Lee that are different from those associated with the Western experience of the Grand Tour. Established at the end of the seventeenth century, this type of elite voyage prevailed throughout the modern period, although its scope was amended along the way from scholastic to romantic enterprise, from emotionally neutral observation of foreign cultures to exotic accounts of scenic tourism. Informed by a postcolonial consciousness, Lee articulates travel as a form of community that imagines alternative possibilities of togetherness outside the national space.

Cover: Lee Mingwei. *The Dining Project*. 1997. Installation view, Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York. Courtesy the artist and Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Charly Wittcock

Right: Lee Mingwei. *The Sleeping Project*. 2003. Installation view, 2003 Venice Biennale, Taiwan Pavilion. Courtesy the artist and Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Dolby Tu

On January 1, 1994 nine sculptures were given to:

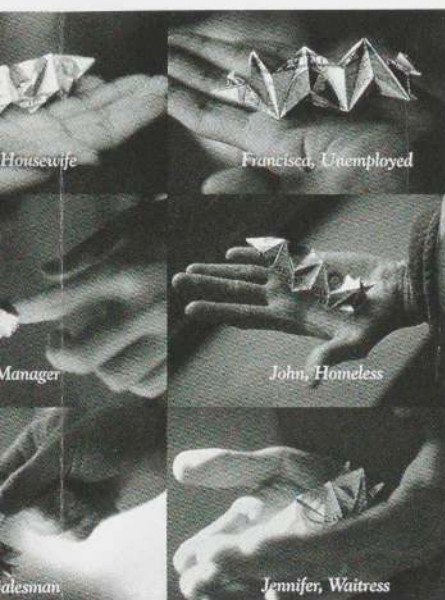


Using the tourist trope to explore issues of cultural multicenteredness, Lee's project for MoMA canvasses a field of operation across five of New York's—and the world's—most ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Earlier this summer, Lee issued an open call to anyone interested in leading him on a tour of their choice—of Coney Island, for instance, or the Farber Houses in the Bronx, or the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Although the call is now closed, the tours continue through the duration of the exhibition. Both "guides" and "tourist" have been documenting their experiences via digital snapshots, and their dialogues are being recorded on tape. Lee's installation, which will continually change over the course of the exhibition, comprises side-by-side projections of photographic stills, fragments of conversation, and collected keepsakes from these tours. By implication, the installation is not fixed according to the action of an individual producer in a given space. On the contrary, it is the product of a

series of actions in which artist and public, local and foreigner, site and sight, history and actuality mutually overlap.

The idea of artistic peregrination is at the crux of both historical and neo-avant-garde manifestations—for instance, the Dada tours of Paris, enacted as anarchic voyages close to home, and the Surrealist *flânerie*, or stroll, through the crowds in pursuit of uncanny encounters. These gave way in the late 1950s and early 1960s to critically engaged practices that turned Paris into a site of political license and collective festivity. The Situationist International movement, a key catalyst for the May 1968 revolt in France, promoted an art of *dérive*, or drifting, in the form of clandestine walks and direct interventions in urban space. Acting against the so-called "society of spectacle" (the society of media events, marketing, and commodities), Situationists like Guy Debord, the group's main spokesperson, insisted on the dictates of communal play, establishing vectors, itineraries, and passage-





Left: Lee Mingwei. *Money for Art*. 1994. Silver dye bleach prints (Ilfochrome), 11 x 14" (27.9 x 35.6 cm) each. Courtesy the artist and Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York

Below: Guy Debord. *The Naked City*. 1957. Screenprint, no dimensions available. Collection Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague. Photo: Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague

Douglas Gordon. *Psycho Hitchhiker*. 1993. Black-and-white print, 18 1/2 x 23 7/16" (46 x 59.5 cm). Produced in collaboration with Tramway, Glasgow. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London. Photo: John Riddy

Christian Philipp Müller. *Illegal Bordercrossing Austria-Principality of Liechtenstein*. 1993. Performance for the 1993 Venice Biennale, Austrian Pavilion. Courtesy the artist

ways through the city to confound routine experiences. The Fluxus group's mock-serious Free Flux-Tours of the subsequent decade took up where the Situationists left off, staging excursions into marginal city zones in an effort to redirect travelers away from the geographical prerogatives of real-estate capitalism.

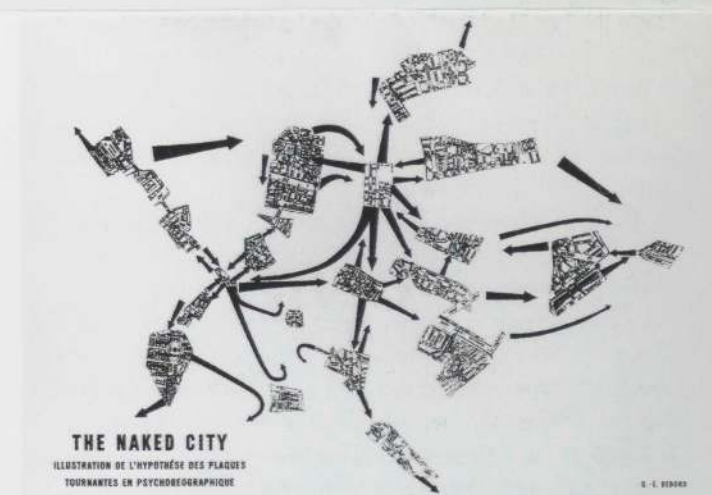
In recent years, artists have devised new paradigms for the tourist experience. Douglas Gordon's *Psycho Hitchhiker* of 1993, for example, refers to illicit uses of public space. For this project, the artist impersonated a hitchhiker stationed in the middle of the road, holding up a sign addressed to drivers marked with the destination "Psycho." Like Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* of 1969, a series of performances in which Acconci roamed the streets of New York in random pursuit of a different person each day for the duration of three weeks, *Psycho Hitchhiker* articulates a sense of potential threat to the national imagination. The figure of the traveling stranger, or outlaw, as threat has become endemic to the post-September 11 climate. Also critical of exclusively nationalistic attitudes is Christian Philipp Müller's contribution to the Austrian Pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale, a project that involved a series of "illegal" border crossings from Austria to eight neighboring countries, most of which belonged at one point to the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Dressed as a hiker and traveling without proper visas, Müller left Austria unnoticed, crossing into Italy, Switzerland, the Principality of Liechtenstein, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and finally Slovenia. From frontier to frontier, his experience paralleled that of tourists, refugees, and migrant traders.

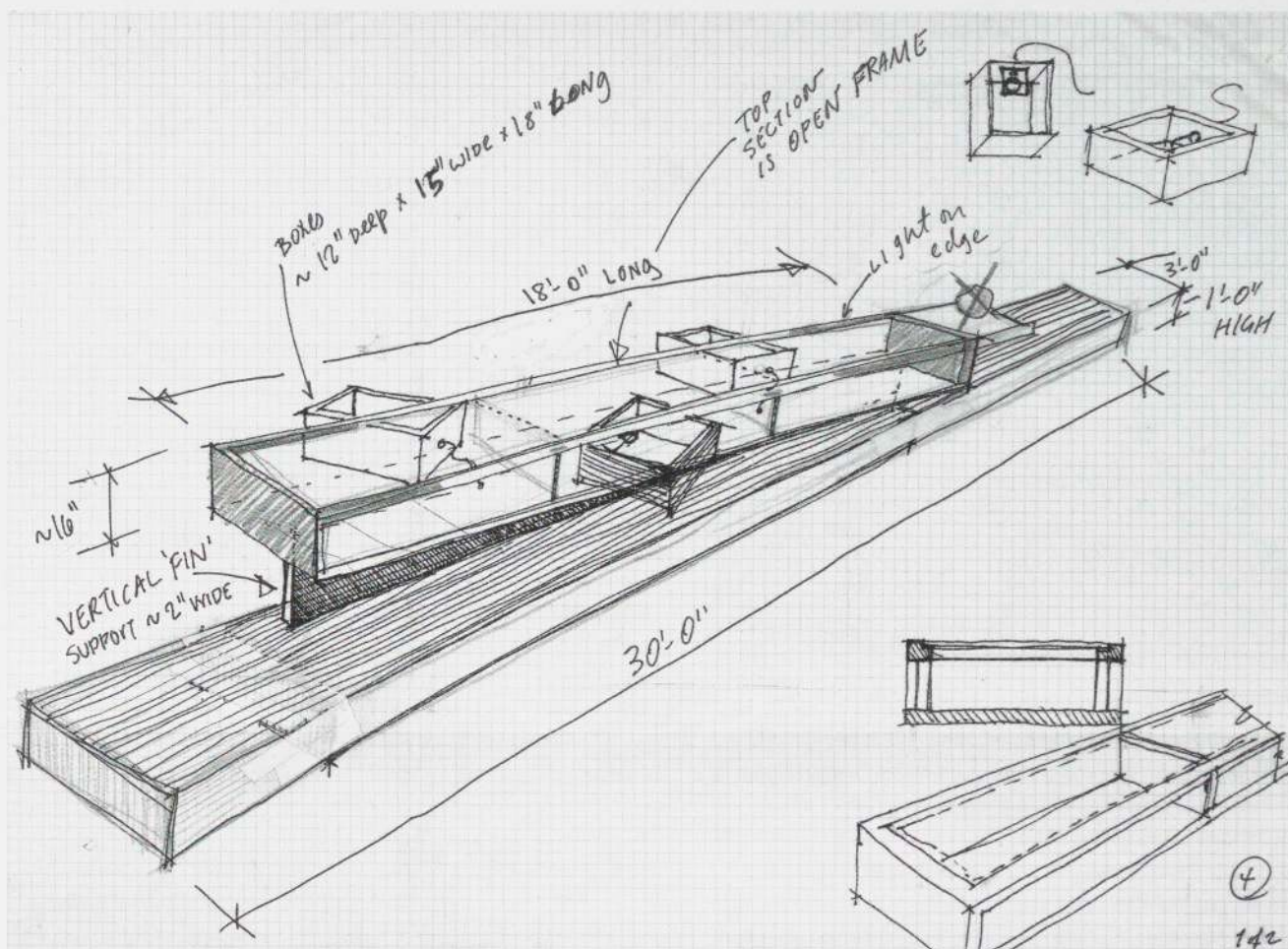
The journey across civic and national boundaries is a key aspect of Lee's project for MoMA. Anthropology historian James Clifford notes that cosmopolitans are resistant to the assumption that belonging to a nation-state "is an all-or-nothing proposition." Rather, they tend to sustain and mediate worldly affiliations, which explains why they "take their roots with them" wherever they go.³ This process does not presume the primacy of Western worldliness, nor is it exclusively a Western privilege. Instead, it designates the sharing of cultural differences between a "here" and a "there." In this manner, Lee's project implies a situation in which singular beings are constituted by a sharing that makes them *others*. At the same time, it implies the desire of un-like-minded beings to partake in the act of sharing. Lee voluntarily positions himself as a tourist within the greater New York metropolis. Yet by virtue of his position, he introduces the city to other perspectives.

Taiwan, or for that matter any other place Lee calls home, is not just a place "out there" but is also part of a diasporic circuit that includes New York.⁴ By taking on the role of tourist, Lee surrenders the authoritative leadership of the guide (although his affability and sense of fellowship confuses any easy dichotomy between guide and visitor).

This strategy applies not only to *The Tourist* but to many of Lee's projects. *Money for Art*, conceived in 1994, is the artist's earliest instance of an exchange approach with the public. This performance piece started in a San Francisco café, where Lee engaged himself in making origami sculptures by folding ten-dollar bills. His activity attracted responses from passersby, who began conversing with him. Lee then offered his interlocutors the completed sculptures as gifts. In exchange, some agreed to stay in touch with the artist and to inform him whether the sculptures had been preserved as art or converted back into money and spent. A community exercise, *Money for Art* called into question the gestures of giving and receiving, the obligation of reciprocity, and the ways in which socioeconomic and cultural factors affect the conditions of ownership.

For *The Dining Project*, first performed at Yale, in 1995, Lee cooked traditional Pan-Asian meals and dined one-on-one with thirty people who responded to a flyer that he had posted on campus. The idea of dining as an art practice conjures up the early food performances of "Chef Daniel" Spoerri, who in 1958 made his first *tableaux piège* (trap paintings), which captured the residues of actual meals with friends. In 1963, he opened the Restaurant Gallery J, in Paris, where French, Swiss, and Romanian menus were served. The waiters included the art critic Pierre Restany and the poet John Ashbery. He subsequently opened two other restaurant-galleries, the Eat-Art Restaurant and the Eat-Art Gallery, both in Düsseldorf, where he cooked for artists and, during the 1970 celebrations of the ten years of the Nouveaux-Réalistes, organized an "Eat Art" dinner, where artworks made with edible materials were served. Other artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark and, more recently, Rirkrit Tiravanija have also turned the art gallery into a community watering hole. Through their food performances they have devised new networks of conviviality characterized by rituals of sharing and hospitality, gift-giving and seduction. Lee has similarly relocated artistic experience in the domain of social praxis: his dining space was one of communal expenditure, in which offerings were made and exchanges proposed.





Stephan R. Freid, AIA Architect. Preparatory sketch for Lee Mingwei: *The Tourist*. 2003. Ink and pencil on paper, 8 x 10" (20.3 x 25.4 cm). Courtesy Stephan R. Freid

During his residency in early 2000 at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a Venetian-style palazzo built in Boston at the beginning of the twentieth century, Lee produced *The Living Room*. The point of departure for this project was the role assumed by socialite and patron of the arts Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924), as hostess and interpreter of her collection of ancient mosaics, Chinese carvings, and Old Master paintings. Drawing on Gardner's lifelong interest in collecting both experiences and art, Lee enlisted the collaboration of forty staff members—curators, conservators, guards, and trustees—to take turns playing host to visitors in one of the galleries, which he had converted into a modern living room. The unconventional installation included objects brought in by the museum staff. Altering museological practices of classification and display, Lee probed the mechanisms through which taste is legitimized and the ways in which museums mediate our perception of the displayed objects. The social encounter between visitor and art custodian served to generate critical opinions independent of those that cultural institutions, de facto, produce and reproduce.

In *The Sleeping Project*, first organized at Lombard-Freid Fine Arts in 2000, and subsequently selected for the Taiwan Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale, Lee offered yet another sense of the communal—of what it means to be together. In this case, he turned the exhibition space into a dormitory with multiple nightstands and two custom-made beds, one for the artist and one for the participant enlisted to spend the night with him. Each evening a guest would arrive, and each morning he or she would depart, leaving behind objects of personal use: magazines, pictures, cassette tapes, etc. (we all leave parts of ourselves in the places we visit, no matter how brief the stay). Sleep-overs involve intimacy, and intimacy, particularly

with a stranger, is demanding. It is an experience that entails the negotiation of one's sense of identity through an encounter with another. While an intimate relationship thus established seems consensual, it is in fact constituted by a mediation of differences, which is part of what people share when they come together.

This brings us back to *The Tourist*. What defines the mutually constitutive relationship between foreigner and local? How is a place identified in the multiplicity of experience to which it plays host? It is said that sightseeing is a ritual that celebrates difference. No itinerary is the same. Evidently, the tour that the tourist receives is not synonymous with the tour that the guide gives. This explains why, for *The Tourist*, both "tourist" and "guide" have been equipped with cameras, and why the images documenting their common journeys are being presented side by side as double projections. Furthermore, the audio recordings of their exchanges are played back, suggesting a communication of affect. Displayed together in compartmentalized boxes (like the Fluxus group's Fluxkits), the sightseeing keepsakes speak of our need to engage the world in ceaseless signification, and function as intimate records of our mobile existence. The New York tours are constructed from dialogic encounters and from multiple subject positions. They articulate an experience that is equally about the commonality of sharing and the commonality of difference—of how "here" comes across from "there," and "there" from "here."

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biography

Born in Taichung, Taiwan, Lee Mingwei lives in New York City and Berkeley, California.

selected solo exhibitions

2003: Harvard University, Cambridge. 2002: Rice University Art Museum, Houston; Eslite Gallery, Taipei. 2000: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston; Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York City; Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College; Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale. 1999: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art. 1998: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City; The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.

selected group exhibitions

2003: Taiwan Pavilion, Venice Biennale; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus; Cincinnati Center for Contemporary Arts Center; Des Moines Art Center; Ho-Am Art Museum, Seoul; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York City; Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston. 2002: Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover; Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art; Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Art. 2001: Taipei Museum of Contemporary Art; Palazzo delle Papesse: Centro Arte Contemporanea, Siena; The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton. 2000: Taipei Fine Art Museum, Taipei Biennial; Moderna galerija, Ljubljana; Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. 1999: Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson. 1998: Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro.

acknowledgments

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notes

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 26.
- 2 Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999, originally published in 1976): 203.
- 3 James Clifford, "Mixed Feelings," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 362–369. The argument following the quote is indebted to James Clifford's *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Lucy R. Lippard, "Travel Advisory," *Whitewalls*, no. 37 (1996): 43–47.
- 4 This argument can be made for other cities. For instance, a version of *The Tourist* was presented at Rice University, Houston, in 2002.