Lee Mingwei

United States

Taiwanese artist Lee Mingwei made his museum debut at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York with 'Way Stations', inaugurating a new series of small-scale contemporary projects. Consisting of The Dining Project and The Letter-Writing Project, 'Way Stations' captivated visitors who ventured into the museum's street-level gallery. The exhibition's humble title, signifying an intermediate stopping place, encompassed the art as well as its display site, a modest-sized room sometimes missed by those making a beeline for the larger galleries upstairs.

Mingwei's projects create direct ties with his audience, slowing people down and interacting with them one at a time. A Ch'an Buddhist who spent many of his boyhood summers training in a monastery, the artist was sensitive to the spiritual ideal of awareness and the value of interpersonal exchange at an early age. In his embrace of the everyday activities of cooking, dining and writing as art, Mingwei is as inspired by Buddhist traditions as he is by western avant-garde precedents.

For The Dining Project, Mingwei prepared an Asian meal five nights a week for a person chosen at random from among the many would-be diners who left completed forms daily at the exhibition. Subsequently, the artist met his lucky guest in the gallery after hours, the two dining unobserved on a spare and elegant platform constructed of wood, tatami mats and narrow troughs of uncooked black beans. The participant's unshod feet fitted into a submerged well, unexpectedly filled with raw rice.

During dinner, Mingwei taped their unstructured dialogue, later playing altered, barely audible versions during public viewing hours. By hovering near the platform's microphones hidden beneath the beans, museum visitors could eavesdrop on six revealing conversations on any given day. The dinner participants ranged from a twelve-year-old girl to the Whitney's former director, David Ross, who dined with the artist on his last day of employment.

Mingwei's artwork was exhausting. Each day, he began at seven o'clock in the morning, travelling from Brooklyn to Manhattan's Chinatown to shop for fresh ingredients. He then returned to his home and studio to make his own tofu according to his grandmother's special recipe. Still later he took the meal's components back to Manhattan and prepared dinner in the museum's staff kitchen. The dining process lasted for several hours. After cleaning up and attending to the tape, he usually ended his day at one o'clock in the morning.

Although The Dining Project offered passive interaction to all but a few, The Letter-Writing Project provided direct participation. Visitors could enter one of two handsomely designed booths made from three sloping walls of translucent glass braced with wooden struts. Each contemplative zone was equipped with pens and writing paper, and furnished with either a seat and desk or a low bench for eastern calligraphy. Signs invited the audience to compose letters to the living or dead, and to reflect on gratitude, insight and forgiveness. Completed notes were 'posted' in designated slots along the walls.

Gallery visitors were free to open any unsealed envelopes. Although a few of these revealed heart-warming reflections, many contained wrenching and intimate descriptions of loss, abuse and regret. The act of reading yanked visitors from the anonymity and politeness of the museum into the unfiltered, emotion-charged world of real people. At the end of each day the artist collected the 150 or so envelopes and stamped and mailed those with full addresses. Weekly, he reverently burned those directed to the deceased.

While thematically related to the food actions of his contemporary, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Mingwei's Dining Project is also conceptually linked to such American feminist initiatives as Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 1969 Maintenance Art Manifesto, which iconoclastically proclaimed 'My working will be the work', and Mingwei's Letter-Writing Project engages the audience with the earnest directness of Mary Beth Edelson's ongoing Story Gathering Boxes, which began in 1972 to provide a space for viewers to both write and read real-life narratives.

Primarily a conceptual artist, Mingwei describes himself as 'in the middle of the debate over the distinctions between religious and secular, between art and life'. He has created a profoundly egalitarian, public art that offers a direct connection between artist and audience, and between individual members of his audience. He knows instinctively that when ordinary people talk about art, they relate it to their lives. What does the future hold for the first Chinese-American to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum? Whatever it may be, it is not likely to involve food projects, which leave little time for anything else.


Judith E. Stein