During his residency in early 2000 at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a Venetian-style palazzo built in Boston at the beginning of the twelfth 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 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 pooled the mechanisms through which taste is legitimated and the ways in which museums mediate between visitor and art custodian served to generate critical 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 custodian? There 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 literary example is this. Evidently, the tourist that the tour guide receives is not synonymous with the tour that the guide gives. This explains why *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 a stranger, is demanding. It is an experience that entails a negotiation of one’s sense of identity through an encounter with another. While an intimate relationship thus established seems ceremonial, it is in fact constituted by a mediation of differences, which is part of what people share when they come together.

acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgments are due to the artist, Lee Mingwei, and the members of the public who participated in this project, to the architect Stephan R. Freid and the fabricator Eric R. Swenson for their work on the exhibition and the brochure.

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notes


Roxana Marcouli  Assistant Curator Department of Photography

selected solo exhibitions


selected group exhibitions


Roxana Marcouli, Assistant Curator. Preparatory sketch for Lee Mingwei’s *The Tourist*. 2003. Ink and pencil on paper, 9 x 12” (22.9 x 30.5 cm).
and guest, local and foreigner, rooted and routed are being discussed at the Freid Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Dolby Tu

“If contemporary tourism is constituted by networks that exceed the ambit of distinctly mapped cultures and nations, the question arises as to how the traditional linear oppositions of host and guest, local and foreigner, rooted and routed are being discussed at the Freid Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Dolby Tu

If contemporary tourism is constituted by networks that exceed the ambit of distinctly mapped cultures and nations, the question arises as to how the traditional linear oppositions of host and guest, local and foreigner, rooted and routed are being discussed at the Freid Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Dolby Tu

“taste this” or “feel this” is also the basis for a certain kind of tourist experience. As Dean MacCannell notes in his classic essay "Toward a Theory of the Tourist", the tourist is a form of community that imagines alternative possibilities of belonging. It is not surprising that travel has implications for Lee Mingwei, born and raised in Taichung, near Taipei, Lee’s cosmopolitanism predates his first trip outside Taiwan. Indeed, it stems from Taiwan’s unique cultural heritage, which includes influences from various European countries, Chinese and Japanese annihilation, and American protest.” But Lee has also traveled extensively. Among other long 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.

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 primacy of Western worldliness, nor is it exclusively a form of post–September 11 climate. Also critical of exclusivity, Lee recognizes the "benefits" and "tourist" have been documenting their experiences as 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 but becomes a function of the actions of a performer or performer in a given space. On the contrary, it is the product of a series of actions in which artist and public, local and foreign, site and sight, history and actually mutually overlie. By involving both tourists and visitors, the installation presents a different kind of space for the public to experience the artist’s project, in which the artist is an active participant in the production of art. The Sleeping Project, conceived in 1994, is the artist’s contribution to the Austrian Pavilion at the 1994 Venice Biennale, a project that involved a series of “illegal” border crossings from Austria to eight neighboring countries, most of which were organized at one time or another to the former Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Despite being viewed as an act of civil or national rebellion, Lee’s actions were generally considered an act of civil or national rebellion.

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