

On the Individualistic Artist and Collectives in Organising Art Events: An Interview with Lee Wen

Lee Wen, interviewed by C. J. W.-L. Wee

Can you offer us an introduction to your performance work and the importance of larger or group-oriented artistic practices?

I see performance art as another medium of visual art practice. Like others with a fine-arts background, I tend to look at the medium of performance art as an extension of the two dimensions of drawing or painting, and of the three dimensions of sculpture. This 'extension' is then a move towards including the multi-dimensionality of performance art that will include time, space and body specificities. In later experiences, I came to realise that there are more permutations and hybrid possibilities beyond the time, space and bodily extensions, and that the complexities are immense as our constant search for new experiences lead us to experiment with film, video, sound, internet and the other technologies that engross our evolving contemporary society.

As an artist who has participated in these complexities of performance in institutionally organised events and in events organised by independent artists internationally, I see the need for both types of events. Our artistic or other agendas often are not as transparent as is claimed in terms of criteria for inclusions and exclusions of participation, and our aspirations for fair representations for these events in terms of intercultural exchange is like an osmosis of power relationships that offer better possibilities of building a peaceful world of co-existence than a single penny spent on the military and fear-inducing instruments of social control such as immigration checks and border controls, censorship, surveillance of a population, and so forth.

Our world is getting smaller, given the present state of the technologies of communication and travel. Superficially, it look as if we are losing traditional values and heading towards the doom and damnation of market capitalism; however the reality is more complex than this type of general or theoretical argument of what seems to be happening in the world. With the correct attitude, I believe that the ability of organised events that allow artists from different backgrounds and countries to meet and exchange will accentuate our various uniqueness, and will help preserve not only the essence of our traditional values – which we otherwise shamelessly discard while embracing market demands – but will also lead us to mutual respect and understanding, and hence also enhance the possibilities of peaceful co-existence. With efforts by all concerned parties, I hope we get to see another half century of international exchanges that will enhance a *networking* (in the best sense of that term) of states and individuals that will be in genuine sympathy with the pursuit of art and culture as a response to our 'globalised situation' (though I'd rather use the now rather old-school term, the 'international spirit') that, also, as a consequence, may lead to an improved state of the world – given we still seem to tolerate mass destruction, holocausts and inhuman oppressive structures.

Can you say a little more regarding your own background and history as a visual artist who then moved more into performance art?

My first public encounter as an artist was that of publishing *A Waking Dream*, a book of drawings and poetic prose, in 1981. It was only through encountering Tang Da Wu and The Artists Village (the alternative artists collective)¹ in 1989 that gave me more direction. It is often asked why Singapore

¹ [Editor's note:] For more information on the artistic collective, so important in the development of the contemporary arts in Singapore, see Kwok Kian Woon and Lee Wen (eds.), *The Artists Village: 20 Years On* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009).

has a higher profile of performance art than other countries in Southeast Asia, or in Asia as in general. I am not sure why exactly, but my response to this question is often to point people to performance artist and academic Ray Langenbach's doctoral dissertation, *Performing the Singapore State, 1988-1999*.² This is a study of significant individuals in Singapore, where performance develops in tandem with various state policies on how Singapore should function or perform as an economically successful state; some of what Ray looks at informed my forays into performance art. Although my general position is to insist that I work as a performance artist based upon personal experiences, my artistic responses in fact are inevitably intertwined with the responses of a society in which the state plays a major role in people's personal lives; such lives thus had in turn to respond performatively to the performance of the state.

Tell us a bit more about the background or the history of your willingness to link your individual performance practice and understanding of artistic creation with larger group or more collective practices of art.

I would need to admit – first of all – that the artist groups or institutions with whom I work with are, in fact, the closest model of implementing anarchic intentions; however such groups only need a little structure and perhaps be 'directorially' based by a few – who make decisions – to become an organising committee. Besides The Artists Village in Singapore, I have been involved in one-off projects with groups such as Art Street, a performance collective in London, in 1991, and with more sustained collaborations, such as my collaboration with the Black Market International; I only began working with the latter in 2000.

However, such 'groupings' may in certain respects be more 'apparent' than 'solid'. People do differ and artists may prefer to remain as artists in some loosely collective form and not be incorporated in some formal fashion – for such formal incorporation could lead to situations where artistic bottlenecks can occur. The Artists Village actually resisted registering as a Society under Singapore law for two years, after the Village was evicted from their first premises at Jalan Ulu Sembawang;³ and 'members' did not wish to even register as a Society actually until 12 February 1992. Even then (and thereafter), we were sceptics (in disguise) of such formalisation, as most of the time we found it to be a fuss to follow the rules of registration and other requirements of having people in formal positions of leadership and service; you could say we were reluctantly playing musical chairs with having various people occupy the various committee positions (such as 'secretary' or 'treasurer') that incorporation as a Society required. When we organised artistic activities as a group, we were in fact functioning in a semi-voluntary capacity – and regardless of whether we were registered, or not, it was often only a handful of enthusiastic key operators who were the organisers. The rest were too busy and only came in during the celebratory opening nights of events to put up their works, and then returned on the last day of the event to take their artwork home. We did get extra hands to help clean up or move whatever props the event may have required, but they were also there to help drink the beer and wine.

In the beginning of various forms of collective work, it is always exciting to meet fresh new faces and to learn that we are not alone in our search to make art that has more meaning to it than just being a commodity. There is great rejuvenation of faith in the human spirit. However, things do happen that test our will and resolve. We learn to overcome our weaknesses if we are not just to live with

² The dissertation can be found online at <<http://www.worldcat.org/title/performing-the-singapore-state-1988-1995/oclc/224329325>>, accessed 17 June 2012.

³ [Editor's note:] The Artists' Village started off in a rural village at the address that Lee Wen mentions, but the land was later reclaimed by the state. Lee Wen informs me that the area is now vacant, and has been fenced up as protected land for army training.

them; we find or make friends and lose them – but hope always they will return or we otherwise meet them again through reconciliation, somehow.

How does your thinking on the need for strong artistic independence relate to the present artistic conditions in Singapore? For example, in relation to the state and, say, funding issues and other related concerns?

Singapore is geographically at the crossroads of trade and culture between east and west since long ago, from the Sri Vijaya period in the 7th century CE, to the time of Majapahit in 1293, to around 1500, before the Europeans arrived and formed colonies in the region. As Singapore was a former British colony, the city-state has built our laws, infrastructures and social institutions using the British model. Since our independence as a democratic republic in 1965, the ever-strengthening one-party rule, with the tendency to centralising cultural institutions, helped to create a more homogeneous identity from a diverse society. However, it also created contrived solutions needing constant changes that also destroyed earlier formations of unique cultural identities. One example is that of the Speak Mandarin campaign that started in the 1980s, where all media stopped broadcasting programmes in various non-Mandarin Chinese ‘dialects’ (as they are described) that stumped and stifled many homegrown Singaporean cultural heroes like Wang Sa and Ya Fong,⁴ a multi-dialect comedy duo who lost their satiric cool when they had to switch to the Mandarin-only productions allowed on the airwaves.

In the visual arts, Singapore artists have for some time faced many discrepancies in getting acceptance from our own society. Those who look to Western artists usually think we are not capable of originality and are only Western derivatives. Others look to China and India as the source of our immigrant cultures and prefer a sort of continuation of the past-to-present as represented by artists from those countries rather than from Singapore.

At the same time, there is an increasing mistrust especially amongst the artists themselves in regard to an increased dependence on state funding – given that funding for the arts has increased significantly since the 1990s. It becomes more difficult to be seen to be independent of the state’s political agenda, and it becomes hard even to assess critical artistic responses objectively. The small fish in a small pond syndrome, as I suppose it could be called, distorts our perception of scale as well as quality of the works presented or seen. Some distancing of the state from its cultural agencies need to be implemented in order for the arts to flourish in a more organic way; if not we may be heading instead towards producing a technocratic product with no soul.

However, I do observe that the bureaucracy of the state’s arts and arts-related agencies becomes friendlier as I age and gain in stature. That there is an attempt by them to reach the grassroots is a good sign; but perhaps it would be nice also to invite more hip people to lead these state agencies instead of their remaining so ‘square’. It is then hard for artists to work in direct negotiation with the agencies. Various policies on censorship, public licensing, public ratings and warning requirements go against my belief in and commitment to artistic license and sovereignty, yet I submit to and engage in negotiations for a gradual change towards openness and acceptance of new and unconventional practices.

Over the years I have found working in groups to be an advantage in terms of gaining emotional and intellectual support. However, at the same time, an artist’s individualism remains a type of idealism

⁴ [Editor’s note:] The reference here is to the comedy duo popularly known as *Ah Pui* (‘the fat one’) and *Ah San* (‘the thin one’) – Ya Fong (d. 1995) and Wang Sa (d. 1998) – which rose to fame in the 1960s in Singapore. They were dubbed as the Laurel and Hardy of Singapore, and performed in theatres and on television. They were also known in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan.

that resists corporatisation, and this resistance occurs in order to be true to an anarchic self-motivation – and this self-motivation then runs counter to the impulse to run an organisation or towards collective work. Too often, collective work only taxes the same handful of people who sacrifice their own time in the name of collective art creation; and there are detractors who comment from the side-lines on what is happening – but who do not abandon the group so as to still give moral support. The funding policies of most funding agencies internationally – including those in Singapore – favour events and activities that reach out to the community and encourage community participation, or else draw in a significant audience number. The transfer of funds from agencies sometimes must be deposited specifically into a corporate bank account of an art collective or group.

As an artist I do not believe in comparing the merit of projects based on audience numbers or by the participation of others apart from the artist himself or herself. I work at organising types of art events that are not organised by others – hence we organise in order to fill gaps. At some point, I realised that organising with a group or as a collective tends to get more financial support as the funders probably think the support is better spread out, given group participation. However, while I find working in groups may increase our funding to some extent, the core group of operators or organisers may not be significantly expanded. It would be good if funding agencies understand that that funding does not follow some mathematical rule – we need to consider human motivation. We may find membership may even grow, but that the ‘volunteer time’ remains same. I often wonder why people join groups if they have no time to spare to help in the organisation. The idealism of working with an enlightened artists’ collective may need to deal with the question of what happens when the artistic operation depends only on a handful operators, though we want to offer some legacy to the future generations yet to come. I would have no qualms in ending a collective – regardless of its history – that is run by jaded and tired old guards. Collectives may remain relevant only when members collectively spare their time to organise together and effectively.

On 4 July 2011, the National Arts Council (NAC) revealed their programme for 2011 to 2013 (entitled as a ‘Workplan Sharing Session’), using a vocabulary that was adopted from Singapore artists’ own language, as it were. We were given a run-down of plans, strategies and schemes that would offer more support for developing Singapore as a Global City of the Arts. We were also surprised by an animated performance by Benson Puah, the CEO of the NAC. He stepped off his pedestal on the stage area to speak on the same floor level as the audience, and urged us to see this action as the NAC proclaiming peace so that we work together: the Council risks its own position of bureaucratic authority, showing a willingness to join the artists to be on the same side of the barricades.⁵ Hence the work plans were announced as sharing *our* vision. I had made a plea in saying that the NAC should be given greater autonomy as a government agency if it wished to do a good job at supporting the arts and artists. Given the over-arching influence of a strong one-party government and the centralisation of every aspect in our society, it is difficult for artists to have enough freedom or autonomy in order to create freely without fear of sanctions or censorship. It would be in our best interest and would create credibility for both the state and for artists and cultural institutions like the museums, arts councils, heritage boards and arts festivals if they all could enter into an autonomous zone of self-management or sovereignty.

One found it hard to think that NAC could simply be on the same side as artists. In fact the most recent national budget showed an increment of financial support for the arts and culture. However, on the ground level, we have found that acquisition funds for our museums to support artists

⁵ For a fuller account of the meeting between Puah and various arts stakeholders, see Mayo Martin, ‘NAC is Your BFF! 2011 to 2013! Pinky Swear!’, *Today Online* (Singapore), 4 July 2011 <<http://blogs.todayonline.com/forartssake/2011/07/04/nac-is-your-new-bff-2011-to-2013-pinky-swear/>>, accessed 17 June 2012.

directly by acquiring artworks have been frozen and artists' organisations found they received decreased funding for their funding proposals for projects, if their funding application were not rejected outright. All very puzzling – even as we were listening to news regarding increments in the arts budget. On hindsight, Benson Pua's friendly speech was quite what might be called a 'ghost story'. The increased amount of funds may actually mean more financial support for community clubs and other such associations for community-based art support. What may be happening now is not more autonomy for artists or more sovereignty for the arts and cultural development, but instead a burgeoning of influence and control by the state in the realm of the arts.

Artistic individualism has its role; and artists must continue to operate as agents for their own agenda of presenting diverse permutations of individualism, even if that may be frowned on by the straight-thinking bureaucrats who apparently speak an 'artistic' language, and yet...

Lee Wen has been exploring different strategies of time-based and performance art since 1989. His work has been strongly motivated by social investigations as well as by inner psychological directions which lead to art interrogating stereotypical perceptions of culture and society. He is a contributing member of The Artists' Village alternative in Singapore and participates in the Black Market international performance collective. He is co-organiser of the Future of Imagination (2003), an international performance art event and R.I.T.E.S. – Rooted in The Ephemeral Speak (2009), a platform to support and develop performance art practices, discourse, infrastructure and audiences in Singapore.