

## **Art Theory**

**Britney Saywell**

### **Summative Assessment**

#### **Essay**

#### **Chosen Essay Question: 'Materiality'**

*'Discuss one contemporary artist's practice that critiques the materials used within their practices to address social/cultural contexts. You are asked to address how the materials inform the conceptual concerns within the work. You must discuss at least three artworks and examine how the artworks connect to contextual conversations in Material Thinking and materiality. You cannot use any artists presented in class or artworks you have discussed already in coursework this year.'*

*'Lee MingWei<sup>1</sup>: Contemporary Art Educating People as Material'*

**Initial Due date: 14 October 2022**

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<sup>1</sup> 'Lee' is a Lastname, and 'MingWei' is a first name (Chinese name origin). Said; Lee Mingwei.

## **'Lee MingWei: Contemporary Art Educating People as Material'**

This essay informs contemporary approaches to materiality discussing artist Lee Mingwei and the place materiality occupies within his practice. Specifically critiquing his artwork better known as projects; 'Stone Journey', 'Letter To Oneself' and 'Our Labyrinth'. Addressing everyday social concerns and worries contemporary artist Lee MingWei's practice is centred around human connections through processes of contemplation. Lee creates space where our walls of perfection are pulled down for just one moment and our shared suffering can breathe. Human to human. Strangers can encounter our humanity alongside each other. Based on Lee MingWei's practice audiences can grasp concepts such as: people activate material, people are a material, and people are the most important material. Overall implying that materials used in art can be stretched beyond physical matter.

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> Material. People Activate Material.**

Materiality within contemporary art articulates the impact of experience as directly affected by the nature of materials, both physical material and supporting relevant details. Conceptual Art identifies how a material is more than an object to be perceived. Rather, emotion, bias, and a sense of experience and history are possible to access beyond the normative truths relating to stagnant objects. In the supporting text '*Materiality as the basis for the Aesthetic experience in Contemporary art.*<sup>2</sup>' Author Christina Murdoch Mills states "... Art objects embody ideas and experience (Murdoch, 2009)." The artist initially activates the material allowing a steady impact based on the fluidity of persons and environment.

Acknowledging materiality within conceptual art allows a viewer to consider relative truths around the physical matter in relationship with fluid concepts that rest in the hand of the perceiver when viewing or experiencing art.

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<sup>2</sup> Christina, Murdoch Mills, '*Materiality as the basis for the Aesthetic experience in Contemporary art.*' University of Montana, May 2009.



Figure 1 Stone Journey 2012 Installation view. "Tales of Flower and Stone" E.Space Louis Vuitton, Taipei, 2012 photo: Lee Studio.

Interactive installation and performative artist Lee Mingwei draws on the aesthetic sense in the audience participation based on their collated experiential knowledge. Expressing ““Many of my projects are based on your kindness and understanding. Without your participation, my work would be meaningless. (Lee Mingwei 2015).” Through his hand, artist Lee alters the circumstance of a set of stones from the Porpori River Valley in New Zealand as he brings home to Taiwan 11 glacial stones. It’s at this point where the opposing material is introduced to the stones’ story as it is cast in bronze. Replicating all physical forms without representing the essence of the material. There is a third material educating the work, concerning the audience. A buyer of the pairing is asked at some point in the future decide which form to rid themselves of. <sup>3</sup>

The heart of the project is the involvement of people who are given the opportunity to participate in contemplation. To consider a material, an act, or form beyond the physical appearance. The interacting audience are involved in Lee’s conceptual terrain concerning “notions of ownership, control, value, and loss. The decision making is at the heart of the project. (Lee 2015)” Stone journey highlights the value of people when approaching conceptual art. Here the audience members play a vital part in the

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<sup>3</sup> Kaikodo, ‘Lee Mingwei - Stone Journey - Write Up.’ Kaikado.com.

activating the physical material stone and bronze. People are the activator of material in conceptual art. Their place is vital for the work to take place.

### **People Are Material.**

Material acts as an entryway to greater materiality found within the embodied knowledge of an audience member. Lee MingWei *'Letter To Oneself'* 2020 is a perfect example of the power an audience member can contribute towards "the larger world of emotions in which we all participate in.(Lee, 2020)" The projects Lee Ming Wei builds are space creators. The materials he uses to create space offer a new social context to be formed. This is specifically laid out or grounded by aesthetic concepts of the materials used within an installation.

In consideration with the pandemic times Lee Mingwei doesn't shy away at the lack of art and audience communication. He continues to develop his art project to reaching the hurting hearts from around the world to share with them the gift of contemplation. Hosted by Gropius Bau, the public whilst stuck at home were invited to write letters to themselves on their present situation, worry and hope. Posting them to the gallery in Germany. The people are the material in the work. Their activation of Lee's invitation to write letters wholeheartedly acknowledges the essence of art in this contemporary world. The audience becomes supporting material among the physical materials of artwork. <sup>4</sup>

In addition to the physical matter and the shared connotations, we engage as the audience. The audience, rather than the participators, further materialise the space bringing embodied knowledge and experience to the space "...through the sense of sight and hearing that relates to patterning based on prior experiences (Murdoch 2009)." The audience carry their own aesthetic sense.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *'Lee Mingwei, Letter to Oneself (2020).'* Gropius Bau, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Christina, Murdoch Mills, *'Materiality as the basis for the Aesthetic experience in Contemporary art.'* University of Montana, May 2009.

Building on Mami Kataoka's from the Mori Art Museum<sup>6</sup> in an interview with Lee Mingwei as she expresses her understanding of Lee's work, "Lee Ming Wei's projects are often open-ended scenarios for everyday interactions (Kataoka,2014)."<sup>7</sup> I find the inclusion of everyday human experiences inform the body of work not just an acknowledgement of the audience member. But the audience member is the material holding the artwork together. As though to give it life.

### **People Are the Most Valuable Material.**

Latest exhibition of Lee Ming Wei's *'Our labyrinth'* was held in Tate Modern.<sup>8</sup> depicting a mound of rice, swept by a dancer through an open space. The rice is materialised as it educates the ongoing impromptu dance. Sharing thought and feeling. The space between dancer and audience is indicated by a large rubber mat. The dancers are a quiet meditative silence amid a bustling people. There is a contrast between the dancer and the audience member. Though the work is held on a performative art level there is still an involvement that the audience plays. For there is a sense of preparation, an offering to the audience.

The audience are no longer onlookers rather they are materializing the artwork. As Lee invites "...audiences to contribute to his work through small exchanges of time, conversation, or personal items. (Tate 2022)." The audience member is the most important material when considering the materiality of an artwork.



Figure 2Our Labyrinth Tate modern 2022 performance view.

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<sup>6</sup> Lee, Mingwei. Kataoka, Mami, *'Part 1: What is "Participatory Art"?' - Dialogue between Lee Mingwei and Kataoka Mami.'* Mori Art Museum, December 2014.

<sup>7</sup> *'Lee Mingwei and His Relations.'* Auckland Art Gallery.com, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *'Encountering Lee Mingwei's Our Labyrinth.'* Tate, 2022.

*'Ways Of Following, Art Materiality, Collaboration'*<sup>9</sup> by Kontturi and Katue Kaisa, addresses the current transformations occurring in art. For so long the role of the audience in art has been to hold a critical distance from the final work. Kontturi and Katue challenge this as does Lee Ming Wei. Perhaps art is calling for transformative proximity between the artist, art, and audience. Where art is encountered beyond the - final proposition. "Proposing new ways of thinking and being. (Ways of following – 2018)" The audience can peer into the practice, the making, the thinking, and the experience of an artist. Taking time to intensely feel and walk alongside an artist and the art.

Lee MingWei speaks to the "...connection between strangers (Lee,2021)" articulating, "The magical encounter of the audience becomes the complexity of the work (Lee,2021)." The work even though separate in audience involvement powerfully speaks to role people play in contemporary art. People are the heartbeat of an artwork.



Figure 3 Two dancers, *Our Labyrinth* Tate modern 2022 performance view.

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<sup>9</sup>Kontturi, Katve-Kaisa, *'Ways of Following Art, Materiality, Collaboration.'* Open Humanities Press, 2018.

## **Conclusion.**

To conclude the Artist Lee Ming Wei's art practice grounds the contemporary concepts of materiality. The audience shifts from a peering, viewing stance to the most important role of the work. The people are the seed of knowledge that materializes a work of art. The art is no longer a reminder but an active space relating to "what it is to be a human being (Lee,2021)." He reminds us as the audience that we too carry the essence of materiality through our embodied knowledge.

Every experience that has led to this moment educates our interaction and response to the world around us. We are a part of a larger field of connection beyond the differences that divide us. Lee MingWei invites you to contemplate your role in this world.

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