

Lee Mingwei: The Tourist Project



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17 January - 24 February 2002
Rice University Art Gallery





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Foreword Kimberly Davenport

Between 17 January and 24 February 2002, artist Lee Mingwei was taken on tours of greater Houston by eighteen randomly selected volunteer tour guides. The guides, whose backgrounds ranged from Rice University students and local artists to a police officer and a cleric, met Lee at the Rice Gallery, then set out — on foot, and by car, canoe, bicycle and balloon — on excursions intended to look beyond the familiar tourist destinations. The sites were chosen not for their historical or cultural import, but for the personal significance they held for Lee's tour guides. Thus, rather than merely be driven by a historic landmark such as the Astrodome, Lee saw the inside of Shudde Brothers Hatters and talked with those who worked there; instead of eating lunch at an upscale restaurant, he dined on chips and salsa at American Bar-B-Que & Taqueria, a favorite haunt of Rice students. One day Lee visited neighborhoods where small bungalows are giving way to townhouses; another day he paddled along a bayou once strewn with trash, but now a point of pride and hope for the city's future. Lee saw a city as unique as the diversity of its people and their experiences.

Lee traveled to Rice in November 2001 to talk about his work, and to introduce *The Tourist Project* at a "Town Meeting," to which the public was invited. People were given the opportunity to fill out lottery cards that were later added to the box that hung in the gallery as part of the installation. Throughout the exhibition, gallery staff would draw cards and contact those volunteers to arrange their tours. Guides were asked about their plans for the tour, for permission to be recorded and photographed, and were instructed to bring a set of clothing, including shoes, to be displayed next to Lee's Chinese scholar's robe, a garment he feels honors his heritage.

The Rice Gallery became a place of encounter for Lee and his guides, and for visitors, who came to know something about them and their experiences through traces of presence: the clothing, collected objects, large-scale projected images, sounds of voices (the recorded conversations) and a map indicating where tours had taken place. The exhibition furniture was a collaboration between Lee and a friend, Guy Willey, who designed and built the modular objects — screens, seating cubes and display platform — with an eye toward defining the space while creating a serene atmosphere. The minimal color scheme of red, black, and white made for a striking, yet open environment that allowed the emphasis to fall, as Lee desired, on the experiential aspects of his work.



During our first conversation about *The Tourist Project*, Lee asked that we have a celebratory dinner at its conclusion for all who participated. It was a testament to Lee and the relationships he fostered during his brief encounters, that nearly every participant attended. The warm and festive evening featured a Tex-Mex feast and an abundance of storytelling, joking, and laughter among a group of people who previously were strangers to one another.

Lee Mingwei's artistic practice dissolves the perceived boundaries between art and life, and in the process generates a tangible sense of community, and of place. I would like to thank Mingwei for his artistic vision, his unfailing humor, and his pleasant company. For the Rice gallery staff, *The Tourist Project* was more than an exhibition; it was a joyful interlude during which we looked forward to Lee's return at the end of each day, when he brought us delightful treats and recounted the details of his adventures. He was supremely missed when the project ended.

I would like to thank Jeanne and Mickey Klein for their generous hospitality in hosting a special evening in their home following the exhibition opening. I am grateful to Stephanie Smith, Associate Curator, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, for sharing her spirit and ideas in many conversations about Lee Mingwei's work, since we first experienced it together many years ago. I am especially grateful to our Patrons and Members, who made possible the commissioning of *The Tourist Project* and its first performance and installation at Rice University Art Gallery. Their support of new and often challenging art allows us to initiate conceptual projects such as this, that may exist only once, or that may have an ongoing life as the artist extends his or her original idea through time. We are pleased that Lee Mingwei will re-create *The Tourist Project* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 25 - December 1, 2003.





Reflections on *The Tourist Project* Lee Mingwei

When I started to think about visiting Houston, I found there was no particular architectural element or place that I identify completely with the city. So I thought it would be very interesting for people — ordinary people who are just living here — to act as my guides and take me to sites that are particularly meaningful for them. That way they could re-examine the place through my fresh pair of eyes, and I could experience the city through their personal histories.

All my projects act as the question, 'If you were in my situation, what would you do?' If you have a chance to cook a meal for someone you really care for, what would you cook? And this is the same thing: where do you go if your friends come to visit you? Do you want to show them just a site, or do you want to show them something very intimate so they get to know you better?

When I start a project like this, I try not to have a pre-conceived notion of who are the most interesting or exotic people that I can "collect." Each one of us has a very interesting background and we all come from a history that maybe we don't even realize. It's that "baggage" that I'm really interested in.

In this project the eighteen people who became my guides really took ownership of the work. They were Houstonians, and I was a tourist, so they could show me things in unexpected ways. On my tour with Andrew, for instance, I met Mr. Turner. This man is very well known in Houston as "The Flower Man." He has flowers on his bicycle because he goes around and collects them, and uses them to beautify his yard. So Andrew, who was driving me around, saw him and went, 'Oh, Mr. Turner!' They started chatting, and I got to meet him. It was a moving experience for me that never would have happened had I not been with Andrew.



Cleveland Turner, "The Flower Man"

“My cities consist of the places where personally meaningful events have taken place.”

The objects in the gallery formed the residue of my experiences of the tours. I brought back things to share with people in order to address the physical site of the gallery, but what was seen there represented only a very tiny bit of what had occurred. Even so, I’m still struggling with the idea of documenting experience. Growing up, I spent six summers in a Ch’an monastery. My teacher’s influence appears in my work as the idea of not leaving “things” after an activity, of living more in the moment.

After the exhibition, the things went back to the people they came from. A lot of them were personal things, some that people used daily. We have images on CDs, but the real records are in the participants’s minds, and in my mind. They’re in our memories. That’s the more poetic part of this project; it’s more about memory than anything else.

The Tourist Project was a very emotional experience for me. The last two days of the project I was up in the sky in a hot air balloon one day, and then, literally, down in the cemetery looking at headstones the next. It was a symbolic way to end. I’ve done other participatory-type projects, and by far, this one has been the richest for me.





Schedule of Tours

Sean Rudolph 17 January
The Heights
Wabash Antiques & Feed Store
Shudde Brothers Hatters
Beer Can House
Ninfa's Restaurant
Hermann Park

Andrew Malveaux 18 January
Montrose
Third Ward
Andrew's house
Project Row Houses

Sara Cortez 19 January
Sara's childhood home in South Macgregor
St. Peter the Apostle Middle School

Toni Beauchamp 20 January
Benjy's in the Village restaurant
Canoe ride beginning at Shepherd's Landing,
ending at Allen's Landing on the Buffalo Bayou

Stephen Fox 21 January
Terrell James's painting studio
House demolition site in the Heights

Minush Azari 22 January
The Menil Collection
The Rothko Chapel

The Reverend Harvey Clemons, Jr. 23 January
Fifth Ward, site of Reverend Clemons's childhood home
Pleasant Hill Baptist Church

Christopher Olivier 24 January
Commerce Street Art Warehouse
Olivier's studio
Value Village in the Heights

Richard Elbein 25 January
Riverside Terrace
Bike trail on Brays Bayou
Hermann Park
Wortham Fountain

Yimay Yang 26 January
Bellaire Boulevard, Chinatown

Donald Yeh 27 January
Mexican Bar-B-Que Taqueria
Central Market grocery store

Sheila Chang 28 January
Rice University
Bellaire Boulevard, Chinatown
Enron
Sugar Land

Cecily Horton 30 January
Bolivar Peninsula
Stingaree Restaurant, Crystal Beach

Michael Mezell 31 January
Guadalajara Bakery
Mezell's studio
Folk art in the West End
Gallery Furniture
Lake Houston
Lynchberg Ferry
San Jacinto Monument
Texas Medical Center

Sonya Gonzales-Adams 1 February
The Center for AIDS
Irma's Restaurant

Santiago Cucullu 20 February
Houston Zoo

Al Muir 21 February
Hot air balloon ride over Cullen-Barker Park,
Addicks, and Barker Reservoirs

Russ Pitman 22 February
Glenwood Cemetery

1 - Bolivar Peninsula

Named for Simón Bolívar, the first president of Bolivia, this peninsula is a narrow strip of eroding land or "barrier island" stretching twenty-seven miles along the Texas Gulf Coast.

2 - Buffalo Bayou

Buffalo Bayou flows sixty-five miles across southern Harris County through the city of Houston to its mouth on the San Jacinto River. In 1836, brothers Augustus and John Allen established the city of Houston at Allen's Landing on the south bank of the bayou.

3 - Downtown

Following a boom at the turn of the twentieth century, interest in downtown Houston fell as many residents and businesses left. Today, the downtown area is experiencing dramatic growth with the construction of new housing, office space, restaurants, theaters, and sports arenas.

4 - Chinatown

Bellaire Boulevard, outside Loop 610 to the west, is the center of Houston's "new Chinatown," a commercial area that began to develop in the early 1980s. The area is home to numerous Chinese restaurants, grocery stores, souvenir shops and theaters. Unlike the Chinatown regions of other cities, Houston's Chinatown is not a residential area.

5 - Galveston Island

Galveston Island is a sand-barrier island that parallels the Texas coast. Today, the island is joined to the mainland by an all-vehicle causeway and its beaches, historic homes, and downtown shopping district known as "The Strand," make it a popular weekend destination for Houstonians.

6 - The Heights

Houston Heights, one of the first planned communities in Texas, was named for its site on high land (100 feet above sea level). Today, more than 100 Houston Heights structures are listed in the National Register of Historic Places and it has become a popular neighborhood for young families who are attracted to its convenient location and tight-knit community atmosphere.

7 - Montrose

Montrose is an eclectic four-square-mile neighborhood located west of downtown. The area is filled with fine restaurants, antique stores, art galleries and museums.

8 - Museum District

The Houston Museum District includes sixteen institutions located within a defined geographic radius with Mecom Fountain (intersection of Main Street and Montrose Boulevard) as the center point. The district welcomed more than 5.9 million visitors in 2001, making it one of Houston's most visited tourist destinations. Rice University Art Gallery is located near the center of the District.

9 - River Oaks

This residential garden suburb comprises 1100 acres and was developed in the 1920s by Will and Mike Hogg, sons of former Texas governor James Hogg. A master plan included rigid building codes, deed restrictions and centralized community control to assure exclusivity. The neighborhood remains one of the city's most affluent.

10 - Riverside Terrace

In the 1930s, wealthy Jewish families moved to this area because they were banned from River Oaks. In the 1950s, when black families moved in, many whites fled to the suburbs. A decade later, white residents who saw potential for an integrated neighborhood tried to stabilize it by posting signs that read: "This Is Our Home; It is Not For Sale." Today, Riverside Terrace is ethnically diverse.

11 - Sugar Land

Located twenty-two miles southwest of Houston, Sugar Land is home to Texas's oldest company, The Imperial Sugar Company. Since the late 1950s, this upscale suburb has been developed on the company's former land holdings.

12 - West End

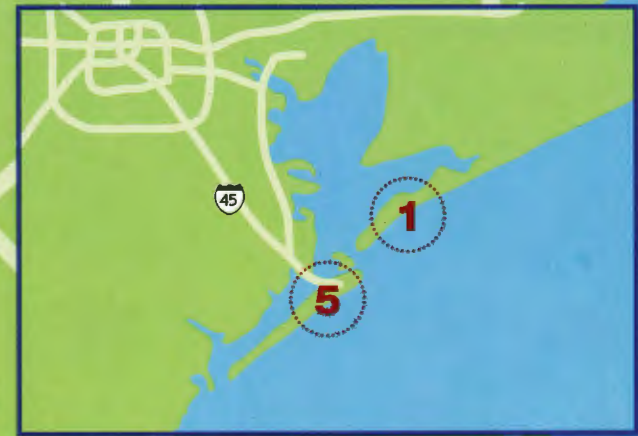
This area was once a largely blue-collar neighborhood on the western edge of Houston. In the 1960s and 70s, as growth continued outward and people moved to the suburbs, many of the houses and commercial structures in the West End were abandoned. Recent development has led to a revitalization in this area.

13 - Third Ward

The Houston City Charter of 1839 organized the city into four political subdivisions or "wards." Today, the Third Ward is the center of African-American business and culture in Houston, and is home to Texas Southern University, the University of Houston, and Project Row Houses, an art-based community development project sited in twenty-two renovated shotgun houses.

14 - Fifth Ward

Located east of downtown Houston, this area was settled by freedmen and became known as the Fifth Ward in 1866. At the time, half the population was black and half white. Eventually, the Fifth Ward population became predominantly black, but with the passage of integration laws in the 1960s, many residents left the community seeking wider opportunities. Barbara Jordan and Mickey Leland, members of the U.S. Congress, grew up in the Fifth Ward.



Sheila

I'm going to show you Enron; you'll get to see it firsthand. Parts of it are still running, but I don't really understand how. I've still got some friends who are working there. Apparently they've gotten contracts from the company that bought them out; they bought mainly the trading division, I think. It's very sad. I hear they're not really doing anything; not much is going on day-to-day. I had just started in July in their Associate Analyst Program, a rotational that lasts 2 years. My first rotation was "Fundamentals" so we studied supply and demand of gas, basically.

We are approaching downtown. You can see the Enron building; right there, the "Speedstick-looking" thing. It's beautiful! There are the news crews — I don't think they're going to let me park here. I used to park in that garage right there. That's my little parking garage! It makes me so sad. It's even worse now than it was when I was here. I was laid off at the beginning before all of the really shady deals started coming to light. Back then it was "the biggest corporate collapse in history" and that was about it, but since then, it has just become this, you know . . .

They're watching us. They're watching you take pictures! Little do they know! I wanted to get a picture of the big "E" with my friends and me in front of it. We'll have to come back sometime. I met so many great people. I started with a class of new graduates, about one hundred twenty of us, just out of school. Then we all got laid off: 'Great having you! Have a nice life!'

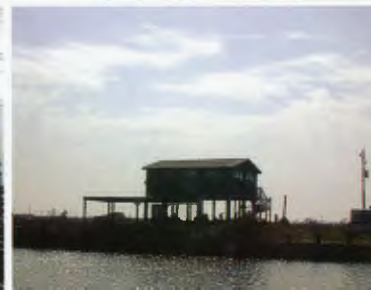
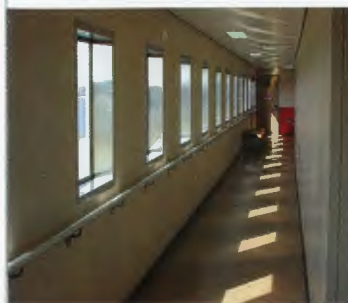
Lately, it has been demoralizing. I think all of us bought into the whole, 'Enron's a great place to work.' I still believe that. I believe that for the most part there were a lot of great, hard-working, talented people. There was a sense of pride. We were part of something really special, but after all this stuff came out it was like, 'Ugh, we were all duped.' Some people have found jobs; some people are still looking. I moved back home. I was in an apartment for about six months, and I never finished unpacking.



Cecily

Bolivar is its own little world. It's mostly because it's so "Other," while being so close to Houston. It's just a very different experience. The people think of themselves differently; they don't even think of themselves as "Galveston people." The ferry will get you out to one end, and there is this one little road at the other end. It's almost like an island. The other thing I like about it is that it's so flat. There's something to me very restful about it.

I grew up in places with a lot of mountains — a little bit in Michigan and a lot in Colorado and in Australia — all over. I always lived someplace where there was either an ocean or mountains. Something exciting was going on! Here, it's like . . . flat. So I think that one of the things I had to learn about Houston, how to be happy here, is not to look to the land for my visual excitement, but to look at the sky. So really, you become extremely aware of weather: weather changes, clouds, fronts, all the different sorts of "sky things," as opposed to being enraptured with valleys and mountains and peaks. Now, I go to places everyone thinks are so scenic, like Sun Valley, Idaho, and I feel claustrophobic. There, the sun is coming over the mountain at 10:00 and it sets at 3:00. It makes me feel like things are kind of folding in on me, and I'm like, 'Just give me my wide open range!' Like this.



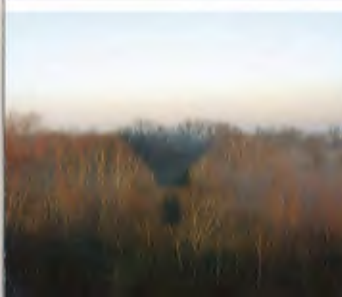
In 1975, there were going to be fifty balloons in one race, so we went, and I was offered a ride by one of the guys I was crewing for. Of course, he was a salesman, but he didn't have to take me for a ride; I was already sold! I gave the ride to my wife, probably one of the smartest things I have ever done. She gave the best description of flying in a balloon that I have ever heard. She said, 'It's not like flying at all. It's like you simply stand still and the earth just gently moves away from you.' It's true. Then we started talking, and she said, 'You can't have two toys,' meaning the Corvette. So about six weeks later I called her and said, 'Come get me.' She said, 'What's wrong with the car?' I said, 'Well, we don't own the Corvette anymore, we are proud owners of a brand new balloon!' I'll never go back.

There it is — now you can see the city. This was the first view we saw on January 1st — the sunrise of 2000! This is how we view the city of Houston all the time; the beauty and the freedom are just unmatched.

I've been doing this for 28 years, and my joy comes from sharing it with people. I always tell my clients that I get to relive my first flying experience through the eyes of everybody I take up for the first time. So it's a kick: the same wide-eyed wonderment, the same remarkable questions, the same expressions of joy.

When you get into a balloon, time stops. All the hustle and bustle is below, and you're above it all. It's the greatest part of it. It has always been my getaway, my form of escape. The first time my instructor turned me loose to solo, I was at home. I fly like other people put on socks and shoes; it's just very, very natural.

What you're seeing that looks like the balloon's shadow is actually a projection, the bending of the sun's rays around the balloon, magnifying it. It's a very unusual thing called the "corona effect." It affects the optics in a telescope, and scientists have studied it from a balloon. Watch how big it gets — see how it's growing? It will grow some more as it gets in this fog over here. That's the magnification effect, and then you'll see the corona around it. See it? Now look, you can see the rainbow. Look at the corona; the effect is like a prism. This is really neat that you can see this; we don't get many days when you can. It's really amazing! You've really gotten a treat this morning. You've gotten the best of it.

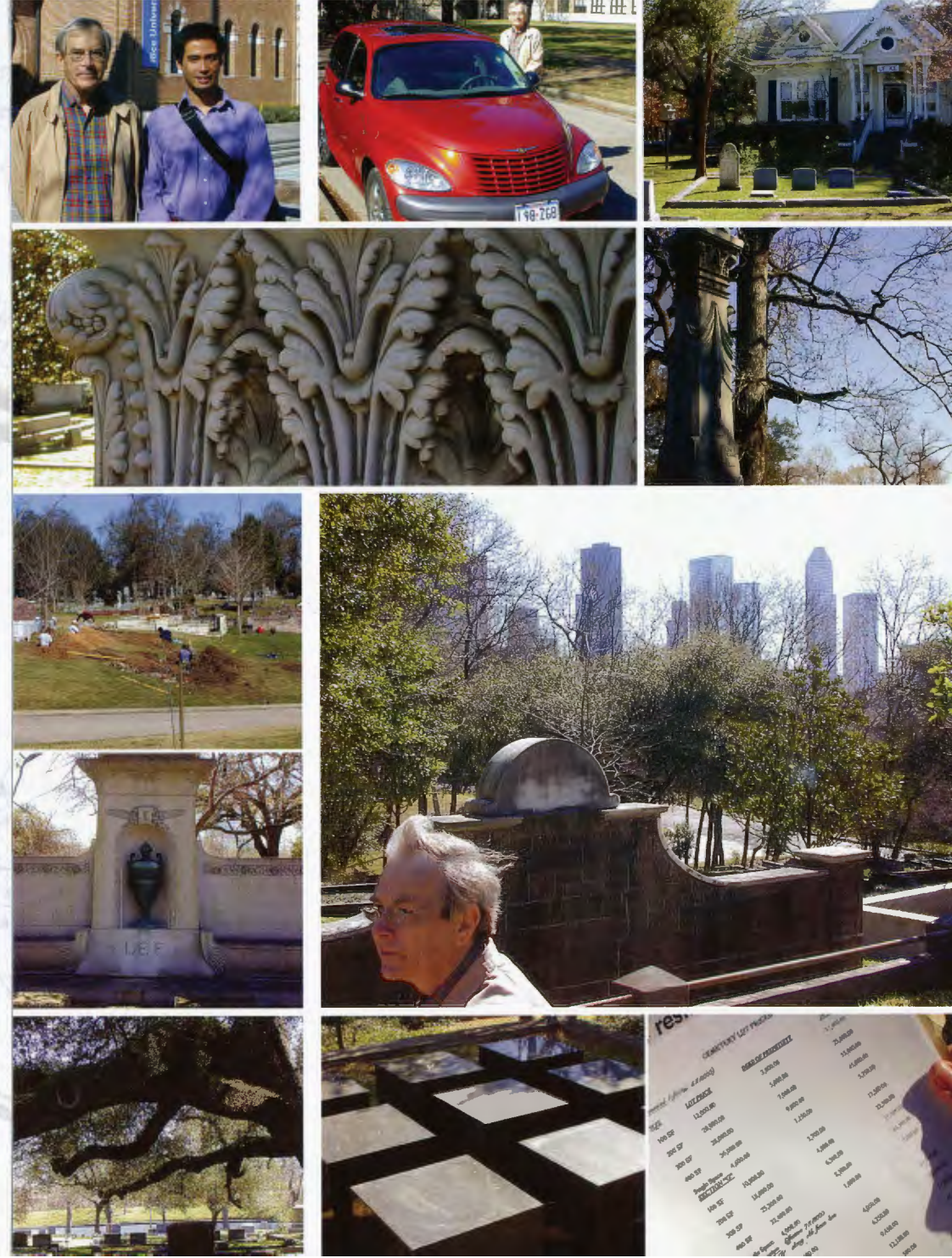


Russ

Let's go up the hill now to this one that's right around the corner, because this is my spot. I looked all over Houston and finally decided Glenwood was the right place, because it has a wonderful roll that people just cannot believe. I call it "hilly," even though by anybody else's standards, it's not, but it is in Houston, Texas. I really liked it because it has these pine trees and it's like you're on the side of a hill looking down. In 1975 I bought a 10' x 10' spot, their minimum size, for \$375. It costs about \$5,000 now for that same size space. When Howard Hughes died and was buried here in 1976, the year after I bought this, Glenwood Cemetery became very popular and that's when the prices went up. I was lucky to get it when I did.

My next task was a monument, so I went up to LaGrange, Texas. I knew that Stoltz Monument Company up there had old monuments. I had a choice of about seven or eight, and I picked the one that you see here today, which is actually a trade-in. They shave off the raised letters and incise new lettering, and that way you get to reuse the thing. Now, you'll notice on the top, there's a cross that looks like a temple. I'm not really a religious person, but when you're picking an old stone like this, you take what you get, and actually it is kind of attractive-looking, a little bit of a Grecian temple look with a cross. I did not want my name on it; I wanted to say something that maybe would catch people's attention and make them pause and think. So I went through *Bartlett's Quotations*, and finally found that quote of Plutarch's which is on there, which says, "The whole life of man is but a point of time. Let us enjoy it therefore, while it lasts, and not spend it to no purpose." I then hunted for a foot marker to put my name on, and found a used one out at Forest Park Lawndale. I put my full name — I didn't want my dates on there — and "On the hill of forever." I made that up, because as I said, in Houston, this is a hill.

So this is my spot and someday my ashes will be out here. My instructions are that when I die, they are to have a big cocktail party right here beside it, with everybody celebrating the experiences they enjoyed with me through my lifetime.







About the Artist

Lee Mingwei was born in Taiwan in 1964 and now lives in New York City. He received a BFA from California College of Arts and Crafts and an MFA from Yale University. Two of Lee's most well known works, *The Letter-Writing Project* and *The Dining Project*, were performed and exhibited in a 1998 one-person exhibition, *Way Stations*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *The Letter-Writing Project* (commissioned by The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia) invited museum visitors to write letters to the living or the dead, and to reflect on gratitude, insight, and forgiveness. Sealed, addressed envelopes were mailed, while unsealed letters were displayed to the public and then ceremonially burned by Lee. In *The Dining Project*, the artist

cooked a typical Asian meal for one museum visitor each evening after the museum closed. Other solo exhibitions include *The Living Room* (2000) at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston; *The Sleeping Project* (2000) at Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York; and a retrospective, *Lee Mingwei: 1994-1999* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (1999). Lee's work was included in the Taipei Biennial (2000) and the Venice Biennale (2003). *The Tourist Project* (2002) commissioned by Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, will be recreated at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in fall 2003.



