Ron Hanson, 'Don't give me the spotlight - I'll install the light myself: A conversation with Lee Kit' The Subconcious Restaurant 2, White Fungus Publishing, Taichung City, 2014



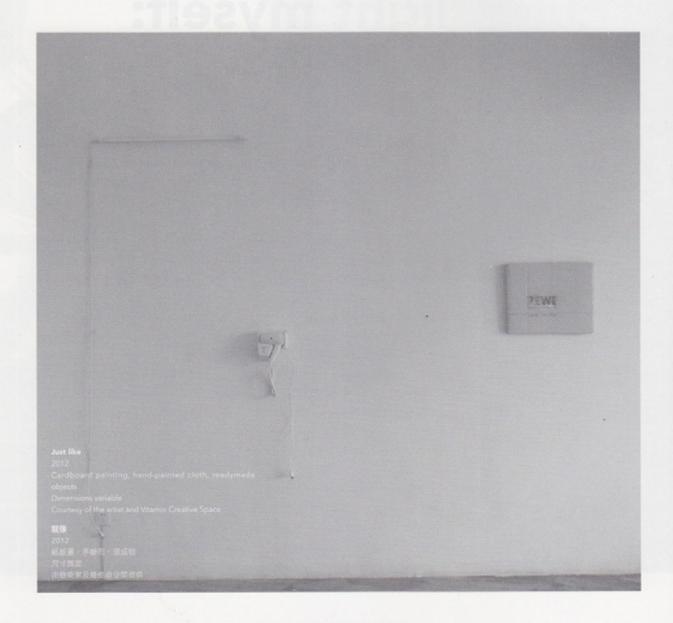
## Don't give me the spotlight – I'll install the light myself:

A conversation with Lee Kit

Lee Kit is a paradoxical kind of an artist. Not being particularly enamored with receiving attention from the art world, he has none-the-less received plenty of it. In 2013, Lee, one of the most anti-monumental artists I know, represented Hong Kong at that most prestigious of affairs, the 55th Venice Biennale. Lee was a controversial pick, not being based in Hong Kong (more on that soon). But also, in this age of loud publicity, Lee's work seems quiet, detached and totally devoid of any direct ties to national, or any other group, identity.

Beginning as a traditional painter, Lee shifted to using fabrics, curtains and other materials for his canvases. And ultimately, he began painting total environments, whether literally, as when he paints the entire wall and ceiling space a stridently hostile creamy white, or through the placement of utilitarian but very specific objects into the space, which operate as much in a sense of color as they do three dimensions. What Lee appears to be always driving home in his diffuse works is the idea of precision, for whatever reasons. We cannot be sure; as Lee prefers to remain aloof when talking about his art, and strangely, despite its success, the work hasn't necessarily found a home in any of the competing discourses of contemporary art. As with many artists in the contemporary era, the work is popular and well travelled, but there is a vacuum in the critical discourse around it. This interview will not remedy the situation but will offer some insight into Lee's history, and his perspectives on art, politics and life.

Lee began as an artist being associated with the Fo Tan community artists in Hong Kong. By his own account, the artist spent an obsessive amount of time in his studio fixating on specific and easily-overlooked details. One of his best-known works is "Scratching a tablecloth" in which over a period of four years Lee laboriously scratched a hole through the table in his studio, in a simple but extreme gesture of meditation and a withdrawal from instrumentalism into a seemingly pointless or absurd activity. But Lee's rise in the art world was rapid. In 2010, Lee was included in the exhibition No Soul for Sale at the Tate Modern in London. In 2012 Lee's work featured in the exhibitions Print/Out at MoMA in New York, and the Ungovernables at the New Museum Triennial in New York. Lee has had dozens of exhibitions each year and now has dealer galleries in New York, Guangzhou, Beijing, Shanghai and Tokyo. But in 2012, riding a crest of success, Lee surprised many people in the art world by moving to Taipei. Subconscious Restaurant editor Ron Hanson caught up with Lee at the restaurant Wu Yun in Taipei and discussed with the artist his move to Taipei, Venice and his current residency at Taipei Contemporary Art Center, among other things.



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Ron Hanson: Good to be with you again. How long's it been - I guess seven or eight years since we first met back in Wellington, New Zealand, of all places. And then we met again in Hong Kong in 2009 after we'd just returned to Taiwan, and now here we are all living in the same country. So it's interesting to reflect a little on what's hapened, but I'm also interested to talk to you about what you're doing now and about things like the Venice Biennale, and stuff like that. At any rate, I've enjoyed seeing you. Since we first met you've become this big international artist but you don't seem to have changed at all. I mean that in a good way.

Lee Kit: No, I don't think I changed the whole time.

### RH: Why haven't you changed? The success that you've had, does that not go to your head?

LK: The first thing is that the first time we met, we met in Wellington between 2007 and 2008, in the Christmas and New Year period. And since then, I started to travel. And every year, more and more. Now I travel every week. So even if I say I am living in Taipei, I am not really living in Taipei. I'm living out of my suitcase and hotel rooms.

### RH: So that began then. The Wellington trip was your first one? So we were your lucky charm?

LK: I don't know what happened that year, I actually don't know what happened. I really don't know. It just happened. Because I am not that kind of artist to promote myself.

### RH: You don't promote yourself?

LK: No, no.

#### RH: Really?

LK: Masturbating in front of people? No.

### RH: That's funny, we've got a friend who actually did that.

LK: Once you've started to promote yourself, it's an endless process. You spend all your time promoting yourself, and socialising with people. The fact is that when you get more opportunities and become famous,

you have to deal with that. If that is your destination, but in the course of it you spend all your effort on promoting yourself and socialising with people, that means you are not doing anything - logically.

### RH: I think it's a big problem that art has become so much about marketing.

LK: Branding and marketing, the same bullshit.

RH: When we first met you in Wellington you were still doing your Masters, had you finished that by then? LK: No I hadn't.

#### RH: So, you were still a student.

LK: Actually after the trip, I finished the thesis but I didn't submit it. Because at that time my university had some problems. They wanted to kill the art department. I talked to the professor who was the Head and Chief of the Department, and he was like, "that's normal, you know". That's not normal. Like in a family, if someone wants to kill our family, is that normal?

### RH: How did you get into this whole art thing? Is your family into art?

LK: No, no, it was out of imagination. Even when I was studying during my degree, I talked to my friends, they're all artists. They were saying, "I want to be an artist, a professional artist", and I was like, "no, just get a job."

#### RH: What kind of job?

LK: I mean anything. Because of my family background, I worked since I was sixteen, fifteen years old. I earned actually a lot of money at that time.

#### RH: Really? What were you doing?

LK: Anything. I was a construction worker, I was a designer, I was an assistant to my professor. I was a DJ. A lot of things, except prostitution. Because I am not qualified. Just because I'm not qualified, otherwise maybe.

RH: So your family situation got you into that.

LK: Because my family was bankrupt, and my parents were old, so I had to do it. Because my older sister didn't do it it. She disappeared for years. And she actually left two children, my niece and nephew. But afterwards, I learned a lot of things. Because, first, I never married, but I have two children. They really take me as a father figure. My ex-father-in-law, he was Mafia... Because I work on a lot of things, so I know how to construct things, I know about legal things. I know a lot of things through my part-time jobs.

RH: That's interesting because you've become a famous artist but you haven't talked about these things. I don't remember reading about them. Is that because people haven't asked you?

LK: I think it depends on the atmosphere. We're friends. We're here in this bar.... After 2008 things just happened. What I was talking about is just my background. I am a kind of guy without vision. I mean, I have vision, in daily life, I want to change some things. But I don't want to change everyone. Because I don't have such a strong ego that I want to control everyone. I'm not Ai Weiwei. I don't want to change everyone.

RH: So that hard early life you had - because you were very young and having to deal with this very serious situation with your family - is that partly why you're quite grounded?

LK: Probably, because you're not that big, and you shouldn't be big. I try to control it. I think "control" is a key word.

RH: It's interesting that you talk about not wanting to change everyone. Because the word "quiet" is often used when talking about your work, but a kind of quiet rebellion. It's quite playful and quite subtle, but there is a rebellion there. But it's not grandiose.

LK: I hate the spotlight. Don't give me a spotlight. I'll install the light myself.

RH: But you've had a huge number of exhibitions. In 2012, how many exhibitions was it that you had?

LK: Now every year since 2010 I've done at least 15-

Last year I spent a lot of effort on Venice. In 2012
I actually did 30.

RH: Was there a tipping point? Was there a moment where something happened?

LK: I think there was nothing particular that happened.

RH: So you couldn't indentify one moment.

LK: Last year because of Venice I could turn down a lot of shows. I really wanted to focus on it.

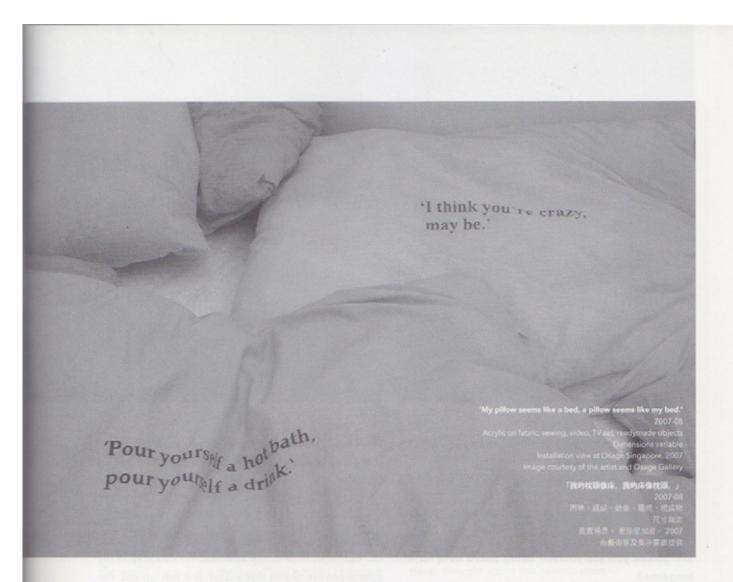
RH: So with all this travelling, are you tired of it? Do you enjoy it?

LK: I think for the first two years, 2008 and 2009, I quite enjoyed it, because it was like a honeymoon. I just keep kept travelling and everyone takes care of you, books you a hotel... But after that I started to get tired, particularly now. I'm getting older, 36. During Venice I stayed there for a month, but actually before and after that, I never stayed in a place for more than two weeks.

RH: So in a way you're experiencing the global art world in the extreme. This is the nomadic lifestye of contemporary art, but you also have quite a healthy cyncisim towards it. But is there a way out?

LK: I think the first thing is that you actually make a choice. If you don't like it, just say "no". If I don't say "no", then I admit that I say "yes". The second thing is that as you become a so-called "very famous artist" you have more shows, and bigger shows every year. But then you have a team to work for you and you'll even have a manaer who manages everything, so no one can contact you. Even your friends can only contact your manager, or someone under your manager. Is that the life? I don't think so. So even now I do everything by myself. But it's very slow. It has become very slow. You just don't have the time and effort to reply to 200 emails per day. You cannot do it.

RH: Last year you represented Hong Kong at Venice but you're actually based in Taipei, based in a loose sense, because you're always travelling. But how do



### you feel about Taipei? Do you have a feeling of home or community here?

LK: The first thing is that I don't have a lot of friends in Taipei, after two years. I'm not very close to the art scene here. But I think it is a very human city that I can do something like this. The other important thing is that because I live here, I can keep something really treasurable inside. When I live in Hong Kong I really need to spend effort to keep that treasurable thing. I don't know what to call it, even in Chinese. But it is very important to be a human being.

### RH: You find that you can do that here, but not in Hong Kong. Why?

LK: I don't know, I really don't know. Even in Taiwan, the social situation is not that good, but every time I come

back, I just think I'm back at home. I feel quiet. Maybe because I don't have a lot of friends here.

### RH: But it feels to me like you're becoming more part of the local scene over time.

LK: Over time, yes. This is something I cannot escape. But the point is that I don't show up, I don't go to openings, which is almost like a policy.

### RH: But you don't need to go to openings, right? LK: Well, I don't enjoy it.

#### RH: Neither do I.

LK: Because with openings, if I take it as part of a duty, I don't enjoy it. But if I live in Hong Kong it is actually my duty to go to openings.

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### RH: So is that partly why you like it here, you don't have as many obligations?

LK: I don't have obligations here. If I go it's because I feel like seeing my friends, because I want to have a drink.

### RH: So can you see yourself being based here for a long time?

LK: I would say that. At least I don't have a plan to move back to Hong Kong.

### RH: That's interesting because you're a young artist and your career is taking off. A lot of people think that they've got to be in New York or Berlin.

LK: I hate all these cities, well not hate, for example I enjoy New York, but not as an artist. Before moving to Taipei my first choice was Berlin. But then I took a trip there, some research, and I thought, "fuck no". Everyone is an artist. I go to a bar and everone is an artist, the bartender is an artist. Too many artists! It's like we are guys, but sometimes I want so see a woman, not because I'm horny, but just for something different. If I live in a city and I see all the guys around and no women, I'm not balanced.

## RH: I read an interview in which you said that Taipei is a place where you can hide. What are you hiding from?

LK: Sometimes, I just don't want to see people.

### RH: There're a lot of people in this city.

LK: But I can hide in my apartment. I can stay in my apartment for two or three days and not go out. I'm very nerdy.

# RH: So last year you were at Venice and that was a big project, a lot of money went into that. So how did you feel about that? I mean in your work, there's a lightness to it.

LK: Last year was lucky and also very controversial, because I had moved away from Hong Kong... I decided at that time in Venice that I didn't want to do a big show, a look-at-me show. We did it in a very human way, because Venice, in this kind of a big exhibition, they have a lot of hidden rules behind it. But we didn't follow the rules. We didn't do eye candy. In our project, when you went into the show, you didn't get given anything within five seconds. Usually, in all the shows at Venice, you go onto the site and you get given something within five seconds. So many artists



followed this kind of rule. On the other hand we did follow some rules, like dinner. Dinner is actually very important in Venice, so we had a dinner for 200 people in the fish market. It was very expensive and my gallery supported it, and spent a lot of fucking money. It was like wow, so I enjoyed it. So I was kind of spoiled with that project. But you don't need to follow the rules of the world. If you know them and you want to change it, you don't need to tell anyone, just do it.

### RH: Now what's happening with the residency at the momet at TCAC, The Burning Issue. What is the Burning Issue?

LK: Actually I don't know. It was just among friends. We were kind of drunk and I said to Meiya and Jun Yang we could do something together. Because they always wanted to invite me to be part of TCAC, but I said, "no". I don't want to be part of any organisation. I only want to be an individual. But I said to Meiya, "You're not so professional as a director". I was so mean, very mean. I said, "You always sleep late and wake up late, how can you have meetings wherever? Why don't you let an artist have a residency and be the director?". It was a joke, and then she took it seriously. So the Burning Issue is basically... all the artists who

come to the residency, they will be the directors. So this month I'm the director of TCAC officially. Because with this institution as a platform of discussion, who will influence the discussion? Of course not only the speakers, but the director too. Because who invites the artists, that is bascially the decision of the director. So this month all the artists I invited... they told me they'd never thought about this combination.

### RH: Why? What's different about it?

LK: Because I am not from Taiwan. I did a lot of research, but still I don't know which artist belongs to which group. It's something I don't need to care about. For my residency the key word is "individualism". I divided it into four talks. It should be a very practical thing.

### RH: So what do you look for in artists?

LK: First, they should be very honest, with themselves, not necessarily very professional, I mean so-called art profesionals, I don't believe in it. They shouldn't be too famous. If they're really famous it means they're very established in the market in Taiwan. What else? No, actually, nothing. I had a list of artists and then just put them together.