

Atsuo Yasuda 'Lee Kit in Conversation' OCULA Magazine, 19 October 2018

OCULA CONVERSATION

Lee Kit in Conversation

OCULA

Atsuo Yasuda | Tokyo | 19 October 2018



Lee Kit. Courtesy © the artist and Shugo-Arts. Photo: Shigeo Muto.

Lee Kit's enigmatic practice pairs intangible elements such as light and sound with painting, moving-image and readymade objects to create meditative installations—or 'situations', as the artist frequently calls them—that often comprise singular paintings, upon which light is cast from a projector, creating an alternate texture to that generated by HD video or painting alone.

A series of these installations were included in the artist's first institutional solo exhibition in Europe at S.M.A.K., Gent: *A small sound in your head* (28 May–4 September 2016), which ran concurrently to *Hold your breath, dance slowly* at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (12 May–9 October 2016). At Walker Art Center, *Hey (the lasting care)* (2016) consisted of a looped video of close-ups of hands and feet in grey-blue and white tones that was projected onto a wall, interrupted by a piece of plywood painted in glossy, transparent paint. To the right of the projection lay a carpet, its left-hand side falling beneath the bottom right-hand side of the projection; beside this, a small paper painting depicts a smaller close-up of hands touching feet with *Hey* inscribed beneath.



Lee Kit, *Hey (the lasting care)* (2016). Exhibition view: *Hold your breath, dance slowly*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (12 May–9 October 2016). Courtesy the artist and Jane Lombard Gallery, NY.

Lee's paintings and projections occasionally feature short excerpts of text. In *The more I ignore you, the closer you get.* (2017), for example, a low-res photograph of a seascape in Hong Kong is overlaid with the text from the title, immediately transforming a simple scene into an image with infinite narrative possibilities. The muted tones that tie his pieces together—often in blue, grey and white—hint at the artist's background in painting, developed during his BFA and MFA at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. *You (you)*, Lee's installation for the Hong Kong pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, showcased the artist's approach to his installations as expanded compositions. The pavilion's floor was covered in an office-blue carpet, while a selection of domestic objects—such as an unplugged hairdryer lying on the carpet, or a vacuum cleaner with its pipe leaning against the wall—punctuated the white-walled room.



Exhibition view: Lee Kit, *You (you)*, Hong Kong Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale (1 June–24 November 2013). Courtesy the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou/Beijing.

The minimalism of Lee's works often veers towards self-referentiality, most pertinently in his 'Hand-painted cloth' series (2001–ongoing). In the early work, *Sunday Afternoon: Picnic with friends and hand-painted cloth* at Yung Shu O, Sai Kung (2003), a photograph captures the blue-and-white, striped fabric being used as a picnic blanket. This collective moment occurred after a long period of government-encouraged indoor seclusion from the SARS epidemic; imbuing the cloth with new significance. Included in his 2016 solo exhibition at S.M.A.K. was *hand-painted cloth to clean window* (2008), comprised of two elements: a small photograph capturing the act of cleaning a window with the blue-and-white striped cloth in question, while to the right the slightly crumpled cloth was pinned to the wall—evidence of dirty remnants subtly present across its surface.

Between 16 September and 24 December 2018, the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo presents Lee Kit *'We used to be more sensitive.'*—a series of installations intended to radiate a sense that 'time has stopped.' Lee discusses the exhibition and his practice in this conversation, which was transcribed from a discussion held between the artist and the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art's curator, Atsuo Yasuda, on the exhibition's opening day.



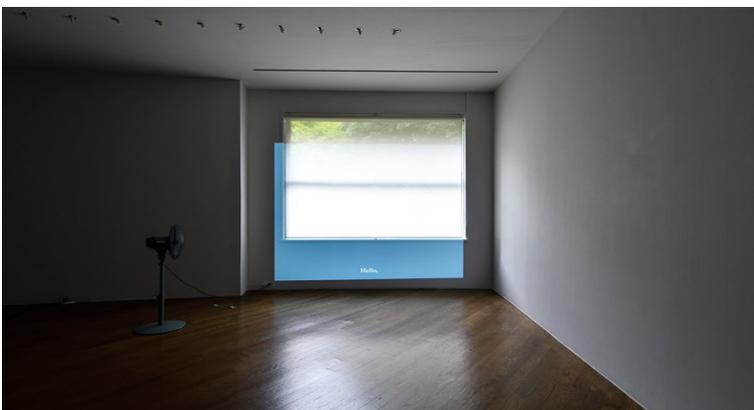
Exhibition view: Lee Kit 'We used to be more sensitive.', Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (16 September–24 December 2018). Courtesy © the artist and ShugoArts. Photo: Shigeo Muto.

Your exhibition at the Hara Museum, 'We used to be more sensitive.', is finally open. How do you feel?

It feels very fresh. I finished everything at 11 this morning. Usually an artist finishes a show then goes for dinner or a drink, but this time I finished and wanted to stay in the show. I like the feeling of wanting to see the show.

After your first visit to the museum, we discussed how you were inspired by the location. At some point you requested to construct walls within the space. The idea of wanting to divide the space and add artificial elements, where did that come from?

I really like the Hara Museum, I think it's my favourite museum; at least in Tokyo. When I made the site visit, the first thing I noticed was the windows and the natural light. The whole space is like a canvas; I had to start with something and that's why I divided the space. I also divided it based on the parts that I don't like—I wanted to hide certain corners—and added a screen in front of the windows at the back. It softens everything and creates a certain feeling, as if time has stopped.



Exhibition view: Lee Kit 'We used to be more sensitive.', Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (16 September–24 December 2018). Courtesy © the artist and ShugoArts. Photo: Shigeo Muto.

How did the process and pace of reading and comprehending the space develop over time?

I first adjusted myself to working in Tokyo. Each day, I arrived at the museum at about half past 11 and spent six to seven hours working. After, I would go to the supermarket to buy dinner, then go back to my hotel room to eat and watch Netflix. After that, I would start writing and editing videos again. I need a certain rhythm when I work. I try not to tell myself that I'm doing an exhibition, because I hate the industry. Why do we do exhibitions? This is a question that I ask myself. Yasuda-san witnessed that. He usually spends his time in the office, but sometimes he would come to the gallery and I would just be walking around.

Creating exhibitions is like acting. I have to keep a certain distance. When I walk around the space I enable myself to get closer to what I want to achieve. It also allows me to filter my thoughts.



Exhibition view: Lee Kit 'We used to be more sensitive.', Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (16 September–24 December 2018). Courtesy © the artist and ShugoArts. Photo: Shigeo Muto.

You're no stranger to Tokyo—you've already exhibited here several times, but this is your first institutional solo exhibition in the city. The location is also different; it's more residential, being the former home of the Hara family, and a rare example of early modern residential architecture. How did the physicality of the space affect your art making?

First, it has to do with the lighting. It's also related to what I just said about walking around the museum. It all starts to appear once I place myself in the environment. I often use a very simple approach. I never use HD video, simply because I don't have time to waste on rendering. My approach also matches the lighting here—it's very soft. When the projections come in contact with the screens, they create a texture that I cannot achieve through painting or HD video.

The other aspect is the feeling of loneliness that exists in this museum. I always relate loneliness to Tokyo, it has a certain type of loneliness that is neither positive or negative. The museum also has that; it's a very civilised kind of loneliness. I just want to capture that, as something human.

What also inspires me about the space is the acoustics, because the ceiling is relatively low. I was thinking about putting some sound elements in the show but when I walked around I realised there was an echo. I wanted to create sound by not including any sound. Sound is also related to the concept of distance that I was talking about.



Exhibition view: Lee Kit 'We used to be more sensitive.', Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (16 September–24 December 2018). Courtesy © the artist and ShugoArts. Photo: Shigeo Muto.

The sound of the projectors' fans is audible throughout the exhibition. You've also placed a fan upstairs, adding to that sound. So, in a sense you are incorporating sound.

I cannot cancel out sound. When I'm sitting at home alone, with a fan on; that sound reminds me that I'm alone.

Apart from the light coming from your projections, a lot of the lights in the museum are turned off. The exhibition depends on natural light, which means that it constantly changes depending on the weather and time of day. It's a one-off experience at every moment.

I use light from the projections because I hate spotlights. It goes back to when I was young, at school, and had to present work beneath a spotlight. I really like the fact that no one can see the whole show, including me. It's constantly changing, but not in a very drastic way. I think that if my own art practice is related to life, it must remain natural. It's also a way for me to avoid total control.



Exhibition view: Lee Kit 'We used to be more sensitive.', Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (16 September–24 December 2018). Courtesy © the artist and ShugoArts. Photo: Shigeo Muto.

The projections are occasionally paired with paintings, or what resemble paintings. In that respect, your work questions what painting is. In the past you have painted on table cloths and curtains, making use of daily objects, which raises a fundamental question about the medium. This question is also raised in the exhibition.

I constantly think about what a painting is. Of course, I still don't know what the answer is, but I think painting is more about the practice rather than form. People constantly debate about whether the medium is dead or alive. I think what's more important is the topic of the painter's attitude and gaze, because now we look at our phone more than anything. We are having to re-learn how to gaze at something.

Text is another interesting component of your work. The projections and paintings contain short, ambiguous excerpts of text that lead us to consider many things.

Over the past two or three years, text has become the weight of my works. The exhibition is formally beautiful without text, but it requires some weight. Text gives my works a kind of punch.

I spend more time travelling than usual because of exhibitions; writing and creating stories has become a very good way for me to produce work and to get closer to myself. Some artists make very long videos and claim that if you don't watch the whole thing then it can't be understood. I don't want to prove myself as an artist by distancing people.



Exhibition view: Lee Kit 'We used to be more sensitive.', Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (16 September–24 December 2018). Courtesy © the artist and ShugoArts. Photo: Shigeo Muto.

I also think that everything is just a trigger. When I see an artwork that triggers me in some way, it does so because it provides an experience. With text, the meaning suddenly changes that experience. The text is just the voice in our heads. I think we all talk to ourselves, whether we're in the shower, bus, or in the street. I'm just trying to capture that trigger.

The text excerpts are always in English. It was a bit of a stretch to come up with the Japanese translation for the title, 'We used to be more sensitive.', in order to convey the ambiguity that it expresses in English.

It goes back to the voice in our head, and the idea that we cannot truly express what is being said in our heads. For example, if I were looking at the audience and thinking 'I love you', and then said it out loud, they'd be wondering why I was saying that; even if I were being very sincere. By capturing it in my work, it becomes something that sits in between; that has a double or even triple meaning.



Exhibition view: Lee Kit 'We used to be more sensitive.', Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (16 September–24 December 2018). Courtesy © the artist and ShugoArts. Photo: Shigeo Muto.

How did you come up with the title?

A few months ago I was in Tuscany—I did another solo show in a small town called San Giovanni Valdarno. It took me a while to learn how to pronounce the name of the town. It's a very small town, with a population of only a few thousand people. I was the only Asian there. They kept calling me Chinese, even though I explained that I'm from Hong Kong. At the beginning it made me very annoyed, but then I realised that that's just how they live, and suddenly this sentence appeared in my mind: 'we used to be more sensitive'.

I'm a city person—it's a luxury for me to stay in a small town, but I'm unable to get used to it. It's easy to misunderstand what I just said about sensitivity. I don't mean that we are not sensitive, I mean that we are now truly sensitive: for example, if I told an American that I don't like Donald Trump, and they interpreted that as me not liking the United States—that is too sensitive. To bring this title into the political realm might be going too far, but this is the reality of the world we live in.

—[O]