

## **Shifts in the Singapore art scene**

**An interview with LEE WEN** by iola Lenzi \*

August 2009

**IL:** The Singapore art scene has changed unrecognizably in the last 2 decades. You were part of the young vanguard making art in the early 1990's, part of The Artists Village, now considered the seminal beginning of contemporary art here. Tell me a bit about how it was then, and how the scene has evolved, for better or for worse.

**LW:** Yes things have changed quite a lot. There are more opportunities, acceptance and support for less traditional and conventional media and strategies like installation, performance or interactive public art, and more recently new-media, film, video, relational aesthetics, textual and conceptual works. Also there are more chances to go global and to see international works with the rapidly increasing biennales and festivals. Beginning in the late 80s and into early 90s a lot of what we did were considered adventurous, sometimes even dangerous if not insane as they were done with a spirit to break out of the market driven art scene and also to respond to a post-colonial sensitivity towards identity formation. Not all of this was done consciously. Looking back I think we were quite naïve sometimes, but it did help to make us more gung-ho or courageous until we hit the wall. Although there are more acceptances of so-called unconventional works these days, there is less risk-taking, as artists tend to be more cautious of boundaries and offending the status quo. I'm afraid of the return of Singaporean "kiasu" tendency, hence complacency sets in as we hold on too carefully to what we have gained through our past battles.

**IL:** You are primarily a performance artist. That has a special meaning in Singapore. From 1995 to 2003 the medium, which is characterised by its spontaneity and unpredictability, was abandoned because the government required so many permits to stage it. One could say it was effectively banned. Can you explain why it was considered dangerous by the government at the time.

**LW:** I have always seen my work as mixed media and consider it as contemporary visual art-full stop. As I have continued to work in various media over the years. But with the demonizing of performance art during 1994 to 2003 by the authorities in Singapore, it was when I felt the need to champion the cause of performance art more specifically as I felt a gross injustice in our society and the need for more openness and tolerance using performance art as a tool and gauge for the changing narrow-minded attitudes in our culture. It was never at all abandoned although regulations were implemented. Artists were using several strategies to overcome the restrictive social system that we found ourselves in. Some moved into theatre, dance or calling it anything else in order to avoid the regulating authorities, but I felt such evasive strategies only perpetuate the injustice and instigates social paranoia further. Why was it seen as dangerous? Singapore is a small place with a multi-cultural population. It's a mega-city, which is also a country by itself surrounded by militaristic regimes. It's not difficult to link the global post 9/11 paranoia to our own racial riots in the 60s that gave us these restrictive regulations.

**IL:** What was your reaction to this approach taken by the government? Did it this banning alter your perception of Singapore as a place to make art?

**LW:** It extends the Singaporean "kiasu" tendency especially within our one party rule. The fear is there is over regulation and centralization of cultural matters here. Our insecurity is accentuated by our history with an immigrant population with a lack of self-confidence and

rootedness. However the globalization process is actually spreading this social ill and I see the tendencies of regulating artistic freedom everywhere I go. From the licensing of public performances to the banning of smoking and chewing gum, you find many countries adopting these policies today. We need a heightened sense of resistance and social responsibility not only as artists but also as global citizens to maintain our human dignity and cultural freedom in the face of growing fundamentalist partiality, diminishing individual rights and choices. I cannot see myself making art in Singapore without a global perspective anymore.

**IL:** Now performance is back, can you tell me what has changed here to make this unpredictable form more acceptable.

**LW:** Singapore has ambition not only to be an economic, financial hub but also a cultural center in Asia hence all that hype of 'renaissance city' etc. So it was not such a surprise that funding and recognition were reinstated in 2003. But official events like the Singapore Biennale and Singapore Arts Festivals tends towards the entertaining, spectacular and user-friendly kind of performances, so there is still a role for independent initiatives to present the edgy, experimental stuff that may not appeal to wider audiences. The problem is the funding bodies do not differentiate us and expect us to be equally safe and appealing so it is a hard game still.

**IL:** Tell me why you particularly favoured performance to express your ideas. Do you think performance is still as relevant today in Singapore as it was in the early 1990's?

**LW:** As I said, internally I don't particularly favour performance art. I always believe different media have its relevance depending on the context but I would still champion it today although the battleground has shifted. In terms of relevance, the crisis is in culture and society not the art form or medium. There is more sophistication but there is also the backlash of conservatism. The global geo-political shifts have also seen many changes in cultural attitudes but the game continues with increasing complexities. Within the specialized field of performance there are more directions and approaches to deal with today than ever before. For example: archives and documentations, how we deal with it and respond to them; new hybrids between performance and other media like internet, theatre, photography, animation; stripped down raw performances relating to shifting perceptions of our bodies versus virtual reality and so on. The problem is we forget and hence repeat what's been done so we find lacking relevance when what we should be blaming is our inability to remain in touch with contemporary times, with what is going on and happening right now.

**IL:** Your art has always dealt with cultural and political issues, identity issues. Singaporeans are not known for engaged art the way say Indonesians or Thais are. Why have you pursued this line in a place that is apparently so disinterested in these things? Is it for posterity, for history, for the record that you do it? Were you able 15 years ago to get a reaction? What about now? Have audiences here changed?

**LW:** On the contrary I think Singapore has its fair share of socially concerned art and artists. Perhaps they are less visible than the Indonesians or Thais because our issues are more complex than what they seem on the surfaces. At the same time we come from a comparatively more urbane background and have distanced ourselves from more traditional motifs hence becoming less exotic and losing out the high profile given to our S.E. Asian neighbours or mainland China artists. As for the lack of interest or changing audiences, I must say it is a mystery I'm constantly trying to understand. But what I do has always been a response to what I perceive to be going on internally and externally. That is a more urgent priority rather than

playing to please the audience. But I don't renounce theoretical, conceptual non-issue based work. It is just that my hands are full in response to what I see as most urgent.

**IL:** I am encouraged to see a shift here recently in terms of peoples' willingness to speak up, be engaged, decide that they can take a stab at determining their own fate. Do you sense this? To what is this due? Change in government policy? The internet? Education? Examples of empowered people in Indonesia, Tehran...?

**LW:** You got it. Its changed in all those things you said but I fear the culture of today is dominated by tendencies of mass consumption, Hollywood movies, and satellite cable television. Our opinions are shaped by 3-minute news bites and internet surfing. Its scary to think how our world is being run by technocrats who hardly reads books in their entirety anymore and probably got their phd thesis written by cut and paste methods stolen from the internet somehow. Although we are talking more doesn't necessarily mean we are communicating more.

**IL:** The government's policy since the 1990's has been to foster the art scene, to manage it from the grass roots up as well from the institution down. It has spent significant amounts of money on many types of projects in the visual arts. What effect has this support had on you, on the arts community, and on art production in general? Has this effect changed over the years?

**LW:** Overall things are getting better. But I am not getting younger so I am getting so busy its getting harder to keep up. As for the community at large art still doesn't make good business sense, or any real sense but maybe it isn't suppose to be anyway. The thing is how does the materialistic society maintain the spiritual soul intact? Can artists still have edgy dreams while meeting their deadline for arts funding? At the same time some things haven't changed. I can't afford to make many big works because of space constraints both in terms of making them and keeping them as well as selling them. So I have baskets full of unfulfilled dreams. The media and schools seem more willing to discuss art but they still haven't catch on what it is yet. It's like squares will be squares and circles are circles and never the twain shall meet.

**IL:** In other countries around the region, Indonesia, Thailand for example, the government spends very little on art and art infrastructure. Yet the visual arts there are flourishing. Do you think state involvement in visual art changes the output, the nature, the flavour of what is being produced?

**LW:** It depends what you mean by flourishing. If in terms of market I think it looks like what you say, but I know the artists in other countries around the region envy us. But I tell them it always looks better on the other side. It's always a hard struggle wherever you are. Singapore is a small country comparatively, so there are lesser collectors. Even the museums and institutions have fewer propensities to collect and it's also due to being an immigrant mentality-why collect if we are not from here? So it makes sense for the state to be involved but in what directions we have to be careful. I think there is a need for art to be integrated more into every aspect of social life but there is suspicion when a central authority engineers it too much.

---

\* *An edited version of this interview appeared in Time Out Singapore August 2009*