

Trilogy of Sounds

Lee Mingwei

When invited to do a project in an historic house, an artist is asked to respond to a unique environment, to the history of a specific place, and thus, one hopes, breathe new life or bring a modern attitude to bear on the ambiance of the past. For local visitors who know the place well, the resulting work often inspires a sense of renewed familiarity or a re-imagining of one's knowledge of the place. Lee Mingwei brings to this new awakening at Mount Stuart a breadth of cross-cultural thinking: he unites certain performative aspects of Western Art with careful attention to gestures from Ch'an Buddhism, and encourages a relational moment between himself and the people of the Isle of Bute.

We might ask ourselves what is it about a place that makes an artist approach a project in a particular way? But perhaps with Lee Mingwei the leading question should be: What is it about Lee Mingwei that makes each of his projects feel a certain way? What emerges again and again in his work, whatever the given context, is his vision of the world as a place that can be made better. Wherever he works, whether in the East or the West, Lee Mingwei's world is a place where people from all parts of the globe will be welcomed, enchanted, allowed a space for introspection and self-awareness. By encapsulating the viewers within the artwork, be it a sculpture or a charmed path through a building, Lee Mingwei engages them in a fresh view of the world. Ritual is the rule of the game and the artist is the creator of the game. My task in this short essay will be to try and illuminate the structure and sequence of the rituals that Lee Mingwei uses here, and to explain how these act persuasively to generate a feeling of exceptional experience.

Intimacy is key to understanding Lee Mingwei's world of ritual. By creating a state of intimacy, the artist fashions a work conducive to reflection and contemplation. He catalyzes this new experience within familiar settings and situations. At Mount Stuart he doesn't highlight the monumental architecture but instead concentrates his attention on seemingly insignificant and mundane details: the wind in the trees, a children's choir, singing birds. It is by making us notice these ordinary details of our everyday lives that he gently brings us into a state of heightened awareness of ourselves, whilst maintaining a state of harmony between our sense of the present day and the historical past.

To achieve this heightened sense of self-awareness at Mount Stuart, Lee Mingwei has set up three subtly evolving performative events, one outdoors in the grounds, and two indoors. These three independent components combine to create a dynamic score that he has called *Trilogy of Sound*. Why has he chosen to work with sound? The inspiration is the winds of the Isle of Bute, the unforgettable whispering of the waves, which produces a muted, dark sound full of sand and fury, that across centuries has carved and shaped the landscape of the land. It is this heartbeat of the Isle that has inspired Lee Mingwei.

A logical point of departure for analysis of *Trilogy of Sound* is the physical and spatial arrangement of the works set inside and outside of the Mount Stuart. The sculpture situated in the outside park – immersed, as it is, in Nature – sets the mood and signals that one is entering into a ritual world. It marks the space as sacral, and invites contemplation.

In this garden space, Lee Mingwei has created a platform for poetic interventions. He has designed and installed a set of wind chimes of various lengths and widths, according to the different notes they produce. From the bottom of each wind chime dangles a strange object: a flattened curve of metal, shaped like a shallow plaque. Still used today in certain ceremonies by Shinto priests, these objects resemble the wooden or ivory plaques ancient scholars traditionally used to hold the rice paper text of what they were going to say when having an audience with the Emperor of China, the Son of Heaven. The playing of the chimes relies on the unpredictable, changing winds, a random force that becomes a compositional tool. This work is deeply connected to nature. You could say it is the music of Nature.

As you approach the sculpture, it begins to restructure your thinking. The immediate impression of the work is that it marks a divide between an inner and outer space. The outer space is the normal, ordinary trees, ferns, small plants, moss and, of course, wind of the forest landscape. The inner space is structured and set apart from the everyday life of the forest that surrounds it. The boundaries of this inner space are delineated on the ground by a bed of grey slate pebbles in the form of a square. The chimes are suspended in a circle above and hung from the from centuries-old oak and lime trees by a web-like wire structure that, when viewed from below, recalls a delicate Gothic Revival architectural drawing, similar to the ones Lee Mingwei viewed in the Mount Stuart Archives. This well-defined geometric structure is like a floating mandala in the sky. It demarcates the natural world of the forest, filled with wind and the sound of murmuring leaves, which almost seem to emanate out in concentric waves from the inner world of the chimes. This drawing in the sky is a portal into the space of the chimes. The inner space of the chimes is set apart, yet is in complete harmony with the nature around it. It is conducting the sound that is created by nature, by the wind.

A public sculpture like this creates a place of leisurely contemplation, a place to pause and to rest. Time seems to move more slowly. It is a simple, peaceful and tranquil place that imparts an impression of being shut away from the bustling world beyond the gates. Its charm lies in its exquisite simplicity. As you stand in front of these gently moving chimes, or lie below them, you are surrounded by nature and inspired with infinite charm.

Moving through the piece feels like a procession, perhaps similar to moving along a set of hanging Buddhist prayer wheels, which one spins in sign of prayer. Here one needs to bend instead, slightly dipping under the chimes to enter into the piece; it is like fording a

river – a river of sound. The bending is a gesture of respect, like bowing through the door of a Japanese tea room. The formality of the piece enables the viewer to forget the mundane and frees the mind for greater things.

Last summer as I studied the work, I sat in the grove of trees under tall branches that stood against the sky like paintbrushes. As I watched the chimes moving in the wind, and echoes of sunlight danced over the surface of earth painted black by pebbles, I felt I was part of some invisible system. I was soaked in the sounds made by the wind and the moving leaves around me. I was conversing with the universe. A flood of reflections ensued.

When a great work of art such as this one appears, it is important that those viewers lucky enough to see and access it assimilate themselves into the work. They need to become immersed in the narrative that is set in front of them, and allow it within themselves. A sense of self-awareness comes by letting go and just listening to the piece. The experience is similar to that of the completely mesmerized animals in *Orpheus Charming the Animals*, a painting by Aelbert Cuyp, in the collection at Mount Stuart. All this holds true as one moves indoors to continue the procession through the indoor elements of the piece.

Trilogy of Sound combines three sound elements in a single work and experiencing them at first highlights the similarities among them. But as one moves to each location, from one experience to the next, differences are accented and new meanings arise throughout. Outside the chimes move and resound in the wind; inside canaries sing in the Conservatory on the third floor and the voices and music of children fill the Armoury. A series of different vibrations are at play between the indoor and outdoor parts of the piece. The sounds of vibration outside, under the sky, are lower musically, and literally closer to the ground. Up inside the house the sounds are high and clear, also produced by physical movement, but more active sounds, from the impulses of birds and children.

The house and its gigantic, rich and majestic rooms carry out the important function of resonating both the sounds and the imaginations of the visitors. By incorporating two different sound sources in the house, Lee Mingwei is telling a story using natural and human phenomena. The mix of the aural and the visual provides a rich field of stimuli to which the viewer can respond. Lee Mingwei emphasizes both the metaphysical and suspended echoing aspect of sound resonating through huge, cavernous rooms and the lighter sounds of children's voices and playful, twittering canaries.

In many cultures birds have a spiritual significance. They are messengers or companions to the Gods. Here they are housed in beautiful cages in a sunlit conservatory, in a space that was used as an operating theatre for the Naval Hospital during the First World War. The canaries sing and celebrate life in memory of the many patients who were treated

here. Birds in cages also rouse thoughts of captivity. Could the conservatory in this grand house be as much of a confinement as a birdcage? Perhaps a passing reference to how history, heritage and position can become a fortress for inhabitants of that realm?

The singing of the children's chorus in the Armoury, which is hidden behind doors and out of sight of the public, resembles sounds emerging from the practice rooms of a music conservatory. Practicing for a Buddhist is a ritual path to perfection. To practice everyday is to indicate a way, a path, in search of some form of ideal beauty. These children are from Rothesay Primary School, the local school, and they come every day for lessons with their music teacher Tony Spencer.

Some parts of the house at Mount Stuart were left unfinished by the builder of the house, the 3rd Marquess of Bute, and were part of a conservation project completed by the last private owner, the 6th Marquess of Bute. Lee Mingwei's intervention can be thought of as one more layer on history, one more gesture in the refurbishment of this building's soul. Lee Mingwei's contribution fits in beautifully with the Bute family's amazing history of culture patronage of Art through the centuries.

There are those who would argue that a container's form is changed by the content placed in it. And conversely, the house as a physical medium has decidedly influenced Lee Mingwei's work. Its architecture has created a vivid imaginative interaction between sound as art and the house. For Lee Mingwei the house is a living body; the memory of those who have lived here permeates the walls and objects. By inserting living sounds, the artist brings new life to the place, and so exposes the real timbre of the house

For some Art is a way to share a common ground, a common passion, an understanding. For Lee Mingwei it is about setting the stage for an exchange that inspires new awareness and introspection in its participants, bringing growth and an expansion of human consciousness. This artist transforms a seemingly familiar environment with refined, nuanced gestures causing a re-imagination of place. Mount Stuart is not just another grand estate, but rather the elegant eccentric creation of an individual. *Trilogy of Sound* at Mount Stuart is unique to this time and place and adds a new narrative to its rich history. Still like life itself, it is a work of impermanence. The language of art is constantly growing as people experiment with old forms in new ways.

Lee Mingwei is a master of intimacy. Mastery, of course, may take an entire lifetime, but the consciousness of the techniques and rituals he uses and the painstaking years of practice dissolve in the pure action of creation.

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