

Ivan Lam Curating Human Experiences 66:06:06
Wei-Ling Gallery

“Artists of today need no longer say ‘I am a painter’ or a ‘poet’ or ‘a dancer.’ They are simply ‘artists.’ All of life will be open to them. They will discover out of ordinary things the meaning of ordinariness. They will not try and make them extraordinary but will only state their real meaning. But out of nothing they will devise the extraordinary and then maybe nothingness as well. People will be delighted or horrified, critics will be confused or amused, but these, I am certain will be the alchemies of the 1960s.”

Excerpt from “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” *Artnews* 1958.

A year later, the writer of the article, an artist known as Alan Kaprow, would trailblaze a new art form, dubbed the ‘happening.’ Characterised by the elements of time, space, the body and the relationship between the viewer and the artist, the happening had its roots in Dada, the post-first world war movement that rejected reason, aestheticism and nationalism, and instead celebrated nonsense, irrationality and anti-bourgeois protest. Writing on happenings – which in 1970s would fall under the rubric of performance art – Susan Sontag likened them to the “allegory of dreams,” noting also of their lack of sense of time, climax or consummation. Sontag concluded that, “One can only cherish [a happening] as one cherishes a firecracker going off dangerously close to one’s face.”¹

In his latest body of work, *Curating Human Experiences*, Ivan Lam takes on the complex art form that is performance art, suffusing his own enquiry with a specific intent around the nature of experience and perception. As an artist, Ivan has been branded with many labels – pop artist, contemporary commentator, risk taker, innovator – although perhaps the most enduring one of all is that of painter. His practice, until now, is typified by the pure physicality of his chromatically charged, resin-glazed canvases. The trademark use of resin adds an additional layer to the work, imbuing it with a dichotomous quality of sumptuous translucence and inscrutable objectivity, glibly deflecting the scrutiny of the viewer’s gaze.

On the outset, Ivan’s move to performance art presents a seemingly radical departure from his previous work. On closer examination, however, some of the attributes that permeate his earlier oeuvre, such as the protean nature of his subject matter and the diversity of his artistic, cultural and literary influences, underpinned by an intellectual and methodical rigour, are prevalent too. Present also is the prevalence of dichotomies: visually, linguistically and thematically. Some of these contrasts are reconciled, clear polar opposites that co-exist and coalesce happily together, like, for example, the series *Cutting the ties that bind* which examines themes around identity, such as generational likeness and difference, pertaining to the individual and the tribe of the family. Other dichotomies in Ivan’s work remain as enigmas, unsolved mysteries that both obfuscate and illuminate, teasing the viewer with their conceptual conundrums.

This conceptual aspect of Ivan's practice makes the progression from painter to performance artist a more obvious one. Conceptual art, like performance art from which it evolved, both share organising themes such as viewer participation, and a turn toward the linguistic performative (where language does more than communicate but rather acts or consummate an action); both also favour an analyses of the discursive and institutional frames over the material aspect of the work, a realm where ideas triumph over the visual components of the work.

66:06:06 is the second of Ivan's nascent time-based experiments. The performance involves the artist sitting in a chair in Wei-Ling gallery for a period of 66 hours, 6 minutes and 6 seconds (the proliferation of 6s is an allusion to the symbol of the devil, or if the number is inverted, 9999, a symbol in computer coding and once a source of apprehension with the advent of Y2K). Five other chairs encircle the artist's chair, and are open to visitors to the gallery who can choose to sit with him – although there will be no spoken interaction (at least from the artist); only the phenomenological experience of sitting near or next to some one, and the passing of time.

The drama of the performance does not lie in endurance. In effect, the artist has created a space of pure feeling, where the primacy of existence comes to the fore. Typical to the nature of Ivan's work, dichotomous themes abound: a performance, which by implication is defined by movement is characterised by non-action and contemplation; the role of artist and viewer is interchangeable, as the artist observes the viewer and the viewer observes the artist (as such the performance recalls George Manciuanas, the founder of the Fluxus movement who said "everything is art and everyone can do it"); the performance is live but recorded; it is finite, unique and ephemeral, but its recording guarantees its repetition and wide dissemination; and more crucially, through the use of a 360 degree camera, the site specificity of the performance is removed, the viewer can literally chose his or her perspective, and is able to continually shift their position seamlessly from moment to moment.

The screen separating the viewer and the artist – and by definition the reduction of immersiveness and engagement in the performance that is assumed in not being physically present at the site of the event – is substituted by another reality: one that presents the viewer with infinite possibilities in orienting himself, and one that subverts the whole notion of participation; now, ironically, the viewer is more present in their absence.

The props of the performance, commonplace wooden folding chairs on which Ivan and his co-performers/observers sit, have been painted hues of red, the gradation of colour increasing so slightly between them that the difference in colour is only realised from the first and last chair. These chairs will become relics of the performance, conceptualised and elevated in a Duchampian manner to become artworks themselves. The arrangement of these chairs is reminiscent of the work *One and Three Chairs* by conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, in which the meaning of 'chair' is examined through the placement of an object chair, a photographic image of the chair and dictionary definition of the word on a piece

of paper. The work prompts the viewer to ponder which of the three is the real chair, drawing attention to a three-way code of approach to reality: an object code, a visual code and a verbal code (the chairs in effect acting as reference, representation and language).

In making the viewer confront the lesser explored aspects of the mundane and the everyday in *66:06:06* Ivan's action brings an understanding of performance as a way of engaging directly with social reality, the specifics of space and the politics of identity, recalling the theorist Jonah Westerman who remarked that "performance is not (and never was) a medium, not something that an artwork can be but rather a set of questions and concerns about how art relates to people and the wider social world." Westerman's comment was made in 2016, and underlines the prescience of Alan Kaprow's writings about the new artist. In exploring the meaning of ordinary, Ivan's new body work does not try and elevate it into extraordinary, instead through the depiction and communication of several meanings and ideas, Ivan creates a work of extraordinary depth and perception.

1. Susan Sontag, "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition," *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966),