

# IVAN LAM - VENDING COMA

Almost 10 years since its inception and 8 months in the making, Ivan Lam's art vending project Coma: 38/500 puts a spin on notions of authorship, value, and consumer immediacy, when sited within the hotbed of Asia's contemporary art market. Lam's on the money when he says, "The art fair itself is a larger-than-life vending machine". Usurping his own spotlight as a featured artist for Art Basel Hong Kong, Lam has stocked his vending machine with a collection of original artworks by Malaysian artists, sharing the stage in a rather philanthropic gesture.

This project, however, is far more than a charitable act or clever marketing gimmick. Rigorously conceptual in its foundation, it sits within a lineage of projects by Lam that explore social/spatial relationships, often using the intersection of high design and the everyday. Speaking with the artist on the eve of the fair, I pushed him on these ideas. It was a surprising conversation that challenged both our prescribed ideas about representation and the art fair forum, and indeed was at a timely chapter as fairs reinvent, reposition and refine themselves within an ever-expanding competitive field, especially within Asia.

## CONVERSATION BETWEEN GINA FAIRLEY AND IVAN LAM

Gina Fairley : Ivan you say it is an "artist's responsibility" to help nurture and spread Malaysian art to a broader understanding / visual recognition within an international arena, and that it is "your gift back to an art scene that has been good to you". Your work has long had a strong conceptual underpinning and from that perspective I see Coma sitting extremely well within your broader oeuvre. Where you stump me is the compulsive charity line. The commercial art world is far from charitable. Why frame the work in this way?

Ivan Lam : Firstly, there are many layers to this project. One of them has this purported selfless and altruistic leaning. It's such a long shot to be accepted to exhibit in a privileged art fair that to smuggle 500 more Malaysian artist into it is a subversive thrill that I couldn't pass on. Does it undermine the fair's tight screening process that all galleries are subjugated? Perhaps, but the more pertinent question lies in this 'screening' process. This is the revelation of Coma.

GF : Spruiking artists through an application process, do you not employ a similar selection process? I am interested in how you conceptually manage that role as author of this project, that is, your projection of Malaysian art?

IL : The self is negated by the plurality of solutions for representation. The choice to make this project all-inclusive stemmed from the reasoning that all artists are deemed equal with the same stature, creed, age and reason. All are equally invited, produce work of the same size, and those represented are paid the same amount of money for their work. This non-hierarchical approach rocks the fundamental status quo that art only exists within the closed loop of elitism.

GF : That would have to be the jarring conundrum of an art fair wouldn't it, touting its wares to the masses, and yet this platform of choice is rigidly siphoned through networks, economic advantage, geography, and as you remind us, selection?

IL : I am playing to 'the gallery' (pun intended) that the art world doesn't have to be cold and calculated. An artist's calling / vision should sit above commercial gains. I had many inputs how to put forward a selection process that would somehow fit all artists, only to find that no matter how much you tweak or adjust the criteria, you are bound to find strong opposition. I didn't want to lose my sight and integrity by bending backwards to get the "numbers".

GF : It raises an interesting point, that of authorship. On one level it's a conceptual work of yours and yet it is filled with the art of others.

IL : Yes it's my work, but my work consists of many other artist's works. I am akin to a conductor in an orchestra and they are my musicians. I am only negotiating the boundaries between them. When you make a non-art object an art object, and then flip it back to non-art object, so on and so forth, you blur or create new context. You take yourself as an artist out of that context to be part of the creation and you surrender that control together with the rest of them. However, at the end of the day it's still MY machine. All the artists' works inside the machine have become my work.

GF : In regard to the format of these original artworks, how heavily have you relied on the vernacular of the business card and that notion of transaction and transportability?

IL : Simply, the size is determined by the vending machine. In order for it to vend, it needs to be precisely that size, custom-framed by a Perspex casing slotted into the machine's display units. Many artists have found this a hindrance or objection to their practice. I wanted something that they were tasked to make, something that represented who they are - like a business art that you pass out to clients - a quick one two punch that says who you are succinctly. Yes, the play on the business card is deliberate. The need to network is heavily ingrained in our culture. It is a curious pun between replication and originality - all artworks in the vending machine are one of a kind. Not replicated, but cultivated.

GF : Have you faced challenges in getting content for Coma, and what has that reticence been ? Do you think there is an inherent apathy in the Malaysian art scene or do your colleagues just not get it? Is it the case that they see Coma as all glory for you through 'using' them? How did you negotiate those hurdles?

IL : I was like a doe-eyed, naïve schoolboy innocently thinking that all artists will connect with my vision for this project. Oh boy was I in for a rude surprise. Everyone had a say, an opinion. Everyone wanted to be the defender/vanguard of the Malaysian art - the glory seekers. It was disorientating to say the least. As much as I wanted this project to unite Malaysians, regardless of age, creed, race, status, representation, these are the exact things that worked against the project, reiterating camp-like divides. What was I thinking getting out of my comfort cocoon and get brickbats!

Preparing the work for shipping to Hong Kong, I had 38 pieces submitted out of about 2,000 invited artists. They are artists I didn't know before, names that became friends, artists that rallied other artists to join. They were precisely the reason why I embarked on this arduous project - to reward the present. It is a curious roll call that I have highlighted in the vending machine's title Coma : 38/500, leaving the viewer to question the absence of the other 462 pieces.

GF : The idea of volume is key then. I think one of the things that defines a vending machine is its excess of choice, groaning with temptation. Unless it is choked full – intentional or not - you are creating a satire about preciousness. Perhaps the thin veneer adds another level to this project?

IL : I have come to realise that dealing with the human psyche is one thing, but dealing with the artist's psyche is a whole other level all together.

GF : Colloquially, we associate the word coma with sustained unconsciousness, minimised brain activity. As a title it might suggest an unfeeling or localised ailment of spirit, as you suggest, but it could also pose a metaphor for the broader market's lack of knowledge of Malaysian art?

IL : While critical, I think it an apt title to show the current state of Malaysian art. It's alive but brain dead. It needs that shot of adrenaline. That type of derisive thinking, of being sidelined, slowly seeps into the psyche of an art scene. I want to be proactive and reactive about it, rather than be dead and accept fate. If you can't bring the world to Malaysian art, bring Malaysian art to the world.

GF : I want to return to the foundation of this piece - it is a vending machine in an art fair. Clearly you are tapping into notions of merchandising, price point, packaging, speed, transportability - you have even referred to the individual artworks as 'products'.

IL : The eco system of the art world is organic and is constantly evolving. Why would art remain the same? The 'proposition' of this artwork speaks as much about the nature of collecting as it does art production. Sealed in Perspex boxes, each artwork carefully placed in a working vending machine, this shifts the boundary of art to commodity. The vending machine inherently vends products for consumption. Now it vends art. At the same time by its very nature it bypasses the need for the salesman. And, when you place the vending machine in the art fair it becomes a covert object. It speaks of a different future. The boundaries of what it is are constantly being negotiated.

GF : I am particularly interested in the notion of how we construct value, not so much in economic terms but in terms of the rarified object, the 'original' as a selling point. Do you think "value" is a slippery or malleable concept when it comes to contemporary art?

IL : Yes I think so. You cannot talk or have a discourse on contemporary art without the mention of money. It's that prevalent. This project mimicks or makes a mockery of the very institution that it represents. It reminds us what the value of art is, and is valued for. This project divides as much as it wants to unite. It is all-inclusive yet exclusive. As much as it tells us about what we are, it also subliminally tells us what we are not. Simply, this project is a reflection of the times that we live in.

GF : I agree, the art world and art fairs are about negotiations, sales pitches, and horse-trading. From that point of view the negotiation of this artwork enters the realm of performance.

IL : Roles are reversible, artworks become products, everything changes but yet everything stays the same. It's in a perpetual state of flux. I suppose from that point of view there is an inherent movement, theatricality, in this piece – literally and metaphorically –that could be akin to performance. However, its premise remains a showcase of painting. I think that also speaks to the dominance of painting within this contemporary Asian art market.

GF : I understand Coma is interactive in that you rotate the artworks daily so that this landscape of Malaysian art is ever changing – fresh – a bit like turning the pages of a catalogue. In your view Ivan, does it owe any debt to the lineage of durational performance art and interventions?

IL : This is a departure from a fixed vantage point of looking at art, and as you suggest could be described as a performative installation, but its core remains traditional painting. I get to be someone else, momentarily, moved beyond the pigeon-hole of a painter. There is definitely a physicality to the object, and the

duration has certainly been arduous in realising this project, however, I clearly see Coma separate to that history you refer.

GF : A deceptively complex artwork, Coma 38/500 certainly challenges in the art fair context. It almost derails the kind of psychomotor action of perception driven sales, not unlike the hypnotic effect of the robotic arm in a vending machine. Got ya!

IL : Put in the money, select the number, and 'tada' an artwork is yours. It takes out the middlemen in this transaction. It's quite a direct approach. Ironically, though, it's placed in an art fair where there are layers and layers of middlemen. I want to challenge that notion as to what are you buying, and really whom are you buying from. As Ingrid Rogoff stated, "criticality is key to moving beyond existing frames of knowledge's and allegiances." (2003)

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