



Interview with Ivan Lam: Completion of “Curating *Human Experiences 66:06:06*”

The ‘*Human Experiences 66:06:06*’ performance took place between the 27th of September – 27th of October 2017 at Wei-Ling Contemporary, The Gardens, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This interview was held at Wei-Ling Contemporary, 3rd of November 2017 at 11 am by Amanda Ariawan.

You have recently ended your performance at Wei-Ling Contemporary, which involved sitting on a chair for 66 hours, 6 minutes and 6 seconds. First of all, what is your feeling to this, considering that you have successfully touched your time target?

I thought I’d be very euphoric, jumping up over joy, but it was very calm and peaceful. It was just like another day at the office.

Through this performance, was it the fact of being able to reach the time target that counted the most or was there more to it?

It started as a time target. Obviously, if you have a goal in mind to reach it, it feels good. It feels like only the beginning of a longer journey. ‘66:06:06’ seems to be like an odd random number. It sounds a bit abstract now but I think it could open other doors to many other rooms in the house – the bigger house.

What sorts of thoughts ran in your head while doing the performance? What did you get from these contemplations?

There are lots of things that went to my mind, but as I said, first it was very physical then it became very mental. It swayed back and forth, but after a while, I managed to channel my thoughts or focus on a couple of things that I want to do, as if I wasn’t sitting down. I’m glad that I was sitting down while I’m thinking, so it seemed like I was doing nothing but then I was actually doing everything in my mind.

Did the experiment go according to plan? Was there anything that you did not anticipate but occurred during the performance?

Yeah, I think I did not anticipate that it would turn out exactly the way it did. Obviously, having people that sit next to you, how they react to you and how you react to them, how you are distracted and how you are not distracted – whether it was a monologue, a dialogue or dialogue without words – it's just really antithesis.

'Human Experiences 66:06:06' is your second time-based experiment. Tracing back, what did the first performance involve and what encouraged you to start it?

It started when I was invited to do the Karachi Biennale. I didn't just want to send a piece of work. So I went there earlier. Prior to the main event, I did a project with kids there, and that transformed into something else; I was making a piece for the school that was hosting the biennale. And then, I tested that piece and it became a performance. It's called *Donut* – a real 360 physical colour-wheel, where twelve kids would each pick a colour to paint their art with. I was like a conductor, right in the middle of the colour-wheel, helping out the whole thing. It turned out quite well to deal. Maybe it was my first interaction with public. I was actually interacting with them and helping them with their art – them making their art, instead of me making their art for them.

In what way does 'Human Experiences 66:06:06' mark the evolution of your practise? To what extent does it differ from your previous pieces?

My previous practise clearly delineates between the studio practises. It's like a production house. When you're done with the product or the artwork, you bring it out into the gallery setting and it's all nice and on the wall. So, you kind of remove that and take the studio practise out in the open, into the gallery setting. That is a shift. I think that shift is great. It's scary and it's exciting at the same time.

So you think that evolution is important in your work?

I think I made that crossroad – or passed that crossroad. Now I've been doing it for half a year now since my last solo. It's important to stay relevant. Performance art, installation art and human experience add a bit more dimension to the art. It's not that I'm giving up one for the other. It could coexist harmonically.

What does the word “curate” in the title of the series of performance, ‘Curating Human Experiences’ mean to you, and how is that important to your role as the artist?

I think I would like to break down the word “experiences” first, and then we’ll get to the curating part later. Why human experiences? What experiences are they? Experiences are divided into three: one is sensation, one is emotion, and one is thought – when you talk, what do you think of? So these three things pretty much govern how we experience things. What do I sense? Heat, dust, textures – those are the things that we sense. Second, what emotions that I go through? Am I happy? Am I sad? And then thirdly, what are the thoughts that come through my mind? If I base or predicate that in my work, I will have all these three things. I felt that painting maybe lacks some of those. Maybe it’s like an amplifier where you play down certain hertz. Basically, it’s about adjusting those wavelengths to reach a different audience, or getting the audience to a different place. It’s constantly bringing your viewer, bringing your collector, bringing your audience somewhere else. This is that “somewhere else” that I’m trying to get.

What about the numbers? How does a symbol of the devil, “6666” – and when inversed, a symbol in computer coding, “9999” depict particular or personal values to you?

It happened because I was trying to figure out what would be a good duration. You don’t want it to be too long, or it becomes Guinness World Record right? Or, you don’t want it to be too short where you don’t learn anything from it. It’s very difficult, so I thought about it. I’ve always liked this number and this saying, “*idle hands are the devil’s workshop*”. So basically, here I’m not doing anything, although I’ve always wanted to work and make paintings. So that came about. And the clock – while I was setting the clock, it just seems that “6666” is the highest nomination that I could get from it. That kind of worked out and I like how it turned out visually also, that when you reverse it you’d have another meaning. People are actually coding things more than they should. People read into it.

Could you elaborate your choices of props? What is behind the gradation of red hues and the placement of six chairs in a circle?

I think the 'curating' part comes in what I want to create and what I use – the props and objects. I come from a background of painter. Just imagine that you want to paint, but you're painting the same colour on the same object over and over again. So instead, when I move onto the next chair, just to show that it's chair number two or the next chair, I paint it in a slight, minor gradient. To me, the change is like time – it moves very slowly. It's not about making big moves by colour jumping. From one part of the colour wheel to another, there's always a shift. In the change between two primary colours, let's say red to blue, there's a huge shift before you get to blue. Since this piece is "time-based" and that time moves very slowly, even colour can be slowed down tremendously for people to actually look at. Also, aesthetically my work has to be pleasing, since I always believe that if a work doesn't look good to begin with, people will not even invest their time or bother to read what you are trying to say. So there's always that "6", that LED red that goes with the chair, and then the circular.

How do your chairs refer to the piece *One and Three Chairs* (1965) by Joseph Kosuth?

A lot of artists use chairs, but him, I remember when I saw his work back then, it's a picture, and then it's a real chair, and then there's a description of the chair. So there are three things. I kind of enjoy the part that he breaks it down so simply, but yet, that's the most difficult thing to do. It's so loaded. It's such a conceptual piece. What is art anymore? Is it the work, is it the image, or is it the actual thing? In my case, I work from painting, to the definition, then the actual object. It's like from 2D to 3D, and then even to time-based, which is 4D. I think that shifting is done by constantly negotiating the boundaries between what is one dimension, two dimensions, and so on.

Some 'happenings' are not officially documented. Contrastingly, in your case, you decided to record the whole performance with a 360° camera. Why do you think it's necessary to document, and what do you plan to do with this video?

A lot of people work very well with video. Making videos or multimedia works. I have never dwelled into that. It's always the end result that I get to show. This one is right in the middle of making the work – documenting and also becoming the work itself. It's not a typical camera. It's a 360° camera. I don't need to frame aesthetically. It captures everything so it doesn't miss anything. It also serves to symbolize the weakness that these days, when it's

not captured on video or uploaded on Youtube, it didn't happen. Social media and all that. First, I wanted to edit it. 66 hours is a long time. It's a very heavy storage of video but actually nothing happened. Very little happened but yet it's documented. I think that irony also plays with that – the part where you're capturing something about nothing. It's like Andy Warhol who captured hours of people sleeping and played it out. So I think that has a little bit of do with it. What will I do with it? That's a good question. Maybe when it comes out in an exhibition form, that could serve. People could sit there, with me not being there and just putting on the camera, then they could be there on the same spot I was. That is another dimension of it.

Why did you decide to do a mute performance in the first place? How did being mute affect your relationship or interaction with the people who were physically present around you during the performance?

That's one of the things that I found out, that I didn't thought of earlier. When I am quiet, when I am sitting still, people around me kind of gravitate to that similar mode that they don't talk. They talk softer, they kind of whisper. It doesn't affect me anyway, because I was already in my mode. But that is very disconcerting. If they see me talking or playing with my phone, it would more be similar to what they are doing, because it's a total contrast with how everyday life is. People are always on the go. People always want to achieve things, want to do things. So that's very contrast. I think I need to have a mute performance where I would have something similar to what they do.

Did any communication (certainly non-verbal in this case) take place between you and the audience? How did eye contacts and visual observations play its role in this act?

I think when they sat next to me, or when they are close to me enough for them to be in my feel, my visual feel, or me in them, there's no dialogue but the body language. Where we put our eye contact is very important. It took me a lot to get used to it and have my own comfort zone where they won't enter. But at the same time, they are between those six chairs. So it's a very strange feeling. Everyone has his or her own way. Some people look away. Some people are afraid of the camera, but they didn't know that it captures 360°, so they want to sit where the lens does not seem to look at them, to just to stray away a bit or to hide. It's fun. I think it's different.

Did you see all those details coming from the first, or did you realize this later as you were doing the performance?

I think I reflected only afterwards, with them sitting. Them sitting actually helps. It does not make me feel so alone, that I could pass by the time a bit easier. Then when I'm alone, it feels that I could have a presence there by imagining someone sitting there with me. So it really plays with your mind and how the clock moves faster or slower.

Speaking of eye contact, artist Marina Abramovic conducted in 2010 at MoMa, New York, a performance entitled 'The Artist Is Present'.

The work was inspired by her belief that stretching the length of a performance beyond expectations serves to alter our perception of time and foster a deeper engagement in the experience. Seated silently at a wooden table across from an empty chair, she waited as people took turns sitting in the chair and locking eyes with her. Over the course of nearly three months, for eight hours a day, she met the gaze of 1,000 strangers, many of whom were moved to tears.¹

What is your comment regarding this work in relation to yours?

I've heard of her as a performance artist. While I was doing this piece and reading what other people are doing, I realized that we actually came to a very similar conclusion of stretching the time of performance. That alters your perception of how time plays, how people look at things and how they focus. I think it's a great piece that she has done. Obviously, it differs very minorly in the setup, the fact that we don't talk, that everyone has their own zen – very meditative. I think me and her, we got different things out of it, but those different things could be very similar. It would be good to have an interview with her, after she's been doing it for three months. I mean, it took me a month to get mine done. I didn't want to get in a contest about who can sit longer. I think that after a while, after x amount of number, it becomes very similar. Either you lock eyes or you don't, or you can do

¹ Quotation from MoMa, New York official website:
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010

a zen zone or you don't, what happens really after the performance and where you want to get after that.

Do you truly consider this as the end of your experiment – or seek continuity to your act?

I think it's as if you got another alphabet and eventually you'll make a word out of it. It's a beginning rather than an end. I look forward to making it again, but it must be in a different context, different way. Many things have ran in my mind while I was sitting still, doing nothing.