

Isaac Leung**ARTIST**

I am Isaac Leung and I wear multiple hats where I am an artist and I am also a curator. I run an art organization in Hong Kong called *Videotage*. And then, besides the curatorial projects and running the art organization I am also a scholar. I do research on different disciplines. Particularly, the most recent is about the culture industry and the art market in mainland China. And I also did a lot of research on technology and sexuality and new media before.

So, I guess my role as an artist is quite kind of interlinked with other roles that I have. I don't consider myself as really an artist as kind of the only role that I have – which is quite different from other, you know, artists.

I am not represented by any galleries and if there are any opportunities or other people inviting me as last year when I did a show, produced a new work at the *ParaSite* show. I would consider it as something – how can I say? – I think I am considering more about my self-reflection as an artist more than my role of being an artist in this society.

Any role, basically, is very much mediated by the whole economy and ecology.

I think there are two levels: One is how you construct yourself and think about yourself as an artist. And the other thing is how the society or how the ecology construct YOU as an artist.

So, I think that part is ... If you ask about "what is an artist?", I think that is very much constructed by a lot of institutions and a lot mediated by a lot of different kind of people and institutions, companies, museums and all these kind of things.

For me, for myself, the role – when I wear the hat – of being an artist, I guess that is not really my concern any more. Because I really don't see myself of playing, want to play the game with all these kinds of institutions as an artist because there is no such a thing, in terms of the career pursuit as this category, as an artist I really am not interested. I think if I were interested I would have already spent a lot more time to work out my art career as an artist – which I don't aim to produce. I don't have an agenda to produce the next work and I don't have the agenda which is bound by a contract with a gallery and so on and so on.

Because I think I am more focusing on this self-identification that I think ultimately ... whether YOU think you are an artist and how your artwork or your attitude of life is something that constructs what YOU think the reality of yourself as an artist ...

Yeah, I think everything is a game. Everything has a sort of a rule. It's a playground. You are bounded by all these kind of rules that are set up by that playground and you always want to subvert all these rules and make yourself meaningful, make yourself functional, make yourself a place in that playground. So, it is the idea about the field, in which field you want to be. I think, for me ... As an artist I think what is more important to me is not about the game anymore. I think I was very keen on playing that game, maybe 15 years ago.

What I am interested in is more ... the attitude of life. How I can use my ... I think in terms of artistic practice – or practicing life – I think a lot of things very much from the idea of art. But ultimately I don't think I need to produce an object. Or the object could be something else. It could be a research, it could be ... a curatorial project or it could be small things that are not showing in a gallery.

ARTWORK

I don't produce a lot of art and I haven't produced any new works for a long time. I think I am kind of a little bit strange in the way that I think a lot of people know me as an artist by a work that I did in 2002/2003 – which is more than 10 years ago. And that artwork actually in Hong Kong nobody has ever seen (laughs).

So, they have only kind of heard about that piece. By the time I did that project – which was a webcam sex project – the artwork was censored by the Art Institute of Chicago. And then I got a lot of exhibition opportunities and attention to talk about issues that I wanted to raise. And then it evolved, when I came back to Hong Kong, I haven't produced any new works until last year I was invited, I was in the show *ParaSite* where I did an installation work which was kind of an extension from the work that I produced in 2002.

The project was called "The Impossibility of Having Sex with 500 Men in a Month – I Am an Oriental Whore". It was an installation, with a video, with photos, with a whole month of journal, of diary. And that was exhibited in many places, the whole installation – but it has never been shown in Hong Kong. Until a year ago when I was in the *ParaSite* show, I did a personal archive installation collecting a lot of things that I have been collecting in the past 10 years that is related to that piece. But I am still not showing the piece itself, but I collected and systematically categorized things that are surrounding that piece and created an installation piece.

If we just put it in a more basic level, they are all objects, right. Just like what I said the other day, any objects, the value of it, the cultural value, or the monetary value of it is very much a construction by institutions. And for me, this is what ... an artwork is very much mediated by all these things. I don't really believe in a certain kind of intrinsic sort of value in the way. But I think the intrinsic value is very much kind of something very personal.

But I think, if you ask me in general, what is an artwork, then I think artwork is very much – to put it simple – it's a construction by all these different institutions in this game.

I could never really make a "work", so to speak, that could pretty much fit into the existing context of museums or private galleries and so and so and so. Because I think, in our existing world, it is just ... in this system, museums or galleries, they are all very much ultimately looking for a very complete object. And that object could be easy to communicate in this context of art.

For example – just to make it more ... to exemplify: my work was ... I did a performance, of trying to have sex with 500 men online in a month and then I documented all this kind of process and researching on the age and where they are from and documented all the images and also the conversations and so on.

I thought the whole process... by the time, it was when cybersex was just starting, I thought I was really raising a very critical question at that moment

So, I thought, that was – as an object, as an artwork –, it was very meaningful, because it was very generative.

I am very bad in creating an object, I guess. And also, in order to create ... in order to be successful in playing that game, you need to have an object, ultimately. But a lot of my work, I think, ultimately, there is no object. Or the object is just so complex that it has many different things in that it doesn't lead to a very coherent ... what we see as "a piece of work".

PRODUCTION

The first piece was produced in 2002. that was a work with an architect to build that installation piece. I remember it because it was my final year project and we didn't have a lot of budget at the beginning to produce that work. I still remember – that's quite interesting – we went to a home depot to get ... we bought like 40 or 50 lights bulbs, translucent light. Then we returned them (laughs). So, when we opened the boxes, we very carefully opened the boxes and we made sure that after the show we could return them. And then it was censored.

After that, because it was in the newspaper and things like that, so I got an invitation from a commercial and a non-commercial galleries. Then I started to have a more systematic way of reproducing that piece of work. But it kind of stopped there.

And then I kept a lot of these artefacts and shipped them back to Hong Kong for no agenda. I stored them in a storage room for 10 years. And then until last year, at the *ParaSite* show, I kind of started to look into my inventory. And then, to a point, actually, I didn't know why I was doing that and, to a

point, I got that opportunity of reproducing or to make another piece I started to make sense of all these objects.

I am a very bad example in terms of production. Production is, 10 years ago and now, is very much also a very process-oriented production rather than producing. Because, again, like what I said in the first question: I am not really good in making an object. I don't have a schedule or agenda that I need to produce certain things at a museum or at a commercial gallery or a contracted schedule. I feel this is more like an attitude of how my everyday practice is informed by me, myself, that I think that I am making art, that I am an artist.

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MATERIAL

So, a lot of the material were life I was remaking my bedroom in that installation. So, I brought exactly my same bed to the gallery and there are a lot of objects that are kind of ... whatever you call it ... the "real objects", the "ready-mades" which transform it into a gallery space plus video and internet.

So, the material is a wide range of things that include a lot of personal things, photographs, videos, news clips, air tickets, diaries, books.

I am trying to use all these kinds of objects to construct a meaning. So, it was quite ... in terms of material it was very much ... My challenge – by that time – was to how I make sense of this material, how to categorize them, where do I put them.

Well, the original work ... one of the reasons why it was censored was because I eventually had 176 guys as my partners. The material was very intangible. These people were of course the material, the partners. And it was a very short-lived moment – for 45 minutes.

I would say the privacy issues like how much your relationship or your objects would tell about other people's stories, too. I think all these kinds of things are ... in terms of ... not really the physical thing but ... about other people's stories, about other people's lives that are interlinked from ... originating from your ... the artist's story.

MEDIUM

A lot of those works are video works and so definitely with a computer and camera and all this. And it always kind of extends to – ultimately – I mean, for the first original work, it was expanded to an installation.

I think the real kind of medium is the artwork that was included or excluded at certain institutions – and eventually, it brought me to a lot of different things – is in itself a medium, a mediation process. It generates a lot of different things that are unexpected. So, I think ... rather than the work, the medium, the conventional art medium that I was interested in.

I was more interested in the whole thing as a process. It's the medium of art ... what art, this thing, brought to as a mediation process, to generate so many different things that are quite magical.

PROCESS

I think "process" is the thing that I am most interested in because I think the story didn't end there.

I was back in Hong Kong and then I was invited to speak in a medical school about sexuality. So, I was completely in a different context to situate my work. It just brought me to ... It's kind of like the beginning of my academic life, too. Because I was more invited to speak in conferences, rather than in an art context. Art galleries in Hong Kong were interested in my piece but I think academics were much more interested in these issues that are brought up by technology and sexuality, humanities.

It leads to my second research project: About sex machines. I did a two-year research on robotic sex and went to 13 cities to interview production of sex robots.

And I also made a documentary which I didn't leave my artistic practice, creative output. And I am still in the process because I am still busy of making of that.

And then my PhD project was about art market and art institutions and – that was very much influenced by my experience of being an artist by that time – that I was very much interested in the whole ecology of art (laughs) rather than only focusing on artwork. So to speak: What does it represent? What are the relationships of people? What are the relationships between institutions? What are the stories behind?

Without this experience, I don't think I could do these kinds of research. And that also goes to the first question of roles: It is just very complex.

You really need to be there and hang out with them and to live with them or do projects with them together in order to know how things work. So, I think being an artist and curator and also a scholar, this multiple identity helps me to earn a ticket to be or to having an excuse for being part of the people that I completely didn't know before.

PRESENTATION

In a couple of shows I did they were in the format of an installation. In terms of presentation they're always kind of ... they have a format. And the format is that they always have a lot of information that I try to categorize. That's the formality and the way of how I present things. So to speak, the pieces were very much research-based work, in that they gather a lot of data and then I represent this data in a way that I could make sense of it. In the format of putting things in a cabinet, or putting on a wall, or in a video. So, they are all having the same kind of pattern. And I think a lot of my work is very much research-based. They have complex data and then I generate it into a work that I present – where I present my analysis of all this data that I have been collecting.

I think when I was in Chicago, we had a group called "Nipporn" instead of "Nippon" which was kind of a sex activist group which were all artists. We had parties that are art-engaging, we are making art but also having parties, sex-related. So, a lot of audience were very much this kind of controversial, cutting-edge people. I think it really shifts from time to time. When the work was censored, it started to radically change: the audience was different.

Originally, it was a kind of school context but it goes to, expanded to different audiences, different interests of the piece. I think after going back to Hong Kong it is a completely different interest by people. I don't think in Hong Kong the art scene is particularly interested in works about sex.

INTENTION

Ultimately, for me, the joy and pleasure of making art is to step at the forefront of the society and make something ... make people think and challenge people, challenge the normality and people's thinking or their way of practicing life. I think that is the very ultimate thing that making art ... the intention.

Why are we even making art? For me, it has to be something that other disciplines cannot do. And that is something that would possibly bring us to somewhere that is different from the reality or – ... something else, right?

I am not interested to make an object that fit into the discourse of commercial gallery or museum, so to speak, and I am very bad in making that, too. (laughs)

And I am more interested in how that piece means to me not only on an emotional level but how that piece brought me to other paradigms. For example, after I came back to Hong Kong: Hong Kong is not a place that is very popular in sex art – and particularly about that piece. It is very difficult. Even now it is. But that piece brought me to a lot of paradigms. For example, right after I came back to Hong Kong, I was invited by a medical school professor to talk about cybersex in a medical school. That is something so different from what I was practicing as an artist.

So, I am more interested – as in a work – how these objects or how this piece of work brought me to making my life, as a life-making process.

METHOD

All my artwork is pretty much research-based. So, like any kind of research, I have a general problem that I want to explore. And then I set up a certain kind of rules of how I can play this game. For example, how I collect this – whatever you call it – data or these sex partners at the beginning of the project. These rules ... it is like a game that I set up: a month; how many people; how can I interact with all these people. So, there is a certain kind of way in which I create all this rules and create a game in my own artwork.

And I think in the second piece I purposely break my own rules. I had a certain way of putting my objects together, according to a certain manner. And then I kind of enjoyed the way of ultimately taking things away and putting it on the other cabinet or putting it next to other objects and to make it ... to re-make, to re-think about my history.

So, in terms of method, I guess in all the works I have been making was that I always have that kind of setting up my own game and always subverting this game. Like what I enjoy of ... as a researcher, understanding the ecology.

ART

I think for me, art is just something quite ... it is really like a practice of life. It changes you because it is somehow quite magical. You can use under the umbrella, under this name of art, create a lot of things that actually don't make sense in other disciplines.

What I am interested in, ultimately: why is art so magical in such a way that it is ultimately different from other objects?

For example, if I call this, my mouse, radically art – or if MoMA, Guggenheim call this mouse art – then how is it different from the object of a mouse that is sitting on my table? How come art, under this name, things could be radically changing? And I think from an artist's point of view or as a researcher or as a curator, with all my different identities, are treating this matter in a very different way.

What would be the differences, right? If I were an artist – and creating that mouse – then I would firstly think about how this mouse would be something that gives certain ideas that would create ... that would make people think; that would challenge people; that would raise certain controversies or ideas.

As a researcher, I would be more interested in how can someone use this object to identify or authorize "this is an artist"; in what kind of way this artist say this discourse is considered to be valid.

So to speak, an artist ... someone who calls himself an artist or others call him an artist suddenly could make this object become so important, creating a discourse, and that goes back to why, how this artist ... the role of this artist can be authorized by an object – which is a normal object, originally.

As a curator I think my role is to create a new context to authorize these objects to be meaningful or to create some meanings that have never been talked about before. So to speak, to use different spaces and ways of presentations, ways of gathering different artists, objects together to create a new context that would potentially give something also quite challenging, but I think "curator" is the

role of not so much talking about creating that object but to contextualize the things. But they are ultimately about art. And art is just something quite magical because we all know this is a mouse (laughs). And why is it not a mouse anymore? That is something that bankers wouldn't think about or medical doctors wouldn't think about or physics ... physicists. This is a mouse. But artists would always think about "this is not a mouse". What can it be more? A mouse plus. And in an art context you can. Because it can be validated. It can be authorized to say, "this is not a mouse". But in reality, a majority of cases and disciplines, this is still a mouse. So, I think this is what's so interesting about art because we can have the room to think about ... starting to think this is not a mouse.

BIO

* 1978, Leung is a practicing artist, curator and researcher in art and culture. Leung received an Honorary Fellowship of a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the New Media Art Department of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, the University of the Arts London. The creative practice in artistic and curatorial projects has prompted him to conduct substantial research on art and culture. Leung is currently a doctorate researcher at the School of Creative Media, the City University of Hong Kong, specializing in the contemporary Chinese art market.

From 1998-2008, his artworks were exhibited in over 30 venues across the globe.

In 2002, Leung was appointed as the Programme Director of the media art organization *Videotage*. In 2013, Leung was appointed as the Chairman of *Videotage*.

Credits

The interview was conducted on 28 November 2014 at the artist's office at the Department of Cultural and Creative Arts at the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

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