

THE IMPEDIMENT OF CONSCIENCE

CRITIC'S ESSAY | LILIAN CHEE

At the time of writing this article, my own perspective of Michael Lee's latest project, *The Consolations of Museology*, is a mixture of actual, shared, fictional and projected states.

The outcome, I am told, is a series of paper models, ten of them, laboriously made by hand and delicately bound into books. The ambition, on the other hand, is much larger, touching the chords of human emotion, and thus, pervasive to every living soul. Our conversations have been both intellectually invigorating and emotionally draining. Lee's idea is to make ten models of hypothetical museums. Each museum would address a key inadequacy endemic, he says, to humanity – jealousy,

cowardice, stupidity, ugliness – dark states of being which lurk beneath each personality, and which threaten to shatter our perfect world. The pairing of museum to problem is a twist to the architectural method of pairing building type to programme. However, the problem with the ‘problem’ in this case, is its immediacy to the personal. In our preliminary conversations about the project, it became evident that while the inadequacies could be cast as theoretical ‘problems’, it was impossible not to embody potential ‘solutions’ with knowledge from personal experience. It seemed that Lee had set up an incredibly intriguing but exceptionally complex brief for ten museums, which we could each take apart, re-imagine, re-build and inhabit. The temptation in each viewer to identify with one, two, or all of these human failures, would not be uncommon. Thinking through how the artist is compelled to confront these failings in public, I am reminded of what feminist literary critic Elspeth Probyn calls a “fear of the near”, in this case, a fear of exposing the self, or an anxiety of being in proximity with one’s own experiences, thus inducing a disembodied and distanced response.¹ Instead, Lee’s project turns this kind of distanced criticality on its head. It draws the viewer simultaneously inwards to his or her self, and outwards towards the artist and the work. It is critical. It is personal.

Working through this essay in Singapore (and for a stint in Melbourne and London) physically apart from Lee’s ongoing production

in Hong Kong, two issues become increasingly germane for me when trying to take apart this project. They revolve around questions of experience and association. These aspects are, I suggest, customary routes into engaging art. They are present when we enter discussions on works such as the one in this publication, that is, works which require a sense of perception that is both contextually grounded and also in imaginative flight. They are the levers which institutions like the museums alluded to by these models, continually rework and manipulate. The notions of experience and associative perception may not be, as Lee's work insinuates, as divided as we think. Through a familiar-made-unfamiliar frontier, a museum of paper in this instance, this project seeks, I believe, not to resolve the big problems of humankind, but to transform, question and critically materialise our notions of experience using a set of semi-fictional spaces. The extent to which we may inhabit Lee's experimental 'consolations' depends on the work's ability to galvanise our personal experiences materially. But it should also be emphasised that the kind of 'experience' I am referring to relies on a relational connection between your or my experience with the artist's. In that sense, it is both personal and relational. And the models, which may be described as utopian, dystopian or heterotopian, depending on your relationship with them, act as important mediating sites.

In her seminal essay, "Experience", literary critic Joan W. Scott reiterates that experience

is doubly problematic and unavoidable.¹ At stake here is not merely the veracity of the experiential content but rather, as Scott points out, "the constructed nature of the experience, about how subjects are constituted in the first place, about how one's vision is structured".² In other words, Scott is raising the stakes of experience from one of individual investment to one of historicised subjectivity:

It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known but rather *that which we seek to explain*, that about which knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicise the identities it produces.⁴

The experiences insinuated by *Consolations* seem to be less essentialist or foundational rather than that which compels us to confront our own experiences as inevitably historicised; that is, what counts as experience is not given but something which we may want to resist, or need to negotiate. As this kind of experience is "always contested, always... political",⁵ it allows us to look back critically towards how we position ourselves in relation to others, to how we occupy spaces, and to the values we hold dear. Here, it is particularly striking that experience is enacted against a series of pseudo-architectural backdrops

which are considered, if nothing, neutral. Paradoxically, the museum may be considered, both historically and programmatically, as an architectural typology purposefully removed from the emotional, the intimate and the personal in order to present, archive, disseminate and curate an impartial, wide ranging and uncompromised knowledge of the subject at hand. Here, the museum is re-examined as a site, which produces contradictory meanings – itself a construct which needs untangling.

The museum is a historical, ideological and discursive centre for production and dissemination of both cultural knowledge and knowledge of the visual arts as a point of that larger if ever inconsistent script about subjectivities, genders, classes, ethnicities, sexualities, abilities.⁶

The act of museumisation and the institutional demands of the museum are, as art critic Ralph Rugoff argues, contractual; "... the meaning of any exhibit is open to negotiation because the museum isn't merely a place that preserves culture – it's involved in the process of inventing it in a deal worked out with each and every visitor".⁷ Thus museum architecture is privy and instrumental to this deal. Spaces are ideally neutral, familiar, linear and sequential so that there is a clear beginning and an end. Experience is controlled and repeated. Boundaries are clarified. The experience of such authoritative spaces can be exhausting, prompting architect Louis Kahn to suggest that we all just want a cup

of coffee once we enter a museum, or as Rugoff contends, we need that cup because the “atmosphere of infallible authority is paralysing” resulting in an “airless space” which “immobilises our curiosity”.⁸

The potentiality of the museum as a trigger of unexpected experience is what, I believe, Lee is trying to tease out in these book-models.⁹ More provocatively, *Consolations* celebrates the weak. The ‘white box’ is translated through paper, a fragile material, into an open-ended metaphor of our own private archive of failings and unrequited desires. These weaknesses are then problematically aestheticised – we are fascinated by the precise construction of the books, but also drawn to their fragility, their embodiment of labour, and to possible evidences of human imperfection. Through its seriality, what *Consolations* shows is repeated frailty, a constant re-working of an idealised idea, or an impossible process of trying to make something perfect happen caught in freeze frame. We look closer, become more involved until the geography of the model space engulfs our physical but disembodied positions. We shift from being in the museum to looking at ourselves being in the museum. It is, above all, a self-situating perspective.

In her vitrine exhibition of nondescript cardboard boxes filled with curious objects, images and texts at the Freud Museum in London, artist Susan Hiller repositions the museum goer as a visitor, perhaps an unauthorised one, into Sigmund Freud’s home at 20 Maresfield Gardens. Hiller uses the

‘worthless’ objects which she has collected over the years to work through her own relationship with Freud’s domestic space, bringing across difficult notions of mortality, history, ethnicity and gender through the artifacts.¹⁰ “I started with these objects, some of which are objects that I have kept for years, little unimportant things, souvenirs if you like”, Hiller shares, “with a lot of personal resonance. Of course I didn’t know what the resonance was. I just knew that I was stuck with these things and I never wanted to throw them out”.¹¹ “Orchestrating relationships, and inventing fluid taxonomies, while not excluding myself from them”, her objects (e.g., milk jugs, water collected from mythical streams corked in antique bottles, lantern slides, old discarded books) are re-contextualised in relation to the history of the house, its illustrious occupant, and the promise of psychoanalysis as a ‘talking cure’. It also crucially repositions the artist herself as protagonist in this space.¹² In this case, Hiller’s approach is at once biographical, relational and critical. Comparisons between Hiller’s boxes and the boxed-book-model-museum in *Consolations* may be made in terms of their intensely intimate scale and semi-biographical-yet-relational content. There is also a mechanism of psychoanalytic transference in both works, that is, the viewer is prompted to emotionally transpose his or her personal experiences onto the objects. Each object begins to take on multiple meanings which are variously cultural, shared and personal. This complexity makes analytical

art historical lineage, arguing for the inevitable contamination of high art by 'low culture', that is, by popular techniques and imageries, and vice versa. "Monumental pictorial forces are at work", Warburg claims, "within this 'inferior' region of Northern European applied art".¹⁴ In *Mnemosyne*, Warburg arranged and re-arranged his collection of images on large panels covered with stretched black cloth. He proceeded to photograph these assemblages over several iterations. In each photographed iteration, Warburg does not merely represent the images as arranged but uses the photographic medium to *re-produce* a new art-historical lineage of images. His technique has been described by contemporary art historian Philippe-Alain Michaud as "cinematic" since it focuses on shifting relationships between image and observer, and rather than mine for absolute meaning within the image itself, the arrangements set the image in motion so as to produce a series of relational effects between image and image, and between image and observer.¹⁵ The revolutionary aspect of the Warburgian series lies in its recognition of possible contradictory meanings arising, as it were, from the *spaces* between images. Confronted with a panel of mixed images, the viewer is forced to move from mere contemplation towards active intervention, he must "re-create the trajectories of meaning, the highlights, by focusing on the spacing of the photographs and on the differences in size among the printed images that correspond to variations of emphasis".¹⁶

In *Consolations*, the opened books are to be shown in a seamless and transparent cube. The ten books are also to be viewed in conjunction with a video (also captured within the cubic frame) by Singapore filmmaker Willie Koh, with Nicolas Escoffier (music) and han (photographer) in collaboration with the artist (publication). In the first instance, the film's narrative plot may be seen as a substitute for tediously going through the books, page by page. Yet, the video may work conversely as a catalyst to understand Lee's books differently. The moving image may not simply supplement the static books but recast the latter as cinematic constructs, inviting the viewer to physically circulate around the transparent cube and to actively "re-create the trajectories" of these artifacts, re-appropriating associative clues given by familiar motifs such as the gable-fronted house, or re-engaging less familiar texts and conversations on human frailties by ancient sages, contemporary philosophers and filmmakers. The viewer's involvement in the artwork becomes more invested in the personal and also more relational to the artist's self-comparisons and contemplations of one's personal failings, or speculation about the autobiographical nature of the work, for example, will certainly not be uncommon nor unexpected. This mode of engagement reminds me of the intensity of Warburg's and Hiller's archives, and of Scott's argument on reflexive (rather than authoritative) experience. The effects of Warburg's *Mnemosyne* has been

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described as “involving not objects but the tensions, analogies, contrasts, or contradictions among them”.¹⁷ Perhaps one may extend these ambitious effects to those of *Consolations*.

When we first discussed this project, I wondered if Lee’s ideas were too personal, whether the work would expose his own weaknesses and make his position too vulnerable. As Susan Suleiman puts it, taking on the contemporary subject’s (the artist, the critic, the audience) self-interest and putting it on display can backfire on the subject: “They bring the... self into play, and into risk. They stir up muddy waters. They lead you into temptation and error – or into beatitude and bliss. In a word, they matter to you”.¹⁸ Yet, I had also taken a liking to the project because it had a certain feminist leaning, a point I oddly failed to discuss at length with the artist. Perhaps it was also the impediment of my own academic training which habitually urges one to push criticality through control, distance and objectivity. Here, addressing commonplace ills such as unpopularity, not having enough money, frustration, inadequacy, a broken heart, messiness, stupidity, the lack of physical beauty, and cowardice through model-books with sound-bite sensitive titles like “The Great Hall of Rejects”, “Window Shopper’s Union”, “Museum for the Frustrated”, “Centre of Dependency”, “A Loser’s Respite”, “Federation of Failures”, “Institute of Contemporary Fools”, “Pandemonium of The Perfect Mess”, “The Misshappen Collective”, and “The House of Escape Artists”, *Consolations* may be seen

as one attempt by an artist to work through not only the abstract weakness of humankind but also to tangibly problematise his own conscience, failings and experiences. It may be about making the personal political again.

Taking on the museum as a site for this paradigm shift is a strategic decision. As Douglas Crimp suggests, unlike the private collection which re-invests its objects with specific value, the museum fetishises the objects it accumulates and wrests them away from their meaningful contexts: “The museum constructs a cultural history by treating its objects independently both of the material conditions of their own epoch and those of the present”.¹⁹ Here, Crimp reiterates Walter Benjamin’s emphasis on engaging the contemporaneous moment in historical construction so as “to set to work an engagement with history *original to every new present*. It has recourse to a consciousness of the present which shatters the continuum of history”.²⁰ In *Consolations*, Lee is perhaps trying to reconcile on the one hand, the cultural function of the museum as a collective historical repository with, on the other hand, the contradictions of the present moment and individual agency. Re-encasing the books in the (white) cube is a nod towards the first instance, thereby also making the personal historical and cultural.

The notion of conscience – which I had picked up almost intuitively when I first got wind of what Lee intended, and was reluctant to let go despite its problematic relationship

with issues of morality, ethics and truth, for example – is ultimately tied to the emergence of agency and the individual (flawed) subject. Conscience either propels and/or suffocates the creative self. It is present, I would argue, in Lee’s work. Here, conscience comes into play when the artistic self is put at risk. Lee wants his project to be cathartic. Yet it is debatable whether an artwork with such a particular aesthetic quality can heal the fractured individual. Is the cathartic relationship more applicable to the artist than to his audience? Can the audience’s relationship to the work move beyond curiosity of the artist’s intentions towards self-inquiry? In short, can these beautiful, fragile, ornate, excessive and ‘useless’ book-models function as conscience-pricking devices?

A final note may be made on the relationship between these paper museums to architecture. While it would be foolhardy to liken these constructions to those of modeled buildings, it would not be out of place to embrace this exploration as a new modality of the architectural model. Perhaps one could be as provocative as Aaron Betsky, who has argued that:

Architecture is not building. Buildings are objects and the act of building leads to such objects, but architecture is something else. It is the way we think and talk about buildings, how we represent them, how we build them. This is architecture. More generally, architecture is a way of

representing, shaping and perhaps even offering critical alternatives to the human-made environment.²¹

The book-models are certainly a concrete way of shaping, experiencing and talking about museum spaces. They are also aesthetically produced – the choice of a particular shade and weight of paper are not coincidental. They are solid artifacts which relate to the observer's culture – to our understanding of how to read books, to our relationship with museums, to how we gravitate towards or away from the humanist issues which these books try to evoke, to our values of beauty, pathos and poetry. They may not resemble familiar buildings but the books do create imaginative spaces which the observer can subsequently enter and reside within. In this way, they re-animate the question of architecture, moving it beyond building and enriching it again with the energetic strokes of shifting cultures, personal perspectives and stimulating conversations. Perhaps as Lee has picked Alain de Botton's tome *The Consolations of Philosophy* as a catalyst for this work, he is also venturing towards the daunting question that de Botton also asked: whether architecture can adequately address the big questions of humankind – happiness, peace of mind, and hope, amongst others.²² It may or it may never. But for architecture to be relevant, it needs to confront and negotiate these impossibilities. And like art, it must fully engage with that which troubles our conscience.

"I had realised before now that it is only a clumsy and erroneous form of perception which places everything in the object, when really everything is in the mind".²³

(Endnotes)

- 1 Elspeth Probyn, "Après le texte qui vient?": Ghosts in the (Missing) Text", in Marysia Lewandowska (Ed.), *The Missing Text* (London: Chance Books, 1991), 101-16; here 108.
- 2 Joan W. Scott, "Experience", in Judith Butler & Joan W. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-40.
- 3 Scott, "Experience", 25.
- 4 Scott, "Experience", 26; my emphasis.
- 5 Scott, "Experience", 37.
- 6 Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (London: Routledge, 2006), 18.
- 7 Ralph Rugoff, "Beyond Belief: The Museum as Metaphor", in Robert Mangurian and Mary-Ann Ray, *Wrapper: 40 Possible City Surfaces for the Museum of Jurassic Technology* (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 1999), 102.
- 8 Rugoff, "Beyond Belief", 102.
- 9 For an exposition of the book-model, see Lilian Chee, "Divine Library: Building an Unseen Monument", in Lilian Chee (Ed.), *Documents: The \$100,000 gallery of art* (Singapore: WORM, 2007), 18-21.
- 10 See Susan Hiller, *After the Freud Museum* (London: Book Works, 2000).
- 11 Susan Hiller, "Working through Objects (1994)", in *The Archive*, Charles Merewether (Ed.) (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 47-8.
- 12 Hiller, "Afterword", in *After the Freud Museum*, unpaginated.
- 13 Rugoff, "Beyond Belief", 103.
- 14 Aby Warburg, "Peasants at Work in Burgundian Tapestries", in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), 319.
- 15 See Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone

- Books, 2004), especially foreword (by Georges Didi-Huberman), chap.1, and app. 1.
- 16 Michaud, *ibid.*, 245-6.
- 17 Michaud, *ibid.*, 244.
- 18 Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking who one is: Encounters with contemporary art and literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.
- 19 Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 204.
- 20 Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937), in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 352, cited by Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, 204-5; emphasis mine.
- 21 Aaron Betsky, curatorial note, *Out There: Beyond Building*, the 11th International Architectural Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, 2008.
- 22 Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 2001).
- 23 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols, Vol.6, *Time Regained* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 275.