



"Some of the most important works of art are the ones that we live with and that affect our daily lives, such as architecture, furniture, and fashion, which can be said to even shape our bodies and our minds."

Michael Lin in conversation with Gerald Matt
Kunsthalle Wien project space, 2005

Locomotion should be slow, the slower the better... interrupted by leisurely halts to sit on vantage points and to stop at question marks.

Carl O. Sauer
The Education of a Geographer, 1976

Widely recognized for his use of floral patterns that reconfigure architecture by overlaying it on the exterior and/or interior of buildings, garden pathways, tennis courts and parking garages, Michael Lin has transformed functional spaces into sites enlivened by color and design. Using these decorative design patterns, he has also carved out spaces within spaces to designate areas for gathering, rest or contemplation. The paintings—most of which are based on Taiwanese textiles—are recognizable as architectural interventions in and of themselves, but Lin's production of social space is another key feature of his art practice. At the onset of every project, Lin puts together a team to meticulously produce his monumental paintings by hand, working through several weeks, even months, to finish a given piece of work. This particular process of production inculcates in each project an inherent intent: of becoming sites for people to come together. For every context that Lin's interventions occupy, his concern becomes "... not so much about painting, as it is about the public space and the role of the contemporary artist in the public sphere."¹ The painting then acts like a motif, a subtle presence that encourages the recognition of a specified site where engagement, conscious or not, can occur. Alexandra Munroe writes that Lin's paintings are "...more like a medium than a thing... more interested in creating a painting as a space to occupy (Hanru 2009)²." By turning architectural spaces into 'situations' that are interactive and provisional, Lin invites the visitor to take an active role in the work's production of meaning.³

This latter sentiment places Lin's practice squarely within the purview of relational aesthetics⁴ of the 1990s. With his work *Model Home: A Proposition by Michael Lin* (2012), Lin collaborated with the Japanese architectural group Atelier Bow-Wow and construction workers, who painted his wall design at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai. *Munroe posits that Lin, at this juncture, was producing work within the network paradigm⁵, an aspect which consists of working with people in fields, and among realities far outside the arts⁶. The artist takes on a similar engagement in *Michael Lin: Locomotion*: his intervention does not only introduce a relation of exchange between the city and the museum, but enters the geography of the city itself.*

For *Michael Lin: Locomotion*, the artist transforms MCAD's space to the extent that entering it equates stepping into a painting. The commissioned work begins from its barely legible initial sketches



Untitled Gathering, Manila (2016)

on the white wall, flowing into a print study across glass windows, towards experimentation with scale, then colour, to its final form and design. Interested in involving pedicab drivers with his project in Manila, Lin met with the local community through their *barangay* representatives and suggested a swap. In exchange for their old pedicab hoods and tarps—some personalized over the years with motifs and emblems of ownership, many tattered and on their last legs—a new one with his printed design on it, upholstered on to their pedicab frame as they saw fit. For Lin, the exchange is not simply symbolic, but a sustained participation with the community, one that went far beyond the axis of the museum and the College, and even the dates of the exhibition.



Pedicab from Barangay 752

While *Model Home* in Rockbund engaged construction workers who worked within the museum to produce the work, Lin, for *Locomotion*, cedes ownership of his artwork to the pedicab drivers who get to create the patchwork design for their side car's frame; each pedicab will have a different pattern.

Fifteen pedicabs, now art objects decked with Lin's prints, become geographical indices pedaling through the interstices of the city, tracing a line of art along the streets of Manila. Once a day, they enter the museum to pick up a passenger or two, and for that moment while inside the museum, their pedicab tarps hone in on the central image found within before the pedicabs ride out back to the streets. Another work in the exhibition, *Untitled Gathering, Manila* (2016), a painting cut to create 240 little stools, on the other hand

is a passive receptacle for social gatherings, a place where one can sit and rest, listen, talk, and be still. *Locomotion* is, unless parked, moving, taking people from point to point. With the pedicab, maps are thwarted, and areas unknown to art and vice versa are entered. The wall patterns that travel from interior wall to exterior geography are like a slice of the art world moving through streets. Michel de Certeau writes that maps organize cities to establish power, a guide to 'read' the city, and in this way, own it: *as far as the eye can see*. This 'reading' loses efficacy once on the ground, the city becomes opaque, needing someone to weave across its terrain for places to open up once again.

Similar to his other interventions, the entry of Lin's art-making is quiet, becoming part of, and finally belonging to the space itself. Despite its massive visual presence, the paintings work on the principle of sinking into the background allowing for stories to be made and told, for the odd question to start a conversation. Any social exchange sparked by the presence of this special tarped-out public transportation is beyond the access of conventional art institutions, and perhaps this is where the projects of Michael Lin extract the most pertinent social exchanges, far away from the gravitational pull of the art world.⁷

Whatever categories Lin's work is seen to fit under, his practice is a continual assessment and re-assessment of his role as an artist engaged with the public sphere. Whether setting up temporary café spaces, taking over book covers, working with architectural firms, construction workers or pedicab drivers, Lin's projects are fraught with the tensions and politics of their contexts. His engagements are evidences of a sincere interest in understanding connections and processes of social conditions. David Harvey writes that "Place is given priority over space, the stability of being, over the dynamics of becoming." Indeed, the ubiquity of the pedicabs will result in the recognition of the prints by a large public in the future, and this positions Lin's project as more than a presentation of a space with the potential of becoming, but the beginnings of a production of *place* for being.

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1 Hou Hanru, "Michael Lin, Public Artist" in Nicolas Bourriaud, Bruce Grenville et al, *Michael Lin* (Vancouver and Osfildern, Germany: Vancouver Art Gallery and Hatje Cantz, 2009), p27

2 Munroe, Alexandra, "Take Away My Authority," *Model Home, A Proposition by Michael Lin*, pp. 19–23. Exh. cat. Shanghai: Rockbund Art Museum, 2012. [Chinese and English]

3 Ibid.

4 Bishop, Claire, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004)




5 While grounded in similar ideas about art as a platform or laboratory for social interaction and political engagement, the 'network paradigm' points to a form of art expressly committed to working with people in fields and among realities far outside the arts. It is an open workplace in real and online space, alive with errant discussions and unpredictable group dynamics, and committed to creative research on the state of our planet. It simulates the Internet model of blogs as infinitely variable social media networks, rather than defined containers of content: Users can freely access, consume and forward content in any direction. Projects arising from this model won't add up to make sense about any one subject; rather, they challenge our codes of cognition and incite new ones through unexpected interactions and connections. Drawing on people and ideas that cross disciplines, media, historical periods, cultural discourses, economic class and national borders, the rural and the urban, the 'network paradigm' overturns the authority of the artist in favor of dynamic and unscripted participation—a spectacular subversion of power. Munroe, Alexandra, "Take Away My Authority," *Model Home, A Proposition by Michael Lin*, pp. 19–23. Exh. cat. Shanghai: Rockbund Art Museum, 2012. [Chinese and English]

6 Ibid.

7 In Bishop's essay, using Rirkrit Tiravanija's work as example, she cites that most projects falling under relational aesthetic rely on a 'microtopian' community, made up of participants who identify with each other and have something in common, most often than not, the art world. Bishop, p67

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