

EDUCATION RESOURCE GUIDE

Engaging with Performance

C Art through the Lee Wen Archive

Suitable for educators engaging students aged 12 and above, and of a wide range of subjects, including Art, History, and Environmental and Social Studies.

About NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore

NTU CCA Singapore is a National Research Centre of Nanyang Technological University, with a focus on *Spaces of the Curatorial*, rooted in the belief that contemporary art extends beyond physical spaces like galleries, and is intrinsically intertwined with the world around us. It brings forth innovative and experimental forms of emergent artistic and curatorial practices that intersect the present and histories of contemporary art embedded in social-political spheres with other fields of knowledge.

About Asia Art Archive

Asia Art Archive (AAA) is an independent non-profit organization initiated in 2000 in response to the urgent need to document and make accessible the multiple recent histories of art in the region. With one of the most valuable collections of materials on art freely available from its website and on-site library, AAA builds tools and communities to collectively expand knowledge through research, residency, and educational programmes.

AAA Learning & Participation aims to be a thought leader in shaping art and education in the twenty-first century. We offer programmes and online resources for teacher professional development.

The AAA Learning & Participation Programme is supported by the S. H. Ho Foundation Limited and C. K. and Kay Ho Foundation.

About the Education Resource Guide

A collaborative effort between NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (NTU CCA Singapore) and Asia Art Archive (AAA), this Education Resource Guide (ERG) was specially created to provide an introduction to the history and practice of performance art in Singapore and Southeast Asia, with a focus on the Lee Wen Archive. It aims to guide teachers in effectively creating in-class experiences or planning learning journeys to art centres, archives, and museums like NTU CCA Singapore and AAA.

While there is much to be gained from experiencing performance art, we acknowledge that performance art can be difficult to comprehend. Through this Guide, teachers and students may discover how artists engage with issues that matter to them, through the medium of performance art. Included in this Guide are recommended pedagogical methodologies, activities, and approaches to decoding performative artworks. These activities are suggestions, and do not present the only approaches or answers. Teachers and educators can select and combine the activities, as well as incorporate their own ideas, to accommodate topics discussed with their students and classes. In carrying out the proposed activities, it is important to note that there are no right or wrong answers. These activities provide entry points for both teachers and students to explore varying perspectives, while instilling trust in their own responses towards performance art.

This ERG is part of NTU CCA Singapore's and AAA's many online resources, that are free and available to teachers and students on the respective web pages. Constituting performance art as well as other forms of artistic exploration, we hope these resources will be useful not only for art educators, but also for educators of other disciplines (including history, politics, and environmental studies), who wish to adopt creative ways of engaging with their lesson materials. These resources may be used in physical and virtual classrooms, for independent learning and group lessons, and in preparation for on-site performances and gallery visits.



Link to NTU CCA
Singapore's online
resources:
[http://ntu.
ccasingapore.org](http://ntu.ccasingapore.org)



Link to Asia Art Archive's
online resources:
[https://aaa.org.hk/
en/resources/for-
educators](https://aaa.org.hk/en/resources/for-educators)

A Peek into Performance Art

Performance art refers to artworks involving live action. Artists primarily create bodily movements and gestures to interrogate a wide range of issues. Its live-ness allows artists to reach, confront, and interact directly with their audience, prompting the work to unfold spontaneously.

The roots of performance art can be traced back to Dadaism in early 20th century Europe. Dadaist artists, such as Marcel Duchamp, Hugo Ball, and Emmy Hennings, protested against the principles of modern capitalism and a pro-war society through cabaret performances. Commonly characterized as avant-garde and nonsensical, these performances sought to highlight the absurdity of the socio-political conditions of their time. Integrating readings, music, and dance, these performances also questioned established understandings of what art was, blurring the lines between the visual, literary, sonic, and performative. Performance art gained prominence in the post-war period. The genre developed to include happenings, actions, connections to feminist art practices, and relational aesthetics in the 1990s.

Today, performance art is a widely accepted component of the visual art world. Its historical precedent makes it a popular platform for exploring new ideas and formats of artistic creation. Contemporary artists are increasingly bringing other mediums, such as film, photography, digital media and the internet into the realm of performance. The short-lived nature of performance art, with each work existing only in the moment that it is being staged, has opened up discussions surrounding the importance of documenting and archiving performance artworks for future generations.

In Southeast Asian communities, performative genres such as song-dances are common tools of storytelling that have existed for centuries. Performance art recognizes these existing cultural traditions of enactment within Southeast Asia, while providing artists with experimental means to investigate current socio-political and environmental conditions. Southeast Asian artists have emerged as some of the most inventive performance practitioners. They include Arahmaiani, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and of course, Lee Wen.

Lee Wen

Lee Wen (1957-2019) was a pioneer among a generation who defined and shaped performance art in Asia. Together with some of his peers, Lee reimagined the foundations of academic art, opening its vocabulary and techniques to a socially engaged practice. His oeuvre included sculptures, music, paintings, poetry, and installation.

He was the youngest of five children raised by a single mother, Lee Mee Lan, after his father, the writer Lee Xue Min, passed away. Upon graduating from Raffles Institution in Singapore, Lee worked at various jobs, including as a bank officer for Chase Manhattan Bank. He quit after six years at the bank, and in 1987 enrolled at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore. In 1989 he joined The Artists Village (TAV) founded by Tang Da Wu. He thrived with peers in an environment that fostered conversation and work that was ephemeral, time-based, process-focused, and collectively and socially informed. A year after joining TAV, Lee studied at City of London Polytechnic from 1990 to 1992, and later finished his Master of Fine Arts at LASALLE in 2006.

While he was studying in London, Lee often was mistaken for a mainland Chinese person. This accentuated his questions about his place in the world and the purpose of art; his father was a well-known writer in the Chinese literary community in Singapore, but Lee Wen himself felt more comfortable in English and had been educated in a system borne of British colonialism. Subjected to the homogenising gaze of Orientalism, Lee embarked on a series of projects that developed alter egos he could use to address socially constructed ideas. The first of these projects is *Journey of a Yellow Man*. Developed for fifteen iterations (No.7, No.8, No.10, No.12, and No.14 were planned but not executed) from 1992 to 2001, *Yellow Man* has been in England, Singapore, India, Japan, Thailand, Mexico, Australia, and China. The project evolved from a critique of racist ideas to a meditation on freedom, climate change, humility, and religious practices – as responses to the locations in which Lee performed. What started as an over-the-top, tongue-in-cheek response to an objectifying gaze imposed on another person's body, became a figure who engaged the audience in questions about their cultural values and norms.

Other projects include *Ghost Stories* (1992–2003), a series on fear and the anxieties of life in industrialised modernity; *Anthropometry Revision* (2008), an interrogation of Euro-American art history through the work of Nouveau Realism artist Yves Klein, a key figure in the development of performance art; *Strange Fruit* (2003), an incarnation of *Yellow Man* in a cross-racial critique of colonial violence, with a nod to Billie Holiday's haunting song; *World Class Society* (1999–2000), a satire of the state's constant social policing and bureaucratisation of civil society in Singapore; and *Ping-Pong Go Round* (1998 and 2012), a transformation of the ping-pong table into a round sculpture that allows players to move around and question the rules of engagement. Lee's projects crossed genres, and he often wrote poems, sang his own lyrics, and played the guitar, both as part of performances and as practices in their own right.

Parallel to his development as an artist, Lee was active in artist-run initiatives—in particular the collective Black Market International, and the festivals Future of Imagination (FOI) and Rooted in The Ephemeral Speak (R.I.T.E.S.). He co-founded FOI in 2003, to test the Singapore National Arts Council's loosening of its 10-year proscription on funding for performance art. He co-founded R.I.T.E.S. in 2009, a platform that explores sound as part of performance and visual art.

In an effort to preserve a record of independent and experimental art practices that would escape the notice or approval of major institutions, Lee founded the Independent Archive (IA) in 2012. IA documents visual art in Singapore, the region, and beyond, with a particular focus on time-based and event-specific art. Beyond this practical goal, Lee also believed in the importance of independent art spaces and institutions, as a counterpoint to private and state institutions. IA continues under a team of younger artists who had helped Lee run the organisation.

In his last decade, Lee Wen's performative practice saw changes due to the effects of Parkinson's disease.

The Lee Wen Archive was digitised through a collaborative project initiated in 2017 by NTU CCA Singapore and AAA, with National Gallery Singapore joining in as additional partner, to give access to culturally significant materials recording the arts of Singapore and beyond.



THE LEE WEN ARCHIVE
<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/lee-wen-archive>

Warm up activity

(1) Define the terms below. How do you think each of them relate to performance art? Jot down your thoughts in the box below.

- (a) Archive
- (b) Collaboration
- (c) Contemporary rituals
- (d) Embodiment
- (e) Ephemeral
- (f) Identity
- (g) Movement
- (h) Orientalism
- (i) Performativity
- (j) Re-enactment
- (k) Socially engaged practice
- (l) Agency
- (m) Time-based media

- (2) Embark on a mini research project to find out more about performance art. Think about the different kinds of sources that can help you learn more about the medium. Write about your mini research experience in the box below.

- (3) Based on your research, discuss with your friends what you think performance art entails. How is it different from other types of performances you have seen?

Lee Wen's sketchbooks

The Lee Wen Archive contains dozens of notebooks and sketchbooks that Lee Wen kept from as early as 1978 when he was in college, and did not yet know he would devote his life to art. Even then he spent hours drawing and painting. There are two sketchbooks, one dated 1978 and one 1979, full of drawings of shapes, some of which he painted with gouache watercolour. There are other sketchbooks full of fantastical figures—part human, part animal, placed in backdrops as diverse as deserts, oceans, and extraterrestrial landscapes. These drawings and paintings are early examples of Lee's careful study of colour, form, volume, space and perspective. They give us a glimpse into his thoughts and processes, and connections between the practices of drawing and performance.

Activity 1

Image 1 is full of sculptural shapes overlapping one another. This is an example of the artist's studies of colour, form, shape, and perspective.



Image 1: Lee Wen, from Sketchbook, 1978, gouache on paper.

- (1) What do you see from the blocks of colours in Image 1? How are the forms created in relation to one another? Discuss with your peers.
- (2) In a group, recreate this painting using body gestures and movements. (Hint: Take into consideration the shapes and power dynamics among the colours.)

Activity 2

Image 2 is an example of the many fantastical figures that Lee Wen drew in his sketchbooks. Later in his performances, he would create alter egos such as Yellow Man to comment on social issues.

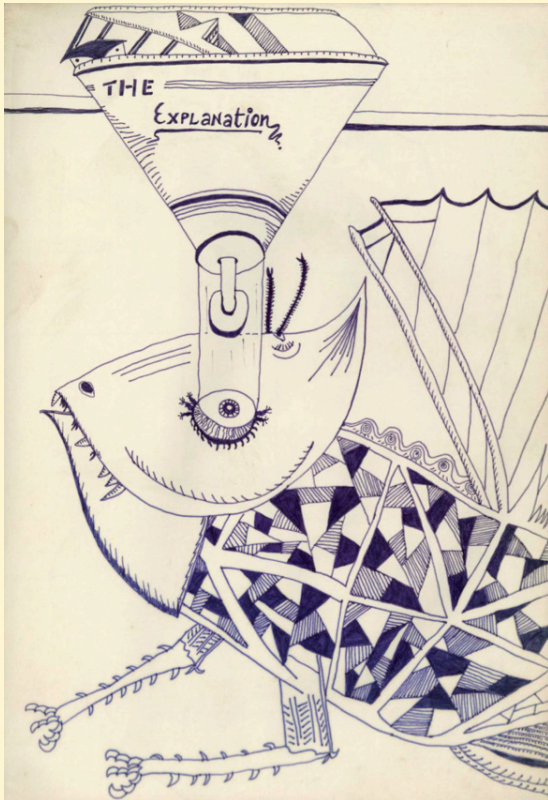
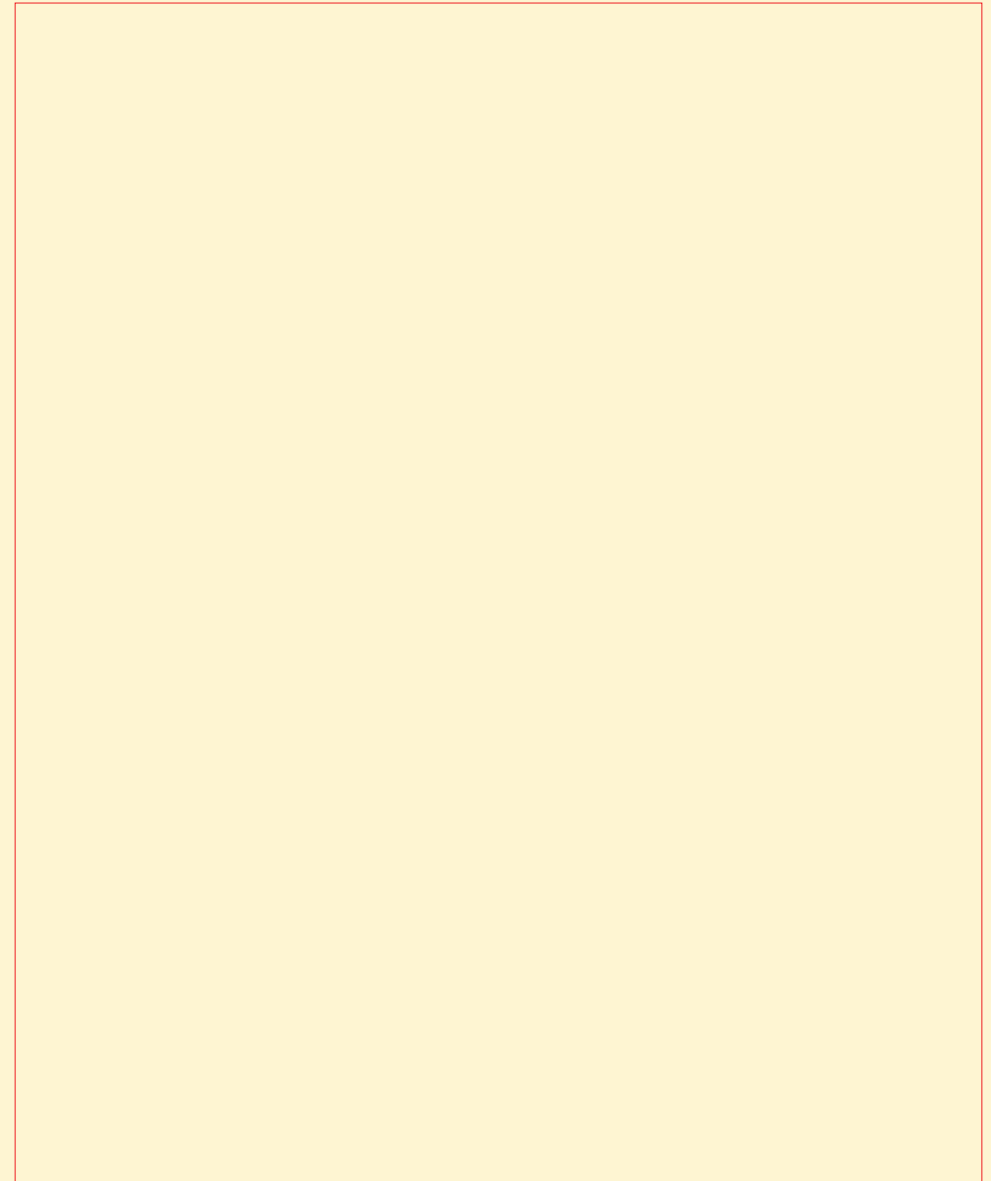


Image 2: Lee Wen, from Sketchbook, 1988, ink on paper.

- (1) How would you describe the figure in Image 2? Discuss your thoughts with your peers.
- (2) What kind of fantastical figures would you draw and why? Draw them in the box below.



Activity 3

As mentioned in the Introduction, *Journey of a Yellow Man* arose out of Lee Wen's experience living in London, where people often assumed he was from mainland China because he looked Asian. In response, Lee did research on Orientalism, anthropology and eugenics. He combined his research on their racialised ideas with his sense of humour to create the Yellow Man, a visual exaggeration of assumptions attached to people's skin colour. In the London version of the performance, Lee used red chains to evoke bondage and the possibility of resistance.



Image 3: Lee Wen, *Journey of a Yellow Man*, No. 1, 1992, City of London Polytechnic, London, performance documentation.



JOURNEY OF A YELLOW MAN, NO. 1
<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/lee-wen-archive-1992-city-of-london-polytechnic-london/object/journey-of-a-yellow-man-no-1-188289>

Watch the video, *Journey of a Yellow Man*, No. 1, linked to the QR code on the left, and discuss the following questions with your peers.

- (1) How would you describe the way Lee moved and used his body?
- (2) How did he use the red chain, and how did he arrange it in relation to his body? Why do you think he used the red chain in this way?
- (3) Have you ever had anyone mistakenly assume your identity based on your appearance? What was your reaction? Share with your peers.

Activity 4

World Class Society (1999) is an installation that pokes fun at the artist's former banking career, and Singapore's aspirations for recognition on the global stage. Part of the installation includes a tongue-in-cheek declarative speech by Lee Wen that interrogates the country's 'world class' status, shown on a television attached to a long sleeve, as well as a stuffed white globe with wings hanging from the ceiling. The audience are invited to complete a questionnaire about what constitutes a 'world-class' society and bring home a 'World Class Society' badge.

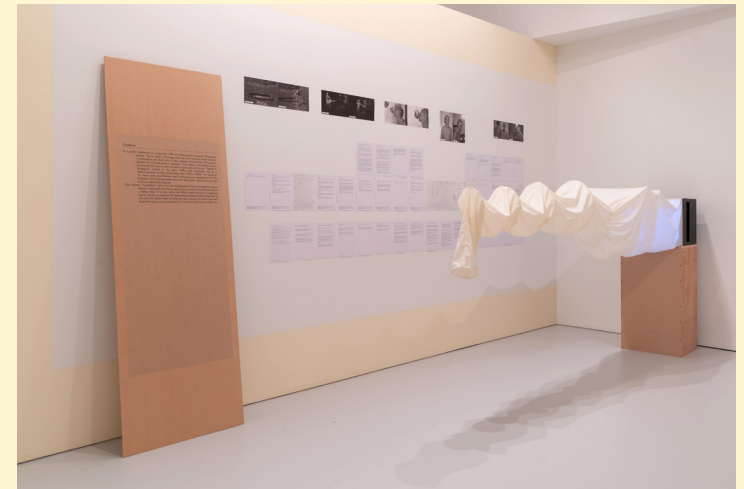


Image 4: Lee Wen, *World Class Society*, 1999, *Journey of a Yellow Man*. Selected Materials from the Independent Archive (2018), NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, installation view. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.



Image 5: Lee Wen, *World Class Society* (detail), 1999, *Journey of a Yellow Man*. Selected Materials from the Independent Archive (2018), NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, installation view. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

World Class Society

“World Class” seems to be the buzzword these days. In news headlines, public speeches, advertisements, statements, and announcements. It seems to allude to a claim of status and standard which is parallel to that of “the best in the world” or “top of the class”. One hears it more and more these days especially in progressive societies like Singapore where there is a strong desire to strive for excellence. But what does such a title mean? Please help us to find out by answering the following questions. The information you give will help us to define and hopefully also make real the criteria for a truly “world class society”. Perhaps in future, if we haven't already arrived yet.

Please pick and circle the appropriate information or answer.

Q1) about yourself:

Name:

sex: male/female

age: 13 yrs & below/14 to 20 yrs/21 to 30 yrs/31 to 40 yrs/41 to 50 yrs/51 to 60 yrs/over 61

marital status: single/married/widowed/with (unmarried) partner

Q2) Your income (per year):

below \$10,000/\$10,000 to \$15,999/\$16,000 to \$24,999/\$25,000 to \$50,999/\$51,000 and above

Q3) Do you consider yourself: very poor/poor/middle-class/rich/very rich

Q4) Do you think of yourself as a “world class personality”? Yes/No

Q5) What do you think makes a person “world class”?

Q6) What do you consider is a “world class meal”?

Q7) Which is the favourite country you would like to live in other than Singapore?

Q8) Do you think Singapore is a “world class” city? - Yes/No

Q9) Which city in the world first come to mind when “world class city” is mentioned?

New York/London/Tokyo/Paris/Beijing/Mumbai/Kuala Lumpur/others (please name):

Q10) Which local art/drama/dance/concert/film have you seen recently? Do you consider it “world class”? (if more than one please put in descending order)

1) _____ 2) _____ 3) _____

Q11) Which area in Singapore society would think has “world class” quality?

employment/housing law/education/culture/health/defence/sports/economics/politics/other (please specify):

Q12) Do you think there is such a thing as a “world class animal”?

Yes/No (if yes, please name it):

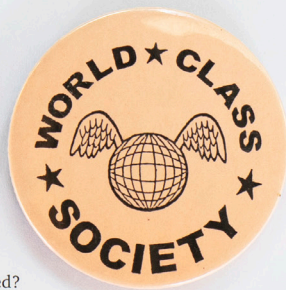
Q13) What do you consider is most important to making a society “world class”?

army/leadership/law/economics/sports/environment/leisure/shopping/laughter/mentality/others (please specify):

Other comments:

Thank you,
Lee Wen

Please leave your filled questionnaire at the table, it will be collected.



WORLD CLASS SOCIETY

<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/lee-wen-archive-1999-singapore-art-museum-singapore/page/13/object/world-class-society-188443>

(1) Watch the video, *World Class Society*, linked to the QR code on the left, and have a close look at the questionnaire in Image 6.

(2) Who do you think Lee Wen was addressing through this work?

(3) How do you think audience members felt after completing the questionnaire? Discuss with your peers.

(4) Do you think that by filling out the questionnaire, the audience became part of the work? Discuss with your peers.

Image 6: Lee Wen, *World Class Society* (detail), 1999, *Journey of a Yellow Man. Selected Materials from the Independent Archive* (2018), NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Activity 5



GHOST STORIES
<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/lee-wen-archive-1996-le-lieu-quebec-11881/sort/title-asc/object/ghost-stories>

This activity requires you to compare and contrast two of Lee Wen's works.

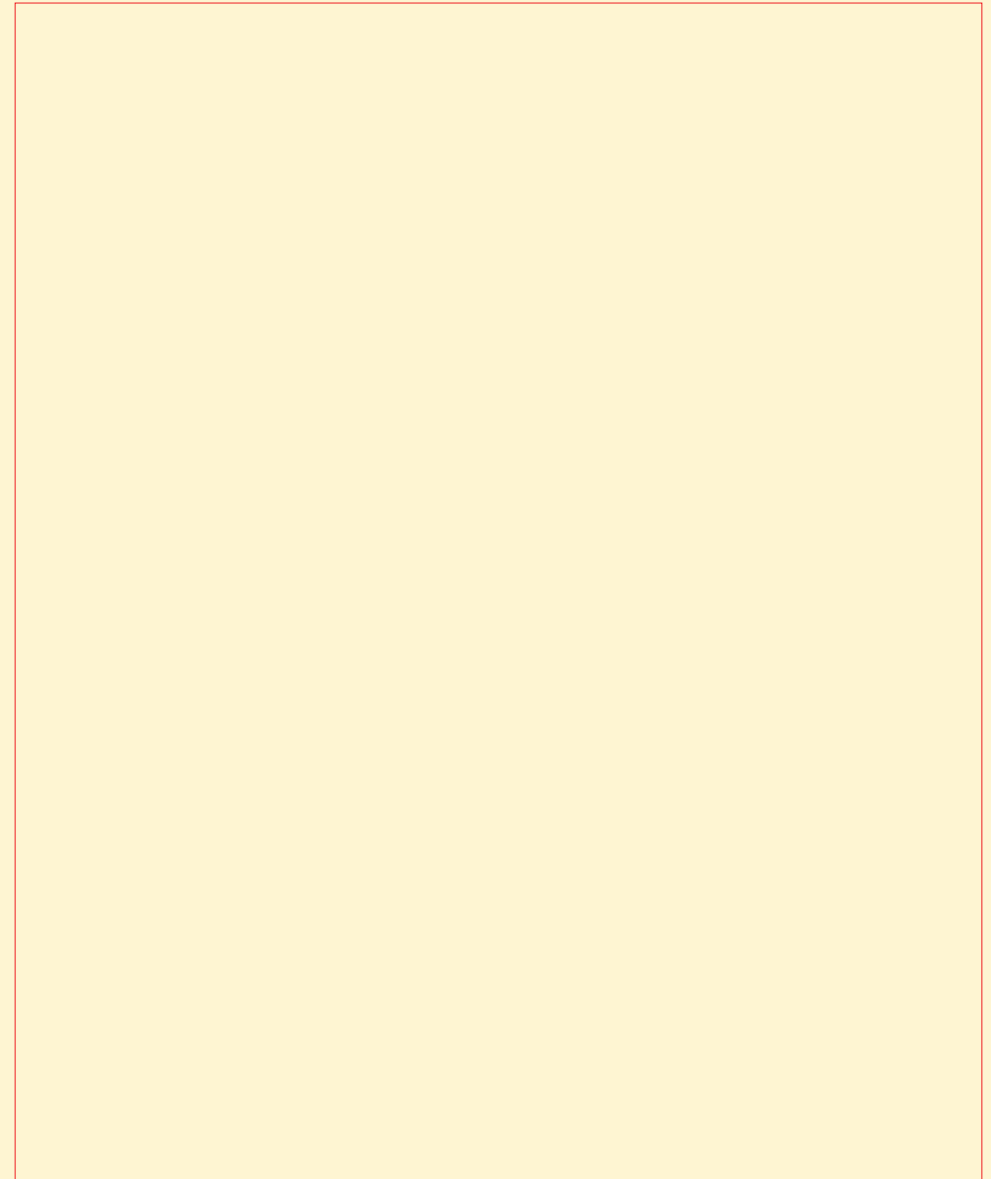
In *Ghost Stories* (1996), Lee Wen performed a series of gestures such as shaving ice, chewing gum, and play-boxing while invoking a sense of fear of the supernatural through atmospheric sounds.

The Body as Archive, staged in 2018 after Lee Wen was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease more than a decade earlier, was centred around a red dress cast in ice, covered with pages from a catalogue of Lee Wen's past works. A relic of past performances, the red dress had appeared in two of Lee Wen's works, and was now made to act as a silent witness.



Image 7: Lee Wen, *The Body as Archive*, 2018, NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, performance documentation. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

- (1) Watch the video, *Ghost Stories*, linked to the QR code on page 14, and look closely at Image 7, of *The Body as Archive*, on page 14. Can you find one visual element that is present in both performances? What do you think this element represents in each performance?



(2) As a performance artist, Lee Wen often used his body as a medium. How differently did he utilise his body in these two performances?

(3) What do you think happens when a performance artist, such as Lee Wen, experiences changes to their bodies? How did it affect Lee Wen's artistic practice?

Food for Thought



Image 8: Lee Wen, *Ping-Pong Go Round*, 1998, *Construction in Process VI – The Bridge*, Melbourne, Australia, performance documentation.

(1) Based on Lee Wen's works that you have seen, has your understanding or appreciation of performance art changed? How so?

- Suggested definitions from freedictionary.com

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In memory of Lee Wen (1957 – 2019)

A RESEARCH CENTRE OF

