

# TERMS AND CONDITIONS

RACHEL WETZLER ON THE ART OF GHISLAINE LEUNG



Above: **Ghislaine Leung, *Public Sculpture*, 2018**, Score: A group of toys in the collection of a public library are given a catalog or call number inclusive of the group. The group is loaned and displayed in an exhibition space. Originally commissioned for Reading Library for Reading International, 2018. Installation view, Towner Eastbourne, England, 2023. Photo: Angus Mill. Opposite page: **Ghislaine Leung, *Monitors*, 2022**, Score: A baby monitor installed in one room and broadcast to another. Installation view, Towner Eastbourne, England, 2023. Photo: Angus Mill.

**SOMEWHERE IN THE BOWELS** of a corporate data server, there are hundreds of recordings of me singing the Raffi song “Baby Beluga,” captured by the smart baby monitor positioned over my daughter’s crib. Connected to an app on my phone, the monitor sends push alerts whenever it detects excessive levels of noise or movement, so I can track her sleep from anywhere. (“Is the heat on? She seems cold,” I recently texted my husband from a hotel room a thousand miles away.) Sometimes, the app sends exhortations to maintain a consistent bedtime routine when it registers that she took too long to settle, or messages of praise when she sleeps through the night. Once a week or so, it compiles the footage into highlight reels overlaid with animated moons and stars. Such sentimental flourishes present the monitor as a kind of benevolent aide, an expert-guided extension of the loving, protective parental gaze, instead of what it really is: a sophisticated surveillance



device with a probably objectionable user agreement that I didn’t bother reading in my postpartum haze.

Ghislaine Leung’s *Monitors*, 2022, allows no such magical thinking. The work comprises a score that mandates, simply: “A baby monitor installed in one room and broadcast to another.” At Towner Eastbourne in England, where *Monitors* was recently on view as part of the 2023 Turner Prize exhibition, the diminutive receiver hung in the gallery, dwarfed by a crisp white wall, displaying a live feed of what is normally out of sight: employees milling around a cluttered storeroom. If *Monitors* suggests the intrusion of the domestic into the gallery space, it also punctures the pretense of the baby monitor as something other than a spy camera, just as capable of tracking adults at work as sleeping infants. In so doing, it lays bare the extent to which parenting is bound up with scrutinizing, supervising, *monitoring*—

and opening oneself up to scrutiny in turn. Of course, turning the camera on the typically unseen inner workings of the gallery also nods to the history of institutional critique and its legacy of revealing the hidden operations and infrastructures behind the slick white cube. And yet: Leung isn't the one who places the camera. What we see is the institution baring itself.

*Monitors* was first presented in Leung's solo show "Balances" at Maxwell Graham in New York in fall 2022. The show's press release reproduced an email from the artist to her gallerist. "I write to you at a point of crisis, probably a necessary one," she began.

I feel unable to make the new works requested of me because I do childcare evenings and weekends, and weekly. I do this childcare not in spite of my work as an artist but as an active and empowered choice to be a mother. As a mother and artist, committed to my child and committed to my art, I am able to work a fraction of the time assumed by societal models that preclude care work. . . . I do not wish to drop out from my art, I do not wish to entirely outsource care for my daughter. I wish to do both art and care and in doing so change the terms of identity and labour within our industry.

The works in "Balances" collectively articulated the pressures of this dual identity. Several incorporated the accoutrements of the nursery: In addition to the monitor (here, the camera was trained on the gallery's back office), a trio of baby gates obstructed each of the gallery's thresholds, representing three separate enactments of the score for *Gates*, 2019 ("Child safety gates installed on all thresholds in the exhibition space"), placed by the gallery's associate director, a preparator, and a private collector, respectively. *Gates*, like *Monitors*, calls attention to the transformation of domestic space that accompanies a child's arrival, the seemingly mundane retrofitting of bedrooms and kitchens with protective implements that appear rather more ominous when transposed into a new context. But their absurd trebling here is also a deflation: More gates do not necessarily equal more safety. At the top of the stairway leading into the main exhibition space, the three gates fanned out from a single post; elsewhere, one blocked off the top of a doorframe, impeding only very tall adults.

But the crux of the exhibition was an intervention of another kind: The score *Times*, 2022, dictated that the works would be accessible to viewers only during the narrow block of studio time that Leung carved out each week from the responsibilities of caregiving and wage-earning: Thursdays and Fridays between 9 AM and 4 PM. The gallery could remain open as usual, but outside of these hours, the works would be withdrawn from display, which meant a laborious cycle of de- and reinstallation over the course of the show's run, in full view of whoever happened to be in the space. In limiting the hours of her works' display to mirror those she is able to devote to her artistic practice, Leung attempted to embed her living and working conditions into the very structure of the show, to make it palpable to the gallery's visitors and staff alike.

Another of the show's scores, *Hours*, 2022, reiterated her studio schedule, this time as a stark infographic: "A wall painting the size of the artist's home studio wall divided into all the hours of the week with the portion of studio hours available to the artist marked in black." Presented as a spare twenty-four-by-seven grid representing the 168 hours of the week, the work (also included in the Turner Prize exhibition) makes clear how little time Leung has for artistic labor, with just fourteen of the units (less than 10 percent) filled with black: the privileged, protected time when she can withdraw from the responsibility of caring for others above herself. Yet the structure of the grid also suggests a scaffold propping up the studio time, holding it in place. If "Balances" was forthright about the ways in which



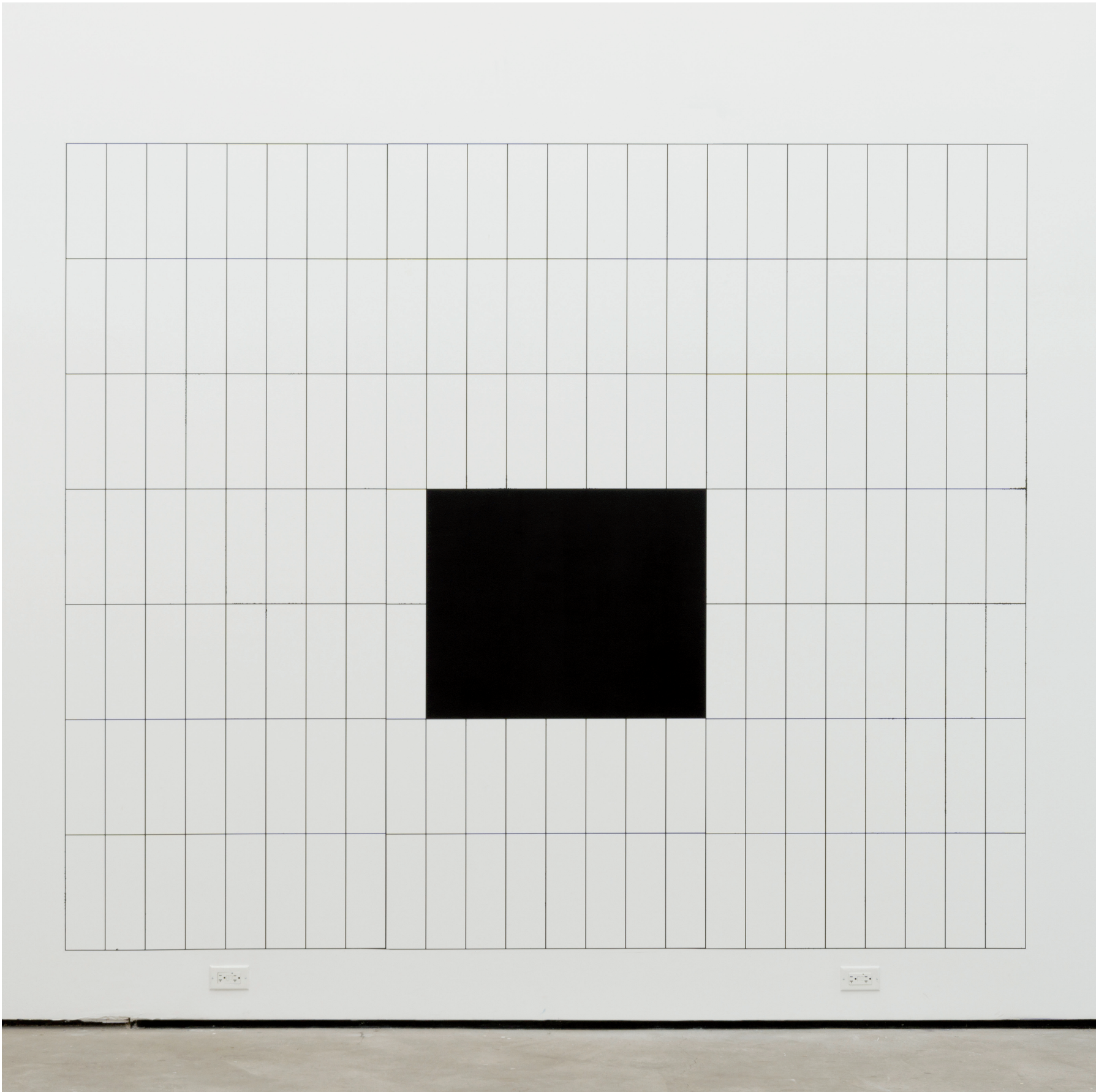
**Balance that is walled off from the world is no balance at all.**



Above: View of "Ghislaine Leung: *Balances*," 2022, Maxwell Graham, New York. From left: *Gates*, 2019; *Monitor*, 2022. Photo: Charles Benton.

Left: Ghislaine Leung, *Gates*, 2019, Score: Child safety gates installed on all thresholds in the exhibition space. Installation view, Maxwell Graham, New York, 2022. Photo: Charles Benton.

Opposite page: Ghislaine Leung, *Hours*, 2022, Score: A wall painting the size of the artist's home studio wall divided into all the hours of the week with the portion of studio hours available to the artist marked in black. Thursday 9 AM–4 PM, Friday 9 AM–4 PM. Installation view, Maxwell Graham, New York, 2022. Photo: Charles Benton.



an artistic career is hostile to the demands of caregiving, Leung also refused to frame motherhood as a burden on her practice from which she would ideally free herself. As she insists toward the end of her book *Bosses*, a slim volume of fragmentary texts released in September 2023 by Divided Publishing, “Do I think of my daughter as a limitation? She’s not a limitation, she’s my life.”

*Bosses* opens with a confession: “I’m tired of hiding everything about it all,” she writes. “My desire to mask my situation is a disadvantage to the understanding of the work.” The crisis Leung identified in the press release for “Balances” was not merely a matter of motherhood’s obligations impinging on her ability to make new work; it was how to fully integrate those two aspects of her identity, artist and mother, to find a method of working and being that would not privilege one at the expense of the other, since any hard separation was ultimately a fiction.

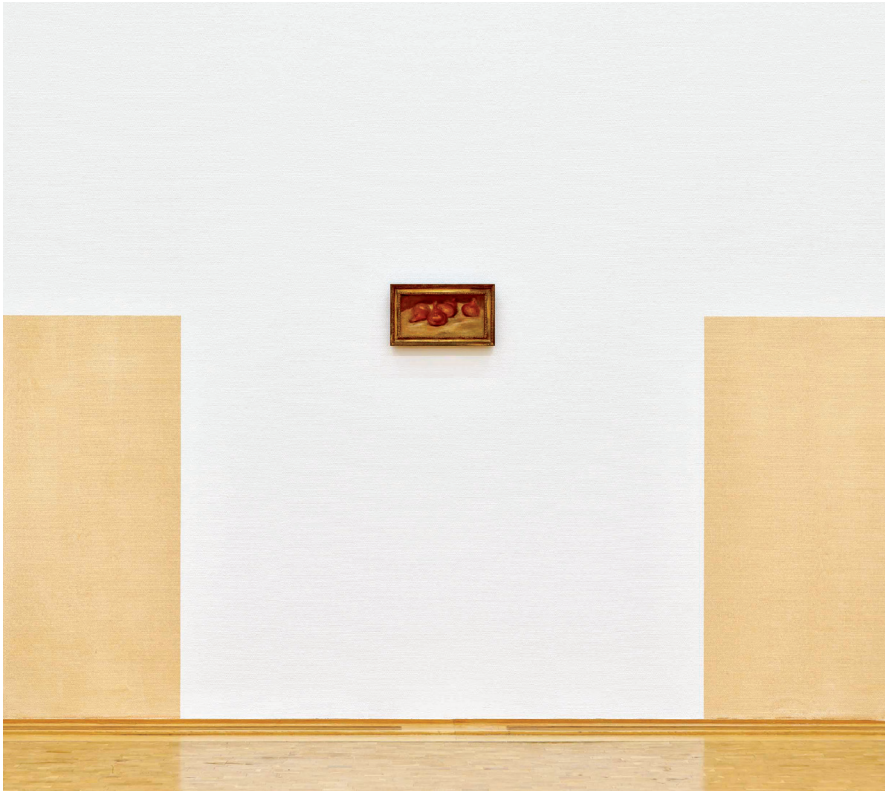
Accordingly, when the works in “Balances” were withdrawn from view, the gallery was never quite empty. What remained were traces: brackets, wall anchors, extension cords, the physical supports holding the objects together. The show’s eponymous score, *Balances*, 2022, specified the presentation of an analytical balance scale with its doors left open. Scales of this type are typically enclosed in order to preserve accuracy, blocking out the corrupting influence of dust, air, vibrations, and other externalities. Here, Leung suggests that corruption is precisely the point. Balance that is walled off from the world is no balance at all.

**LEUNG BEGAN WORKING** with scores in response to what she saw as an intractable problem: As an artist, she could only maintain absolute control over her work for so long. If she wanted to exhibit it publicly, the work would inevitably confront new institutional or environmental conditions, ones she could not necessarily account for in advance. She could either attempt to artificially replicate the perfectly controlled conditions of the studio by mitigating anything that might encroach on the work—an uphill battle—or give in to contingency and embrace it as a constitutive element of her work’s real existence and public reception. As Leung explains in *Bosses*, “Rather than thinking, How can I fix this and control this? How can I maintain its integrity in the way that I have conceived it?, I shifted to thinking that the agency or the identity of the work could come from its vulnerability, its total contingency, its complete reliance and dependency.”

Because Leung’s scores tend to be descriptive rather than instructional, they hand off a considerable amount of responsibility for her work’s execution to the presenting institution. The same work may look radically different from one exhibition to the next, depending on the whims of curators and preparators and the affordances of each particular gallery environment. Though Leung’s Turner Prize exhibition ostensibly restaged her show at Simian, the score *Fountains*, 2022 (“A fountain installed in the exhibition space to cancel sound”), was interpreted at Towner as a relatively conventional water feature gurgling in a metal tub, whereas in Copenhagen, it appeared as a cascade of water piped in from a man-made lake above and raining down from a ceiling directly onto the floor of the subterranean gallery.

But the simplicity of these proposals can be deceptive: The more semantically open the score, the more institutional soul-searching is required to fulfill it. Take, for instance, the work *Browns*, commissioned by the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, Germany, for Leung’s 2021 exhibition “PORTRAITS”: “All available walls in brown to standard picture hanging height.” As the show’s curators recounted in a roundtable, parsing the score prompted a kind of philosophical crisis over the definition of an “available wall.”





Opposite page, top: **Ghislaine Leung, *Fountains*, 2022**, Score: A fountain installed in the exhibition space to cancel sound. Installation view, Simian, Copenhagen, 2023. Photo: GRAYSC.

Above: **View of "Ghislaine Leung: PORTRAITS," 2021**, Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany. Wall: *Browns*, 2021. Center: *Onions*, 2021. Photo: Achim Kukulies.

Right: **Ghislaine Leung, *Shrooms*, 2016**, Score: All available electrical outlets filled with a mushroom night light and adapter. Installation view, Wiels, Brussels.

Opposite page, bottom: **Ghislaine Leung, *Fountains*, 2022**, Score: A fountain installed in the exhibition space to cancel sound. Installation view, Towner Eastbourne, England, 2023. Photo: Angus Mill.



The lineage of the artistic score inevitably leads back to Fluxus, but Leung tends to cite another set of references: Hanne Darboven, Jef Geys, Lee Lozano, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and especially the Artist Placement Group, cofounded by John Latham and Barbara Steveni in 1966, which organized artist residencies at industrial and government organizations under the slogan “Context is half the work.” The most decisive influence on her mode of working, however, comes from structural film. Before turning her attention to her own artistic practice, Leung worked from 2010 to 2014 in distribution and programming at the organization LUX, an outgrowth of the London Film-makers’ Cooperative that screens and distributes artists’ films. Her initial scores took the decentralized existence of film and video as a model for how an artwork could manifest itself in an exhibition without being wholly identified with a unique object, on the one hand, or inextricably tethered to a specific site on the other. *Public Sculpture*, 2018, originally commissioned by Reading International, took up the idea of a given object belonging simultaneously to different conventions of circulation: “A group of toys in the collection of a public library are given a catalog or call number inclusive of the group. The group is loaned and displayed

in an exhibition space.” Each individual toy retained its original call number, allowing it to be borrowed by library patrons as usual, while the group could be loaned collectively to institutions for exhibition as an artwork by Ghislaine Leung, now accessioned to the library’s collection. (She also purchased duplicates of the toys for the library collection, to replace the ones made unavailable to patrons when they were being exhibited.) *Public Sculpture* was an attempt to apply the mechanics of film and video distribution to the presentation of sculpture and installation: A moving-image work does not exist solely as a specific print, tape, or file, but incorporates a set of rights dictating the circumstances under which it can be shown.

The other key concern Leung extrapolated from structural film was a persistent attention to the apparatuses of production and display. As London Film-makers’ Cooperative cofounder Peter Gidal put it in his 1975 essay “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film,” “Each film is a record (not a representation, not a reproduction) of its own making.” With her scores, Leung wanted to encode something of the institutional and material relations shaping the work. Often the scores are designed to accentuate some aspect of the exhibition space’s infrastructure. *Shrooms*, 2016,



Above: Ghislaine Leung, *Violets 2*, 2018, Score: All parts of a ventilation system removed from Network Aalst Bar during its 2017 refurbishment are reinstalled within the space of the exhibition and fixed from the floor, using as much of the material as possible while keeping it all interconnecting. Spare pieces that do not fit in this configuration are bracketed together in smaller formations. A welcome sign is installed. Installation view, Network, Aalst, Belgium. Photo: Iwein De Keyzer. Below: View of "Ghislaine Leung: Power Relations," 2019, Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York. Wall: *Toons*, 2019. Door: *Flags*, 2019. Photo: Charles Benton. Opposite page: View of "Ghislaine Leung: CONSTITUTION," 2019, Chisenhale Gallery, London. From left: *Parents*, 2019; *Bosses*, 2019. Photo: Andy Keate.

calls for the placement of mushroom night-lights and adapters in all available electrical outlets. *Violets 2*, 2018, comprises all of the ventilation pipes removed from the bar at the cultural center Network Aalst in Belgium after the imposition of a smoking ban made them obsolete, reinstalled in whatever configuration will allow them to remain interconnected and fixed to the floor within a given room. (In contrast to these exacting specifications, the second part of the score reads, simply, "A welcome sign is to be installed.") *Flags* and *Toons*, both 2019, stipulate that all internal doors within an exhibition space must be painted glossy black, and the walls glossy white, respectively, in a gesture designed to counteract the conventional demand that the gallery be as unobtrusive as possible.

Though Leung's works are highly attentive to their physical surroundings, she conceives of them not as site-specific but "context-contingent," capable of being realized again and again in different places, but each time conditioned by institutional circumstances that would determine their form. Likewise, they accrue new layers of meaning as they circulate through different situations. When *Violets 2* was originally exhibited at Network Aalst, for instance, it was installed on the floor of the gallery space one story



above the bar from which the pipes had been removed, mirroring their former placement, only this time as a waste product instead of a conduit for its elimination, as if the building were spilling its guts. Subsequent presentations, however, must contend with the challenges of one set of architectural footprints descending on another, with the reconfigured pipes now foregrounding the spatial eccentricities of their new containers. Meanwhile, *Shrooms* is particularly effective in group exhibitions, where it acts as a kind of fungal encroachment on the works of other artists, subtly influencing their placement.

As Leung described in a 2019 *Bomb* magazine interview, when she began working on *Public Sculpture*, she was surprised not only by how many of the toys in the Reading library collection were oriented around domestic role-play, but by the presence of branded replicas of commercially available goods, such as miniature Dyson vacuum cleaners or Miele washing machines. While Leung was fascinated by the curious double brand identity of these objects—the mini Dysons, for instance, were made by the toy manufacturer Casdon, the Miele by Theo Kline—she was especially

concerned with the kinds of social and ideological standards such putatively innocent objects worked to normalize. The toys were not just playthings but instruments for teaching children how to belong in society—in this case, as little consumers in training. Leung’s response was to create a number of scores that stage confrontations between different standard registers or scales, estranging juxtapositions designed to foreground the deceptiveness—and insidiousness—of “neutrality” as a concept. *\_ : \_/\_, 2018*, comprises a toy playhouse purchased in the country where the exhibition is held and a line of tape demarcating the minimum ceiling height for local buildings; to realize the score, the blanks of the title are filled in with the measurements of the minimum ceiling height and the venue’s standard hang height for an artwork. *Closer, 2019*, part of an ensemble of works commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery for Leung’s 2019 exhibition “CONSTITUTION,” entailed the replacement of the gallery entrance so that the door and doorway would conform to the standard domestic size delineated in the building regulations of the country of exhibition, a norm that appeared drastically out of proportion in a public building.

**Leung dispensed with the pretense that it was possible to occupy a fully detached, reflexive critical position toward an institution while working within it.**





In “CONSTITUTION,” Leung explicitly framed her scores as a set of conditions to be met, locating each work’s execution in a network of relations between forces—institutional, infrastructural, formal, spatial—rather than a particular group of objects or materials. *Closer*, for instance, “physically exists when the door and doorway are standard size. The door and doorway are not the work.” *Flags* and *Toons* likewise did not comprise painted walls and doors, or the act of painting walls and doors, but the condition of the walls and doors having been painted. The included scores were an attempt by Leung to think through her own role within and her relationship to institutions. In place of institutional critique, she adopted the term *constitutional critique* to describe her methodology, dispensing with the pretense that it was possible to occupy a fully detached, reflexive critical position toward an institution while working within it. The term *constitution*, she told the Chisenhale’s Ellen Greig in an interview published in the exhibition booklet, connoted both the physical characteristics of the human body and the legislative principles accepted by a political body, a public. “I started thinking on the relationship between the institution and an individual as a relation between bodies; a partnership, a relationship, romantic, dysfunctional or exploitative, inclusive.”

The show’s centerpiece was a trio of works employing prefabricated wall panels, all 2019, that analogized different relations of dependency between the gallery’s power supply and the score as types of interpersonal connections. For *Parents*, a pair of panels linked by crisscrossing extension cords supports a monitor displaying a YouTube “Stuff-a-Loons” tutorial in which a smiling woman demonstrates the process of inserting a stuffed bunny inside an inflated balloon to create an elaborate bouquet celebrating the arrival of a baby girl; *Children* is a single panel with a battery-powered generator capable of running a small heater and a night-light for two or three hours before it must be reconnected to the gallery’s power supply to recharge; *Lovers* incorporates three panels, two of which bear security lights drawing power from one another. *Bosses*, 2019, meanwhile, took the form of an absurd array of twenty pairs of THE BOSS mugs gift-wrapped in heart-printed cellophane festooned with red ribbons and placed in a row on the gallery floor. Each pair of mugs represents an edition of the work *Bosses II*, 2019; *Bosses* materializes when the entire edition of twenty is exhibited together, the work’s stark legislative agenda, so to speak, in tension with the hyperbolic sentimentality of its appearance. Not coincidentally, though it is acknowledged only obliquely in the exhibition materials, the show took place in the contentious aftermath of the Brexit referendum, a moment when millions of British “remainers” found themselves contending with the fact that, soon enough, they would undergo a physically imperceptible but categorically decisive change of state, as they no longer met the conditions constituting them as Europeans.

**I WILL ADMIT HERE** to finding “CONSTITUTION” exemplary of an excessively cerebral tendency that runs through some of Leung’s earlier scores, so reliant on layers of theoretical exegesis that their physical realization seems almost incidental, despite the artist’s insistence that the works’ existence hinged on contextual enactment. But two pivotal things happened in the run-up to her 2021 Museum Abteiberg commission with profound implications for the way she worked. The first was, of course, the Covid-19 pandemic: Unable to travel to Germany to participate in the show’s installation, Leung was forced to delegate the scores’ realization to a heretofore unprecedented degree, and thus was pushed toward the kind of “co-creativity” with institutional partners that she’d wanted all along but had been unwilling or unable to fully implement. The other was the birth of her



Above: Ghislaine Leung, *Holdings*, 2024, Score: An object that is no longer an artwork. Installation view, Renaissance Society, Chicago. Photo: Bob. Opposite page: View of “Ghislaine Leung: *Holdings*,” 2024, Renaissance Society, Chicago. Photo: Bob.

child, which seemed to crack open something in her practice, giving concrete, living urgency to her exploration of entanglement, vulnerability, and dependency. As she writes in *Bosses*, “I am thinking about porosity, and trying not to segregate or compartmentalize parts of my life: I have to let the material that’s around me in.”

As do the scores in much of Leung’s previous work, those in “PORTRAITS” foregrounded the institutional frame, in terms of both museum architecture and organizational/curatorial convention. *Browns*, in fact, emphasizes the tendency of these two categories to collide, in leaving it to institutions to decide which walls should be considered “available” and the shade and consistency of brown to paint them, as well as how to measure standard picture hanging height, particularly in spaces, like stairwells, where pictures are not typically hung (in this case, a thin, almost watery wash of light brown, roughly five feet high measured from the floor up, which clung to every dent, mark, and trace of past use that is normally camouflaged by the endless expanse of white). Because the Museum Abteiberg lacks dedicated galleries for temporary exhibitions, the score was executed in fits and starts throughout the building, as the curators, Susanne Titz and Haris Giannouras, determined wall by wall what would be considered off-limits. Another score, *Arches*, 2021, called for “A white inflatable welcome arch in all available rooms,” prompting a similar process of self-scrutiny on the part of the museum staff. Here, the cheery signs took on something of a menacing edge, heightened by the placement of one along a narrow corridor constructed with temporary walls, all but blocking viewers’ passage: Much as Leung’s specification of “available wall” in *Browns* ultimately required curators to specify what would be made unavailable, implicit in the ostentatiously marked welcome is that there are other spaces where one is unwelcome.

But “PORTRAITS” also included a work of another kind, one that seemed like an outlier at the time: *Onions*, 2021, a little oil-on-canvas still life in a gilt frame. The painting, which hung in Leung’s childhood home, is a copy of a work by Renoir originally owned by German-Jewish relatives of the artist’s grandmother, who were killed during World War II; the replica



was commissioned by Leung’s grandmother before she sold the remains of the collection. As the artist describes, she believed the painting to be the original for much of her life, and when she discovered otherwise, it suddenly seemed like a lesser thing, a bit of dumb fakery instead of a family treasure. The object had not changed, but its status had, stripped of the validating imprimatur of the name Renoir. Installed in the museum, the object returns to the status of an artwork, but now it’s the artist’s home, instead of the artist’s hand, that becomes the guarantor of authenticity: More than a simple readymade, the painting is an artifact from Leung’s life, one that we might imagine has, on some level, influenced her entire understanding of art’s identity.

The works in Leung’s recent exhibition “Holdings,” on view this past winter at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, took up this thread. (Additionally, Leung is opening a new exhibition, “Commitments,” at Kunsthalle Basel this month.) Whereas much of her work to date has revolved around artworks that come into being when certain conditions are met, the core of the Chicago show was a set of objects whose identity as artworks has been withdrawn. Each of the show’s five realizations of the score *Holdings*, 2024, was “an object that is no longer an artwork.” Some repurposed components from previous installations of Leung’s own work, only this time presented in ways that deviated from the original scores, rendering them inert: for instance, a stack of foam tiles from an installation of *Mixed Sports*, 2021 (“interlocking puzzle flooring tiles with proportional central square in complementary colors. No more than two colors of foam flooring tiles to

be used. The tiles must fill the exhibition floor area”), at the Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain in Geneva in summer 2023, and baby gates from an installation of *Gates* at Berlin’s KW Institute of Contemporary Art in 2021, which leaned unsecured against the wall. Others were objects with a similar status from the institution’s own collection, among them a swath of orange striped fabric from Daniel Buren’s *Intersecting Axis: A Work in Situ*, 1983, a site-specific installation comprising fabric partitions that intersected with the gallery’s existing walls, presented here as a neatly folded square on the floor. Complementing these fugitive objects—now paradoxically reinscribed as artworks according to a different set of conditional criteria—were three new works that more explicitly invoked Leung’s own personal history and her experiences of hybridity as the daughter of a Chinese father from Hong Kong and a Jewish mother from London, born in Stockholm and raised in France. *Jobs* was a list of every job ever held by the artist, past and present, printed on Renaissance Society letterhead and displayed at the institution’s welcome desk. *GLX* was a handmade card addressed to her grandfather in Hong Kong as a child, but never sent, a school photo onto which she has copied out characters in a language she doesn’t know. *Wants* was a song from a Western film that Leung’s father would watch over and over before moving to the United Kingdom in 1970. There was an arresting intimacy to these works, but their tone is hardly confessional; instead, Leung posited them as provocative analogues to the non-artworks with which they were juxtaposed—as emblems of identity’s own restless contingency. □

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