

BOMB

Context Contingent:

Ghislaine Leung Interviewed by Alan Ruiz.

The two artists discuss public space and the means of circulation in Leung's recent works.



Ghislaine Leung, *CONSTITUTION*, 2019. Installation view. Chisenhale Gallery. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Courtesy of the Artist and ESSEX STREET, New York. Photograph by Andy Keate.

I first encountered Ghislaine Leung's work when we were both in a group exhibition at TG in Nottingham called *Western Standards*. She presented aluminum reproductions of advertisements for British banks and beer companies, depicting men in late 1960s austerity fashion, figures of post-hippiedom. Deceptively simple and hung in the gallery at the height of a young girl, Leung's work functioned as portraits of a gendered, economic liberalism. This sort of subtle logic is emblematic of Leung's larger practice, which possesses a critical ferocity, sharp humor, and affective intelligence that I deeply admire. I love talking with her and was thrilled to formalize our ongoing dialogue for this interview.

—Alan Ruiz

Alan Ruiz You were recently at EMPAC/Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, developing your new work *Kiss Magic Heart* (2019) which uses large-scale active noise cancellation. I'm intrigued by how you seem to be mobilizing this technology as a critique of individualism versus the way it's often used for acoustic solitude and increased productivity and efficiency in group environments.

Ghislaine Leung Definitely. Active noise cancellation works in a closed system, like an electronic circuit, by playing a sound against its opposite. When you take active noise cancellation out of that closed system and into a space, there are too many variables for total cancellation to work. The sound is always in relation to something else; it's always contingent. So in a way I'm working with what *doesn't* cancel. In

terms of questioning productivity, it's about what group dependencies that individualism physically rests on.

ARIn relation to this idea of interdependency, I'm also interested in how you're thinking through these problems spatially. How are you mapping this technology onto an architectural environment?

GLIt's technically very simple. The composition of the work isn't only the result of a score or recording; it takes place in the overlap between the sound and the physical space as you move through it. So the complexity is at the point of listening. I'm working with very basic material—a series of sine waves and pink noise—in order to accentuate those relations. There are two speakers, one of which has had its phase reversed. Placing these speakers side by side introduces delay and forms a point in the middle where the waves cross, creating degrees of cancellation. Of course, the room itself is acoustically reinforcing or canceling frequencies too. What is key for me is that the work isn't trying to block or make itself independent of the space in order to have fidelity to a certain sound reproduction or imaging—as so many sound works in galleries do. Instead, it is working generatively *with* those acoustics in the very space of the gallery itself and our bodies in that space.



Ghislaine Leung, *Bosses*, 2019. Detail. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Courtesy of the Artist and ESSEX STREET, New York. Photograph by Andy Keate.

ARThis also corresponds to the notion of contingency, as opposed to autonomy. The things you're describing are inherently relational concepts, which have their own kind of politics, right?

GLTotally. Much of my work is context-contingent rather than site-specific in order to negotiate those relational dependencies structurally. I started *CONSTITUTION* (2019) thinking in very material terms of resistance. I was interested in how the structure of something like active cancellation might be mobilized during what could be understood as a resurgent period of nascent fascism. With active cancellation, you throw a noise at a noise; with passive cancellation, you block it. I feel like we need active forms. But those clean, active cancellations only exist when you're dealing with controlled, private space, so I became interested in how this active form might function dirty, not just *in* a public space but to constitute that public space.

ARAn interest in regulatory norms and their aesthetics is something we seem to share. On that note, I wonder if we might shift gears slightly and discuss the use of mass-produced children's toys in your work. For instance, you've incorporated playhouses in *_ : _ / _* (2018) and toy-like reproductions of actual home appliances in *Public Sculpture* (2018). The toys themselves evoke several references. On the one hand, they remind me of Levittown, where the Cape Cod-style home was mass-produced as a commercial object for GIs returning from World War II, carrying all sorts of ideological baggage around the white, American nuclear family. But I'm also thinking of artists who've intervened in this prefabricated landscape, like Dan Graham's *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978). In your work, there's a specificity to each of these seemingly innocuous toys in that they serve as ideological dress rehearsals for children. Do you see them as a kind of ideology critique?

GLSure, *_ : _ / _* (2018) is very much dealing with that. I've never used that term, but I suppose it's less about pointing and more about exploring how supposedly neutral forms contain all sorts of assumptions and how we're implicated within such standards and scales. So, *_ : _ / _* is again context-contingent. Metal tape is installed across all the walls at the standard minimum ceiling height of a location alongside a children's playhouse also purchased from that location. The title, blank here, is generated from those standards plus the standard hang height for an artwork in this location, for instance, 155 : 230 / 109. I'm interested in how we understand these standards as neutral when they are of course highly specific, from the design of both exhibition and domestic spaces to the playhouse's incorporation of a flag holder or the color of the plastic. Neoliberalism is often viewed as neutral because it's understood to be determined by the force of the market. Its ideology is not acknowledged. This frames the entire way we understand these neutralities and the way they can perpetuate violences.



Ghislaine Leung, *58 : 96 / 49*, 2018. Courtesy of the Artist and ESSEX STREET, New York.

ARAbsolutely. Neoliberalism operates like an ideology of no ideology.

GLExactly. These supposed neutralities are actually highly loaded, and not neutral in any way. They play into ahistorical tendencies, where things exist in vacuums, rather than acknowledge the complex of dependencies and specificities they are intersectionally part of and party to.

ARThey're objects that masquerade as a form of play yet actually are instructional of a form of personal responsibility. In this way you could even say they're objects that produce subjects, right?

GLTotally, or maybe reproduce us as objects. And of course, these toys are fabricated by adults and bought by adults. With *Public Sculpture*, when I went to Reading Library and saw there was a toy library, I had no idea that the majority of the toys would be for role play, for shopping, home, and office work. I guess they're learning toys, but they are quite strange in that they're branded replicas. I mean, a tiny Theo Klein Miele washing machine, a miniature Casdon Dyson vacuum cleaner!

ARSo then they're about cultivating taste, too!

GLAnd cultivation very much relates to elevation, something that is often spoken about in relation to artworks. I wanted to make something that didn't elevate as much as circulate, and in the case of *Public Sculpture* I'm doing that by working with a library. These objects exist both as individual library items for loan and collectively as an artwork available for exhibition loan. I come from a background in video where the understanding of objecthood in sculpture doesn't really work in the same way. Video exists in distribution. When you purchase a video, you purchase a set of rights, not a singular object. That object isn't even said to exist digitally unless it exists in at least three places. I started thinking about this term "constitutional critique" as opposed to institutional critique. It was a way I could think through how these structures are distributed, how we internalize institutions and constitute, in bodily terms, their written and legal industrial design, the negotiation of rights. For instance, while working on *CONSTITUTION* and looking at the history of building regulations, what I came across was in fact the history of deregulation.



Ghislaine Leung, *Public Sculpture*, 2018. Commissioned and produced by Reading International. Courtesy of the Artist and ESSEX STREET, New York.

ARRight, and that is an infrastructural concern in terms of a work being contingent upon a set of operations. This relates to what I've called "radical formalism," where form is a relational model, or a

process of engaging existing structures in order to shift, illuminate, or reframe them. I identify with this in that my work is often about showing what is already there.

GLYes, it's true. It's something that I love in your work and that you do so well. I also think it's such a good point because we're talking about neutrality. Dealing with what's already there is really hard, because that's often the one thing you can't see, the one thing you can't look for. You are thigh-deep in it already. Which is why, in the case of sound, listening becomes such a good analogy. It becomes about tuning in to all those neutralities, all the things one takes for granted, the things which work to maintain certain structures. You're always working with history: a context, an institution, a site—a place that has material already. If you ignore or spend time fighting that, you're almost concurring with this idea of neutrality, which I find politically problematic. So rather than fight that, I think so much of my work is about dealing with interdependencies.

CONSTITUTION is on view at Chisenhale Gallery in London until March 24. Ghislaine Leung: POWER RELATIONS is on view at ESSEX STREET in New York City until April 21.

Alan Ruiz is an artist based in New York whose work explores the way space is produced both as material and as ideology. He teaches at the New School in the Department of Visual Studies and the Parsons School of Constructed Environments. Ruiz is a recipient of a 2019 Creative Capital Award.