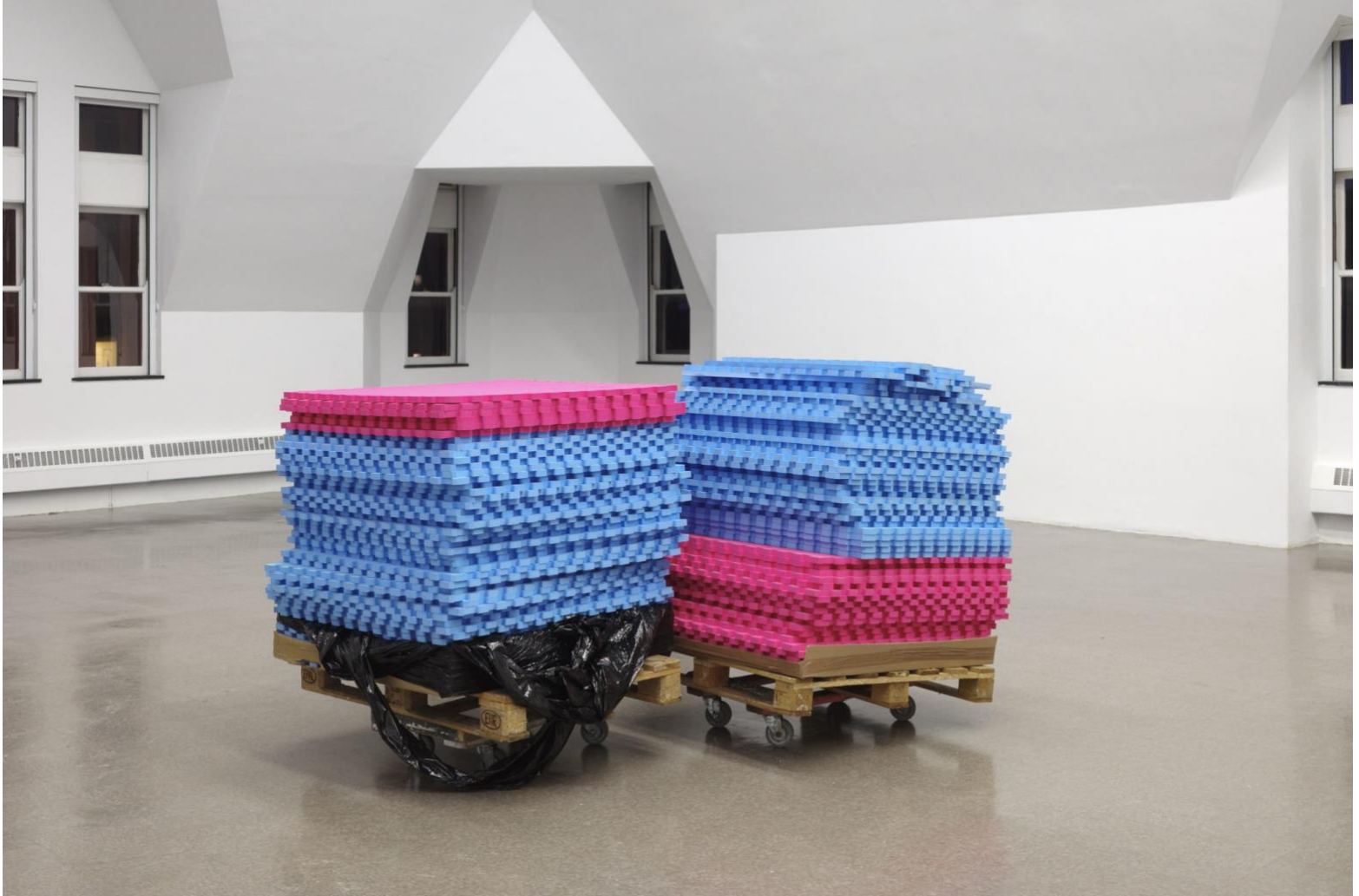


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Immaterial Instruction: A Review of “Holdings” by Ghislaine Leung at the Renaissance Society
By Frank Geiser



Ghislaine Leung, “Holdings,” 2024. Score: An object that is no longer an artwork/Photo: Frank Geiser

My eye was caught by a poster pinned up behind the welcome desk outside the Renaissance Society’s gallery during the opening of “Holdings.” The poster displayed a visually succinct but exhaustive list of jobs held by Ghislaine Leung throughout her life. The list includes formal art positions like “lecturer,” “artist” and “curator” as well as positions that feel more disconnected from the usual context of an art opening, such as “call centre operator,” “massage therapist” and “flyer distributor.” The list ends with “mother.” I scanned through the list of thirty-eight jobs, taking particular note of anything I’ve also done. I suspect many artists can relate to the long list of positions that Leung has held, although this is a reality seldom talked about in the context of artists as internationally renowned as Leung. Success as an artist is tricky. When a critic says that an artwork is successful, they mean the artwork accomplishes goals outlined in either the formal presentation of the work or the contextual information that surrounds it. When asking an artist if they’ve been successful, many people simply want to know if the artist can afford groceries.

“Holdings” is a physically sparse show. In addition to the list of jobs in hallway display cases, the show also contains an edition of five artworks titled “Holdings,” a song “from a film the artist’s father watched repeatedly before moving to the United Kingdom in 1970” played on repeat from a small speaker, and an artwork titled “GLX” consisting of “A school photo of the artist in its original cardboard frame with a handwritten note on the back. The Cantonese characters copied out by the artist as a child, unreadable to her then and now, translate as ‘To grandpapa from Ghislaine, 87.’ Never Sent.”

Physical objects in the exhibition jut out like icebergs on a tiled sea, and much of the conceptual weight of these works remains hidden beneath a surface of context. Each manifestation of “Holdings” is an interpretation of a short “score” provided by the artist

which reads “An object which is no longer an artwork.” Three of these works are fragments of Leung’s past exhibitions: Two pink curtains with a pattern of colorful circles are wrapped in protective plastic to the immediate right of the gallery’s entrance. Two wheeled carts hold pallets of pink and blue foam floor tiles. White metal baby gates lean against a wall to the left of the gallery entrance. The other two “Holdings” are objects from past exhibitions at the Renaissance Society: Near the baby gates is a folded orange and white curtain from a Daniel Buren exhibition in 1983. An alcove in the far right of the gallery contains a single black office chair that was featured in a 2008 exhibition by Trisha Donnelly. I’m told it also functions quite well as a normal office chair.



Ghislaine Leung, “GLX,” 2024. A school photo of the artist in its original cardboard frame with a handwritten note on the back. The Cantonese characters copied out by the artist as a child, unreadable to her then and now, translate as “To grandpapa from Ghislaine, 87.” Never sent./Photo: Frank Geiser

Conceptual art shows often feel like a puzzle, and being able to speak to both the artist and the curator at this exhibition’s opening alleviated some of the difficulty of piecing together clues hinting at the message of these artworks. I’m familiar with Daniel Buren’s work, but not familiar enough to recognize a folded curtain from one show of his work in 1983 without context. An exhibition booklet with a list of artworks is available for audiences to read, but it leaves out many details which helped me appreciate these works. The office chair and folded curtains are a nifty way to interpret the artist’s “scores” in a literal sense, but for those in-the-know they become extraordinary coincidences! Karsten Lund, the curator of the exhibition, shared some of his thoughts with me on the importance of letting audience members arrive at their own conclusions. He pointed out that institutional communication can feel too authoritative, suffocating perfectly valid interpretations that audience members could arrive at within their own understanding of the objects on display. This is a great point, but I’m not convinced that including extra context for the works on display would prevent people from authentically engaging with the work. I suspect holding the viewer’s hand a little more would help many people who are unfamiliar with conceptual art appreciate the historical placement of Leung’s “Holdings.” Luckily, Leung’s artist talk scheduled for March 9 is set to ditch the formal monolog and instead skip straight to answering questions from the audience; anyone struggling to fit the pieces of the puzzle together on their own has a chance to do so in collaboration with the artist in person.

The objects selected from Leung's past exhibitions would all feel appropriate in the context of a child's bedroom. Pink pastel curtains and foam flooring feel eerily similar to piles of leftover materials I've seen stored in basements after the household nursery is renovated for older inhabitants. There is a melancholic aspect to the cheery, playful colors and soft materials piled together for efficient storage. This is mirrored by the baby gates' leaning acknowledgment that anything they were able to confine certainly escaped some time ago. Considering these household artifacts alongside objects from past conceptual exhibitions at the Renaissance Society speaks volumes about the way in which artworks are preserved and stored, calling attention to the practice of maintaining ideas within institutional archives. But Leung's scores ask who these archives are benefitting. The school photo and sound artwork in the exhibition also help bridge these larger, institutional concerns back to Leung's lived experience.

The "scores" that Leung provided for this exhibition are breathtakingly concise. I was struck by the extent to which Leung's scores require trust: Trust in the people behind the scenes to assemble, arrange or fabricate work, but, even more importantly, to interpret her directions with real agency. The Renaissance Society has done an amazing job of finding objects that amplify her voice, but Leung's name would be on the artworks even if they hadn't. Handing over this responsibility to interpret her scores is a manifestation of vulnerability in ways that specific instructions can't be. This is a beautiful concept already, but I think Leung's "Holdings" also calls attention to the relationship between artists and the institutions that display, preserve and finance their work. Many artists don't get to choose whether or not they trust the good intentions of art institutions and the people acting on their behalf—exposure doesn't pay for groceries, but institutional recognition often does. Leung's willingness to trust the Renaissance Society in a collaborative effort is inspirational. Art is never created in a vacuum, but Leung's work is refreshingly honest about its reliance on the people supporting her. So many people both inside and outside of art institutions play a part in the lives of any artist: curators, teachers, administrators, fabricators, assistants, flyer distributors, mothers....