

Ghislaine Leung

Maintenance

17.07 –
18.10.26

Espai 13 presents *Maintenance*, a solo exhibition by Ghislaine Leung.

“It is spring. Yellow and white flowers. My father is in the hospital. He has been there for months. He wants to go home. He can't go home. I go as much as I can. I cannot always go. I cannot even go that much. Over the holidays I have to lift my mother out of the bath. She is heavier than me. I am glad I can do it. I will not always be able to do it. Be glad to do it. My daughter will be my age when I get to be my mother's age. If I get to be my mother's age. My daughter tells me that when I am away she smells my pillow. Why do you have to go, asks my daughter. No one else's mum ever goes. It's just one night I say. One night is a long time, she says. I am in the airport on the phone to the hospital. I am in the airport buying a toy. My daughter is in school. My father is in the ambulance. I am coming back from the airport. I will do the work that needs to be done. I will not go for the install. I will not go for the opening. I will go to the school play. I will take my time. I will hold and let myself be held. Let go. Let what I have already done, am doing already, be enough. And it will be okay. Spring will end and summer will come. It is here now. I am my mother and father's daughter, my daughter's mother. I am everyone I love.”

Ghislaine Leung

CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE CURATOR AND THE ARTIST:

Alejandro Alonso Díaz:

Summer has come, and this show is titled *Maintenance*. In this weather everything is more sticky: the pavement, the sweat, the condensation, and there is certain fatigue to it. Depending on material conditions, some things are harder to maintain than others, and this interferes in both the agency of individual life and social care. What is maintenance for you, and how does it appear in the show?

Ghislaine Leung:

In this exhibition, maintenance is a score: 'The exhibition space is left as it is.' The art has been removed from the previous exhibition, its adjacent structures removed, but otherwise the space has been left. It has not been reset to institutional default, not repainted, holes not filled, dirt not swept, lighting left. Because this is the work that is always done, it is also the least seen. The space closes and reopens and it is stable. But this stability is the product of an action that maintains neutrality, the autonomy of the art context and so the art within it. You understand that labour not by making it visible but by withdrawing it. Here, we can see what happens when the image is not upkept, and what happens is beautiful, human, lived. It continues over the exhibition's duration. The space will not be cleaned and traces will not be removed. It is one of the hardest scores to perform because it involves a reckoning with our own deeply internalised protocols: to clear and tidy away. To make it look easy, effortless, permanent. But it isn't easy. Maintaining a space, a programme, an institution, a practice, is hard and far more work goes into it than the fabrication of artworks. It takes many hands and hearts to carry the work. Maintenance is hard work. It's doing the same thing every day; it's continuing to do something. It doesn't metric well. It doesn't have the desirable quality of the new, or that visibility, of progress or speculation, results and gains. It's the work that has to be done. The housework, the admin, the work of the body, of care. As a labour form, maintenance work is, even by me, routinely dismissed as not work at all. But it is what I am dependent on. Maintenance is emotional labour, it's remembering the things you realised and then forgot again, the patterns of the self, the pulls and pushes. The breakthroughs, and inevitable falls. Just maintaining, just continuing as an artist, as a mother, to remember to understand how much is already work, and that it is enough. It is the invisible reproductive labour all the optics of productive labour rest on. That work simply isn't possible without it.

AAD:

You refer to your work as context–contingent. Through this logic, *Maintenance* is a score that becomes materially present through the act of withdrawal that it activates. As contingent on the exhibition's temporality, the audience's bodies and, ultimately, life within the institution, the work takes on a specific form. But this ongoing maintenance also takes place beyond the institutional space through daily administrative, domestic, intellectual labour, which is somehow reflected in *Budgets*. How do the two scores overlap?

GL:

Sure. I think both works have been with me for a long time, since I worked in institutions, even though I only made these artworks in 2025. I wanted to find a way to articulate how much labour goes into making an exhibition, into making art, that isn't the artwork itself. That what is left behind after the dematerialised object is this immaterial labour. I spent many years working as an art handler and then as a curatorial assistant, and there is a massive amount of work that goes into making the context that art depends on. *Maintenance* and *Budgets* both speak to how much work goes into making a show besides the art. I haven't attended installation for years, but the majority of my artistic labour is not in the two weeks of installation and fabrication, running a practice is logistics and meetings and administration and accounting, time, time undone, time in the void, time unknown. A budget is a representation; it has politics; it does not track the emotional labour, the extra hours, the crisis, the drama. Much like most revelations, it hides in what it shows. I'm interested in showing that hiding perhaps. My own too.

AAD:

Budgets is formalised as an Excel grid on the wall. This form has a long tradition in the history of painting, from Agnes Martin to Mondrian or Josef Albers. But this rationale suggests structures that are observed rather than negotiated, contemplation rather than implication. But an Excel sheet is a lived-in grid. While it speaks of a sort of rhythm, a template, a repetition, a plot; like a score, it deviates from the metrics of the infrastructure within which it exists. This grid might be an anti-plot or, to quote Stefano Harney and Valentina Desideri, a conspiracy without a plot...

GL:

It's a populated grid; in some ways it is and isn't an abstraction, or rather it's a very real form of abstraction that governs our lives. Information outside of an Excel spreadsheet simply doesn't register, and though I might want to advocate for a grid-free life, I am in a world of grids and metrics and sum totals, profits and margins. The only thing I can do about it is to work with that system and its structures differently; I can grid a different system. The budget is how it is, but its visibility shifts it. Perhaps making it visible even shifts how the actions it records are practiced. These are often closely guarded documents, but doing so hinders our ability to understand and acknowledge the labour that goes into art making. The mass of people these exhibitions support beyond the artist. It also begins to articulate how I work as an artist; there are columns for expected shipping, flights, accommodation, production, etc. But as I do not attend, install or ship physical objects, the way I work has structural impact. It allows those funds and energies to be redistributed, for *Divided* to print a second edition of my book, for me to ensure my fee is ringfenced. My work is not only about acknowledgment of the structures we find ourselves within, it is about the capacity to structurally change them ourselves. There are ramifications at the level of production that are a critique of productivity itself. I'm working with what is already here, already around us, already constructing and delimiting how we make. That is not a neutral field; it is the politics in the room.

AAD:

Labour, maintenance and administration: they all suggest a specific way of understanding and managing energy. I'm interested in how you perceive energy within those parameters. In your work, rather than in big material structures, energy appears through daily immaterial actions, relational systems or intimate exchanges. How do scores as a work-methodology reflect this understanding of energy?

GL:

Energy is action; it is labour. From the residual energy of a thousand years of sun and water that makes fuel to the energy that we use and are used for. Energy cannot be created or destroyed; it changes form. Within the logic of profit wealth is created, but this profit that occurs for one is offset by an exploitation of another. Certain forms of labour are dismissed as labour precisely to rob this labour of its energy. To optimise and extract. I manage my energy and labour because the model of artistic production I internalised was one of auto exploitation, of unpaid labour, of opportunistic speculation. None of those practices are sustainable. And certainly if they are, they are only sustainable for some. Perhaps anyone can be an artist, but who can continue to be one is a very different question. I cannot necessarily change how much fee an artist is given for a project, but I can limit the labour I do for that project. These are industrial actions. The score as a way of working came out of these industrial actions, my own subscores that I practice daily. The score was a way of working without production funds, shipping costs, travelling for install, without policing or micro-managing each exhibition. I could send a score and it would be done, and done differently each time, outside of my expectation or control. Working with the given team, and let that trust shape the work. The context the work is contingent on is far more than a physical structure; it's a social one. The scores work because I'm not there, not in spite of my absence. So absence became an active tool in my actions. It was a way of taking limitations and working with them as a material for a different kind of practice.

AAD:

Through this form of action, absence and withdrawal are ever more relevant, especially within today's energetic, social and emotional suffocation. Perhaps if we could bring back energy beyond productivity, its abstraction might disappear and our infrastructural struggles would become more easily communicable (I'm thinking of Marina Vishmidt here...). This exhibition is very much about creating the conditions that do not conceal the violence of such abstraction, (which you refer to as 'default stability'). But often, institutions are infrastructures that speak the languages of productivity. How do you remain attentive to not repeat those oppressive patterns?

GL:

When I worked in institutions I thought that institutions were where change needed to happen, because I thought power resided there. But institutions are what we make them, and that 'we' is the important part. I don't have the ability to change an institution, let alone all institutions, but I can change how I work, how I institute, and what I am instituting. Those systems and structures are dependent on us. There is a porosity. And Marina Vishmidt did such important work to theorise this as an action. It's actions we need; they don't have to be huge or important, but they do need to be maintained. It's about the work culture of our industry. The work I do isn't because I've somehow exited any of those productivity based logics, or the desire for validation and affirmation they provide. I do this work because I am part of all of it. Because I feel pressure. I try to take that and reckon with it. To take those feelings as a sign to stop rather than continue, to action a shift rather than an escalation. Releasing pressure just regulates a system; I want to change it. That change might be less about an energy beyond productivity than below, in the work that is already happening, the reproductive labour that is always necessary to sustain all of us. I try to redistribute my labour capacity, to value that work as of equal importance. I take annual leave the week the art fair comes to town. I skip openings, and dinners, brunches and breakfasts. I reject what is deemed mandatory in a situation where I have no contract, no job description. I want to make that lack into an affirmation, a driving force. To take heart. As a mother, a daughter, a partner, a friend. And I mess up all the time; I think I remember but I don't, and I have to remember again; I am reminded. That's part of it, that's the work. Maintenance is hardcore.

AAD:

The third and last artwork is perhaps the one that accompanies you for the longer time from all of the pieces in the show. *FJM Edition* negotiates notions of value, autonomy, obsolescence, and how the systems of art operate within logistic capitalism. It explicitly performs through the financial and symbolic economies of art and how they can be played out against one another. How was the process of materialising this edition in the specific context of Fundació Miró and how it relates to the exhibition's main notion of maintenance?

GL:

The editions series of works is relatively new in some sense, older in others. When I started making art again I was looking to find ways of making it sustainable for myself. I always try to work with what I already have, in my own home, in the gallery. Objects I myself might dismiss or denigrate. There is an enormous amount of waste generated by exhibition making, storage is at a premium so many things are just destroyed. Neither the gallery nor the artwork is a stable entity, it is only maintenance that preserves it as such. These objects were in service. That role having been done they were to be thrown away. But they are still something despite that, they are not nothing. I want to take these objects, those actions, that labour, seen as secondary, as adjacent, and celebrate them, acknowledge them. It involves a shift in my own value structure, to turn the hierarchies of value I myself have upheld around, to recognise how much we have in what might be felt as less than nothing. And such joy can come from that. Suddenly everything is material.