



What follows is an edited version of an interview of Robert Lee, director of the Asian American Art Center Carmel New York City, by Bruce Checefsky, a coordinator of the Reinberger Galleries, Cleveland Institute of Art. The interview took place March 4th 1992.

Bruce Checefsky: How was "China: June 4th, 1989..." organized?

Robert Lee: The exhibition began right after the incident in Tiananmen Square. We had held a panel discussion with other artists in May about what was happening in China. But when the massacre took place we responded immediately.

We were able to respond so quickly because we planned to close the Centre down for the Summer. So we decided to set up an exhibition that would last the Summer and cancelled our plans for the Fall to make this a one year project. We wanted a way to gather work that would stand independently of the Gallery wall. I felt that the exhibition should be open to all people, parents, children, all people. Soon we saw it was the artists who were responding. We formed the idea of allowing each artist to submit a door, asking them to put their art on the door that could be easily mobile and linked free-standing to form a kind of wall.

As it was, we exhibited in October (1989) at Blum Helman Warehouse in Soho. At the time we had 70 doors, a lot of smaller work and about 80 fax photos, and a few larger works. For the memorial one year later, the show went to P.S. 1 in Long Island City. That was May and June (1990). At that point we had 170 doors. We had four curators involved in the P.S. 1 show to stipulate particular works from the African American and Hispanic communities: John Yau, Susana Torrella Leval, Howard McCalebb and Nancy Spiro.

The show grew and people wanted to participate. We had a request from an artist in China whose work was secretly taken out in Tiananmen Square by one of the press people during this incident.

Many people wanted to join the "China June 4th 1989 an Art Exhibition" show. Some, after the show was over, expressed to us gratitude for having the opportunity to be part of this show. I think for many people it made them feel like they were part of history and had an opportunity to stand together with other artists on something they were touched by and felt strongly about. Artists from as far away as Japan, Canada, Czechoslovakia, and Greece participated.

The political inspiration for the show took place in Tiananmen Square. It was the kind of thing that built up gradually. There have been other massacres throughout history, outrageous human violations on a much larger scale than this.



However, I think it was the peculiar combination of factors that made Tiananmen Square what it was-- the gradual building of world attention and the presence of the media, and a direct head-on confrontation between China authorities and students to see what new kind of pattern or relationship could be built. This comes at a time when there is an open-door policy to greater freedom. There is a lot of cultural growth and artistic development in China during this time.

Tiananmen Square was much more than just a massacre of youth. In some sense it was like Kent State; it was a violation to the concept of what a country is about. One can say that Kent State was an accident, the kind of things students risk when they trample on campus regulations.

Tiananmen Square was no accident. (Yes, they did shoot the students. A horror magnified a thousand times by the media for the watching world. It focused and transformed the clash of Chinese political destinies into a televised drama of global proportions, imprinting itself on the human imaginary in epic dimensions. Never before was such violence turned into a spectacle with weeks to prepare a global viewership for the unspeakable to become suddenly - reality. - RL remark added May 2014¹)

In April (1989), students began to gather from all over China by taking trains to Beijing to participate in the demonstrations. The authorities could have stopped the students from entering the city. Every person carries an identification card. They knew whether they are a citizen of Beijing or not. But they did not do that. They let this thing continue to grow.

The student buildup came years after the Cultural Revolution. When people have gone through many years of political and physical austerity. There wasn't much food in China at that time. Universities were shut down. A lot of the people were working on farms in the countryside.

The Cultural Revolution woke people up. People learned that the government could lie, and you do have to learn to think for yourself. Without the Cultural Revolution, that process would not have happened.

For many people, these demonstrations were an opportunity to speak out during this open-door policy to greater freedom, to test how far the government would go in that freedom, and to finally articulate some of the grievances from the young people. Tiananmen Square was very much a particular point in modern Chinese history that developed over a lot of other periods after the Cultural Revolution.

¹是的，他們確實射殺了學生。恐懼在世界面前被媒體放大了數倍。它將中國政治命運的沖突聚集、轉型為一出在全球範圍內轉播的戲劇，將其以史詩般的程度印刻在人類的想像中。這種暴力行為在數周內被轉變為供全球目睹的景象，無法言說之事變為瞬間的現實，而這此前從未發生過。

The demonstrations outside of China was so large because the massacre at Tiananmen Square offended the instincts that many Chinese believe. Tiananmen Square was something that was wrong in the most basic and gut-level of Human Rights. In Chinese terms it went far beyond that. I have never heard so many people say that they were ashamed to be Chinese. And yet this is what people were saying.

BC : Chinese living outside mainland China were ashamed of their heritage because what happened at Tiananmen Square was uncharacteristic of their culture?

RL : I think China is just as capable of atrocities as any other political or cultural entity. People argue that the people of Tibet have far more atrocities, they might be destroying the population of Tibet. China is doing that through the back door. They can claim that they are not doing it. They don't have to save face to legitimize state power. Where in this case, the government took very premeditated visible action to do what they did. (Their countenance changes permanently. There is no saving face. Grotesque - like a Tao tieh mask on an ancient bronze vessel. RL remark added May 2014)

I hope someday someone will write about the relationship between Tiananmen Square and the United States and also what happened in Central Europe and the Soviet Union.

BC : Like Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution of November 1989?

RL : Soon afterwards, Czechoslovakia events began to occur. The whole of Eastern Europe fell apart-- the Berlin Wall and perestroika. Tiananmen Square had a great deal to do with this, a straw that broke their backs, perhaps more than a straw.

It was part of the symbolism that I think people live with from what I can understand of how people live in Czechoslovakia. You can live with the situation for a very long time and one day you wake up and realize the way you are living and say you don't want to live like that anymore. In many ways Tiananmen Square because of the media was able to present that to the people worldwide.

BC : I wanted to shift and talk about the Asian American Art Centre because it's a kind of community-based organization that has been able to do such a thorough and major look at a world issue in a way that an independent commercial gallery or a museum has not been able to do.

RL : Here was the linkage between politics and arts. Here is where people are receptive to the fact the arts have a role to play in their daily lives and in issues that are meaningful to them. Chinese Americans are very much oppressed in the West. The opportunity to express themselves and to have cultural expressions and to develop an Asian American culture in the United States as other cultures have--this is a way that it could be done.



Asian American Arts Centre

It seems very clear to us this was in direct line with our mission and could achieve goals that other kinds of shows might not be able to do. We wanted to bring American artists together with other artists to join hands.

However the way the demonstrations began to organize was that the Chinese student network wanted to develop particular Chinese demonstrations. To be bipartisan, for many kinds of people to join together and come together, would have been much larger.

Instead, a lot of demonstrations were organized along ethnic Chinese lines. All the Chinese students at universities across the country were linked by fax. That kind of effort, even if effective in bringing the Chinese population together, would have achieved something.

However, the different factions would not agree. Leaders in Paris, Canada, Washington and the West Coast had conferences and congresses and raised money, but did not form a unified direction. Eventually, the whole network broke down. The Chinese who organized did not utilize this exhibition, even though it was available. It made more impact on the artistic community and the American public than on the Chinese community.

When I try to draw a conclusion from this experience, I have to look at the artwork that was there, and there was one that stated the only conclusion that is available. There was an artist who made a tombstone and it said very simply, "Might is Right". And you have to conclude that was the case; that is what happened in China and in the States. (Yes, in 1992-94 I felt that way. Today I see time is on our side. RL remark added May 2014).

(Following RL remarks added May 2014)

More than ever, the international community needs to recognize this global trauma for what it was and remains - a human spectacle of incalculable proportions, buried and awaiting resurrection. The end of official impunity needs to be achieved concretely. To resist enforced amnesia, expose the truth and bring justice to the Tiananmen Mothers is to undo the basis for so much of the corruption that is flourishing today.

Tiananmen Square is a global media event that fused art and politics into spectacle. This is not unrelated to an ancient if not prehistoric ritual where spectators watch while priests oversee sacrificed lives taken at the climax of a sacred event. In prehistory this was an art ritual by any other name. Art was embedded in the massacre, art was not simply a way of artists responding.

However, for artists, in the heat of the moment, they adapted their mode of work to create art addressed to the issue as they saw it. Many were successful, demonstrating what artists here and abroad – given many international artists participated – could accomplish in the crisis moment of 1989. This was a human moment far more than another bloody tragedy, it was a shock on a global scale, a violation to our notion of being human, that freedom itself – could be ripped away, that state power could be

used to deny an inherent quality of human nature. For a government to do this with impunity reveals to today's audience how our government is curtailing further our freedoms unscathed.²

Ryan Wong's interview questions for Bob in May 2014:

How has the memory of June 4th Tiananmen Square massacre changed in the past 25 years? What do you think the date means to people now? What does it mean to you?

The dateline 6.4.89 refers to the tragedy, the resonance of its human dimensions, avoiding terms with political overtones – democracy, etc. Yes 6.4 has become a code in East Asia for those who remember. We debated deleting it from our title. Most young people and interns chose to keep it, noting its historical importance, and the ease Google makes in locating its significance.

For me it signifies that the affection people regard for Chinese people cannot be separated from the justice they demand for them, quite contrary to the inscrutability and other major media tactics deployed to undermine this connection.³

Regarding the upcoming exhibition, what do the objects made for that exhibition mean to today's audience?

² 当我需要从这个经验里得出一个结论是，我必须看看那些被创造出来的艺术品——一块墓碑上写着“强权即公理”。这就是在中国和美国发生的事情。是的，在1992到1994年之间我感受到了那些。今天，我想时代站在了我们这边。如今，國際社會需要認知這場人類的悲劇和全球性的創傷。因為它過去是，現在仍然是無與倫比的人類景觀——它被埋葬過，正等待復興。官方免責的結束需要被實現。抗拒強制失憶，揭露真相並給天安門母親帶來正義是為了鬆懈當今正在湧現的腐敗的基石。

天安門事件是一個將藝術和政治融為一場奇景的全球性媒體事件。這和神秘古代儀式裏旁觀者圍觀被獻祭的人在浪潮中被奪取生命不是毫無關係。在史前這無論如何都是一個藝術儀式。藝術已經內化進大屠殺裏，藝術不再只是一種藝術家回應的方式。然而，對於藝術家來說，在事件的白熱化時刻，他們讓自己的工作模式適應他們所看見的東西，以處理這個事件。許多都是成功的，展示了這裏和海外的藝術家——鑒於許多外國藝術家參與其中——在1989年的危機中所能成就的事情。這是一個甚於血腥慘劇的人性時刻，在全球的範圍內這是一個打擊，一個對我們人類認識的違背，自由本身竟能被剝奪，國家力量竟能被用來否定人性的固有品質。一個如此行卻被免責的政府向如今的觀眾揭露，我們的政府正在漸漸縮減我們的自由。

³ 你認為這個日期對現在的人們意味著什麼？對你來說意味著什麼？

對我來說，它表示了人們對中國人民的情感和他們為中國人伸張正義的訴求是分不開的，這和其他主流媒體所採取的策略來削弱這個聯系形成鮮明對比。

Most years about 150,000 people gather in Hong Kong on June 4. There are many paths to the appreciation of art. I'm open to many of them. As a curator I believe I am illuminating another here, one that has been overlooked in our carrot & stick approach to political affairs. Some of the best works of art will be on display. But we will also have a wall of clippings in English and Chinese for people to learn about what happened. I recently heard that the US government is claiming gold found on private property and in your safe deposit boxes belongs to them, they can come and take it. China got away with murder and now the US sees that they can too. The meaning and sentiments found in art is bound up with, is not disconnected with, the practical and political terms we live with, whether passively or vigilantly. Know your Heart. Guard your Heart.⁴

Can you comment on your own reflections on the New York protests after June 4:

That Saturday a march from Chinatown to the UN had been called, and the Goddess artists created here was to lead it. I remember waking to the most incredible news that the international Chinese student fax network that sprung up overnight organized the march to include only Chinese people – an incredible mistake they insisted on for several months. Tons of New Yorkers wanted to join and were not allowed, except as trailing in the back. We had printed out masks of Chai Ling and Wang Dan seeking to get 30 to 60 people to wear them together to initiate a media sensation. No Chinese would do it, all only thought it was meant as a disguise so the government would not know who they were.

Later we moved the Goddess to Columbus Park where it stood through the Summer and part of the Fall. I remember driving in the back of a pickup truck through the length of NYC securing the ropes that held the Goddess erect and watched as New Yorkers waved and shouted. On the West Coast I believe it was installed somewhere permanently. Here the community effort to change the name of Columbus Park to Tiananmen Sq Park was denied. Officials knew the symbolic power and significance of such artworks but they would not allow Chinatown to become strong.⁵

⁴ 對於即將開幕的展覽，這些為了原始展覽所創作的東西對今天的觀眾有何意義？

我最近聽說美國政府開始對在私產和私人銀行保險箱中發現的金子宣稱所有權，他們可以來拿走。中國以謀殺的方式逃脫了幹系，現在美國認為也可以如此行。在藝術中獲得的意義和情感與我們與之共存的實踐和政治術語緊密相連——無論我們是消極地或警覺地與之共存。

⁵ 你可以評價一下你對於六四後紐約抗議的思考嗎？

那個周六，一個從華埠到聯合國的遊行被召集起來，藝術家們創作的民主女神要被放在遊行的前面。我記得那天醒來聽聞一個難以置信的消息，一夜之間組織起遊行的中國學生只允許中國人進入遊行——這是一個他們堅持了數月的難以置信的錯誤。大批紐約人希望加入遊行卻不被允許，除非他們在隊伍末尾尾隨。

後來我們將民主女神運到了哥倫布公園，她在那裏矗立了整個夏天和部分秋天之久。我記得自己在一輛輕型貨車後面開著車，不停的拉緊拴著民主女神的繩子以保持其站立，並看著紐約的人們揮手和喊叫。我相信在西岸，民主女神被永久安放在了某個地方。在這裏，將哥倫布公園更名為天安門廣場公園的集體努力被拒絕了。官員們知道諸如此類的藝術作品的象征性力量和意義，但他們不會允許華埠變得強有力。