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Public Art Review

Issue 53 • Fall/Winter 2015 • publicartreview.org

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Bending the Arc Together

Jennifer Wen Ma's quest for interactivity

by Jacqueline White

WHAT SPARKS CHANGE? This is the question—a particularly vital and contemporary one—posed by the prolific and eclectic artist Jennifer Wen Ma in her plan for a remarkable, interactive art piece. *Bending the Arc* was commissioned for the October 2015 Flux Night, Atlanta's festival of arts, dance, and performance, hosted annually by Flux Projects, an organization that stages temporary projects throughout the southern city.

Due to Hurricane Joaquin, the event was delayed. As this issue of *Public Art Review* went to press, Flux Night was rescheduled for November, its staging ground the historic, storied neighborhood of the Old Fourth Ward, the childhood home of Martin Luther King Jr. and the location of an historic site dedicated to his memory.

Curated by Creative Time's Nato Thompson, the popular festival is set to include some dozen temporary works, many of which explore MLK's impact. In considering his legacy for *Bending the Arc*, Ma found herself focused on individual action: each person picks up a thread and the strands come together to weave collective motions. The civil rights movement,

Jennifer Wen Ma's *Bending the Arc* was commissioned for Atlanta's October 2015 Flux Night, which was delayed due to Hurricane Joaquin. As *Public Art Review* went to press, Flux Night had been rescheduled for November.

Image courtesy Jennifer Wen Ma's studio.



she proposes, gained power through this kind of individual-collective dynamic, and she wanted her contribution to reflect it.

“I wanted to make a piece that talks about personal empowerment in the light of the insurmountable,” she explains. “Individual acts sparked the civil rights movement.” Inspired by King’s contention that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” Ma set about capturing this sense of collective action in her piece.

Like many of Ma’s works, *Bending the Arc* involves projected light. In this case, the projection on a building in King’s old neighborhood will be a simple line that will change when audience participants whisper, sing, or shout into a microphone.

The grand finale features a choir performing a commissioned work called “Bending the Arc,” accompanied by a digitally remastered version of the audience voices that will be recorded throughout the evening. Singing all together, and combined with the recordings, the voices will seem to lift the lighted line off the building and into the air, where it will make an arc projected onto a scrim of smoke—a literal visualization of the power of the collective human voice.

Bending the Arc is a site-specific, temporary work. Yet the general theme of interactivity—as embodied by public participation in her works—is a theme throughout Ma’s body of work. Indeed, it might be the only common thread in a wildly eclectic oeuvre that ranges from an opera to an Olympic closing ceremony to a fashion-week wrestling match, as well as temporary public sculptures.

For Ma, who sees public art as “my way of giving back to society,” public participation is at the heart of public art. Galleries and museums, where she also exhibits, often reach a limited audience. Public art, by contrast, “is not just about scale and location. The idea of public art ultimately involves the people.” The aim for Ma is that “the people become part of the work.”

FIRST WORDS IN A VISUAL LANGUAGE

Given that the primary effort of her public art is to connect people, it’s ironic that Ma found her initial artistic impulse during a period of crippling alienation and solitude.

In Beijing, where Ma spent her early years, she aspired to become a writer. “My first love is language,” she says. But as a teen, Ma moved to Oklahoma City. With English as her second



ABOVE LEFT: Jennifer Wen Ma's *Nature and Man in Rhapsody of Light* at the Water Cube at the Beijing National Aquatics Center. Designed for the fifth anniversary of the 2008 Summer Olympics, the ongoing work includes automated computer programs and programmable LED lights that translate ancient wisdom from the I-Ching and emotional data collected from Chinese micro-blogging sites into a fluid light display. ABOVE RIGHT: Jennifer Wen Ma in front of the Water Cube.

language, she became alienated from the very thing that she most loved. “It was very profound on a psychological level,” she remembers.

Overwhelmed, she sought refuge in an oil painting class—at least there, she wouldn’t have to speak. In China, her schools had emphasized discipline, and only the elite artists (those skilled in representational work) were welcome to continue their studies. But in Oklahoma, Ma experienced an educational system that was “encouraging to the child.” She was welcomed to the arts, and she began to draw.

The encouragement paid off. Ma continued her studies at Oklahoma Christian University of Science and Arts, where she achieved a bachelor of arts degree, and the Pratt Institute in New York, where she earned a master of fine arts. She started off her career as a studio assistant to Cai Guo-Qiang, the Chinese artist, now based in New York City, known for his work with explosives. Along with Cai, Ma was chosen to be a member of the core team designing the opening and closing ceremonies for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The youngest member of the team by a generation, Ma was vaulted into international prominence: as the chief designer for visual and special effects, she landed an Emmy.

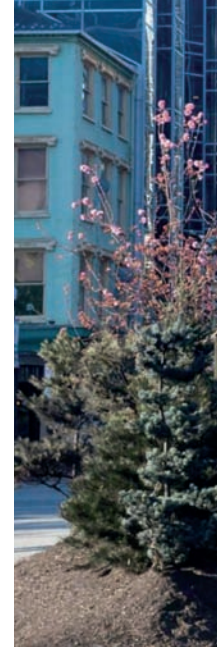
“EMOTIONAL DATA” ON DISPLAY

As her career has developed, curator Lance Fung describes Ma’s practice as “full-bodied.” She possesses, he explains, “the technical expertise of a sculptor, the accessibility of a public artist, and the intellectual depth of a conceptual artist.” In recent years, her work has increasingly showcased these qualities—as well as her growing interest in involving the public in her works.

Nature and Man in Rhapsody of Light at the Water Cube, for instance, began as a call to reimagine the façade of the Beijing National Aquatics Center on the fifth anniversary of the 2008 Summer Olympics, for which it was originally built. The iconic building is an unusually visible landmark in a city where views are often marred by pollution or tall buildings. The boxy structure earned its nickname, the Water Cube, for its function and form.

The brief called for a “reimagining of the cellular ‘skin’” of the building to celebrate the fifth anniversary of its inauguration. Ma won the commission, working with lighting designer Zheng Jianwei, who had also been on the creative team for the 2008 Olympics.

Unlike many public commissions in the United States, this one had no requirement to poll the public or hold a community meeting. “All I had to do is convince a group of bureaucrats that this



For *A Winter Landscape Cradling Bits of Sparkle* (2015), Ma planted 126 live trees in Pittsburgh's Market Square and painted them with Chinese ink (above left). In spring the trees burst into bud (above right). The project, commissioned the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership, included glass globes (right) and a wooden pathway.

is a great idea," Ma says. Still, she saw the work as an occasion for human connection. "It was an opportunity to say something about our collective consciousness as a people," she says.

The resulting work has all the hallmarks of Ma's obsession with public interaction—and is also a unique, delicate, conceptual piece. Ma and Zheng's solution is a state-of-the-art computer program that collects "emotional data" from millions of Chinese bloggers each day and then filters it through the ancient Chinese teachings of the I Ching to produce an hour-long, nightly LED display that plays on the building façade—a visual story in color of the emotional mood of the nation.

The piece is not only beautiful, but subversive in the way it represents human consciousness. "The battleground for that piece," Ma says, "was just the right to be. There are no good or bad emotions; we can feel what we feel without being censored." While the piece does meet Ma's basic criterion of involving the public, it is not—at least yet—truly interactive. But plans are in the works to develop an app that would allow viewers to change the light display in real time.

STARTING WITH A CLEAN SLATE

While many of her pieces involve some sort of co-creation with her audience, Ma is fiercely protective of her role as an artistic visionary. In that way, her public practice is much like her studio practice—guided by her singular mind and creativity.

How that vision gets translated into a final outcome, however, is quite different. For a museum show, she says, "I'm almost my own client." Her creative process is mostly internal, as she wrestles with "what's the most effective way I have to say this?" For public projects, "who you have to please is much more complex." In addition to the organizers and the people commissioning the work, "you're responsible to the public," Ma says.

This creates something of a tightrope for Ma, because even as she seeks to serve and involve the public, she remains guided

by her personal vision. "Art is a very particular singular vision. It's not meant to be all things for all people," she says. "As a citizen of the world, of course democracy is better. But art by democracy is a death blow to the art."

One method that Ma deploys to achieve this balance is to carefully investigate not only the site, but the context of each public commission she accepts. "I do as much research as I can to understand the need of the organizer," she says.

A 2015 installation on a Pittsburgh plaza, *A Winter Landscape Cradling Bits of Sparkle*, serves as an example. The commission was initiated by the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership out of a desire to lure folks downtown in the cold of January and February. Ma investigated the history of the site, how people generally use it, the previous piece on the site (this was the second year of the project), and who the typical audience would be. "I didn't want to make a work that can be done anywhere at any time," she says. "What set of skills will help you communicate with the local people and make a work that's valuable to them?"

As Ma engages in this research process, she says, "I try to go with a clean slate" so her vision for the project can emerge organically as she learns about the people and the project: "If you go with a preconceived notion, then you're always adjusting and you lose your conceptual core."

The resulting work was a temporary, living forest of all different types of trees, all painted black with naturally derived traditional Chinese ink—another signature technique in her work. As the Pittsburgh winter turned toward spring, the trees burst into bud, making a vivid commentary on the nature of changing seasons and the rebirth of spring.

CHOOSING CREATIVE CHALLENGES

One of the secrets to Ma's extraordinary output is her studio. "I run a tight ship," she says, and credits her time working for



Cai as a period during which she learned the value of a well-organized studio. “Every successful artist I know is smart and organized when it comes to business,” she says.

Ma employs just one full-time staff person in New York and another in Beijing. She supplements her staff through long-term collaborations with artists and designers she admires who have their own individual practices but come together to work on her projects. She has ongoing relationships with everyone from a structural engineer to a video editor and even a philosopher.

By keeping her overhead low, Ma has the freedom to say, “I don’t do projects for money.” Instead, she can take on projects because they interest her. And what most intrigues Ma is a good creative challenge. Of the large-scale theatrical productions she has pulled off, Ma says, “It’s exhilarating. Your adrenaline is going. You’re put in a lot of unfamiliar and uncomfortable positions. I love it!”

Call it yet another paradox in her career: while her abiding passions are for interactivity and inclusion, she achieves these aims with a single-minded focus on her individual creative vision as an artist—and a savvy organizational skill on the business side of things. As she explores the themes so apparent in her Atlanta Flux Night piece, *Bending the Arc*, she upends the false dichotomy of the lone artist isolated in her studio versus the co-creative approach of the public artist.

The result? A beam of light will lift into the air through the collective voice of those present, and bend metaphorically, as Martin Luther King assured us the moral universe does, toward justice.

JACQUELINE WHITE is a Minneapolis writer. Her mother is the sculptor Nancy Metz White, whose welded monumental tree forms grace two Milwaukee parks.

RIGHT: Photo by Chris Litherland.

