



Lee Mingwei

at the
Isabella Stewart
Gardner Museum

Installation and performance artist Lee Mingwei was a resident at the Gardner in June 1999. The following February he returned to install *The Living Room* in the Museum's special exhibition gallery. Lee turned the gallery into a contemporary living room, complete with comfortable seating, plants, and music. The concept for this installation grew out of the artist's fascination with Mrs. Gardner's role as a patron of the arts, and her commitment to making her private home a place of public engagement with a variety of art forms. As Lee put it, "While I was at the Gardner I became interested in the notion of hospitality and how Isabella Stewart Gardner demonstrated generosity in her Fenway Court home."

The installation was designed to engage visitors in a very personal way. For the first week the artist himself acted as host, initiating discussion about objects of personal significance that he had brought into the gallery. For the next nine weeks, other members of the Museum family—staff and volunteers alike—took turns hosting the installation and discussing the objects they had selected

from their own homes to bring into *The Living Room*. Guest hosts also included former artist-in-residence Gregory McGuire, a writer who moved to the Boston area shortly after completing his residency. A highlight of McGuire's hosting experience was an impromptu discussion with a group of high school students, some of whom had read his books, on the role of fiction in art.



In addition to interacting with the general public, Lee met with two groups of students. Grade 10 students from the Boston Arts Academy studying set design and installation art talked with Lee about his working process. The students then created their own installation—a “typical” teenager’s bedroom—for the Community Partnership exhibition called *Community Creations* that takes over the special exhibition space for a week



each spring. Lee also worked with kindergartners from the Mission Hill School who were learning about the importance of everyday objects. After meeting with them in the exhibition, he visited their classroom, where each student was in the process of making a quilt square based on objects that were important to them. In this way the artist and students introduced themselves to each other by sharing their environments and the important objects in their lives.

The Living Room also had a profound impact on the Museum community. Lee invited trustees and staff members to bring in personal artifacts and to serve as hosts of *The Living Room*. Hosting resulted in contact with the general public for the first time, in many instances, and provided the opportunity for the Museum as a whole to become actively engaged in a contemporary reimagining of Isabella Gardner’s legacy. Lee described it this way: “I believe that the essence of this Museum does not reside merely in its architecture and objects, but also in its staff and extended family, who make this place function as a living organism on a day-to-day basis. By carrying on the organic process of sharing and entertaining, the Museum regains its role as more than a mausoleum for inanimate, exotic objects.”

