INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ROBERT LEE

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise **Date:** 31 Oct 2009 **Duration:** 1hr 49mins **Location:** New York

Jane DeBevoise (JD): We are delighted and pleased to be here with you. I am sure you are extremely busy. You know what they say about moving. They say that moving is probably one of the most stressful times in your life, up there with divorce, family deaths…seriously. So, if you are feeling stressed out -

Mathieu Borysevicz (MB): Just remember this stress is justified.

Robert Lee (RL): It was amazing though. Everyone came by to the goodbye party. And they were all sharing memories and stories. And we were just so thrilled. Eleanor was also in a stressful state. Something came to me though. It was like death was going to heaven and everyone was applauding us. (Laughter) I am sorry that I am late. These kinds of things happen.

JD: So, tell us, you've been here for thirty-three years?

RL: Thirty-five. In this place for thirty-three.

JD: And you started your Center in '85?

RL: '84.

JD: '84. And you were here in this place all this time. You are about to close your doors and move to a new place. Tell us a little bit about why you started this Center. How did this idea come to you? What was it like to open the Center?

RL: Okay. First of all, Eleanor started this Center. I met her back in '69-'70 at the Basement Workshop. Danny Yung was really the instigator and the seminal force involved there. Frank Ching [?] and a lot of other people from Hong Kong were involved too. Frank wrote Chinatown's Social Service study. All of his friends from college came to help him and he finally published the study. He really wanted to help Chinatown. He found a basement and founded the Basement Workshop, which is where I met Eleanor. Together they all started Basement Workshop. I was involved too. Then Eleanor opened an Asian American Dance Theatre Group in '74, the time we also got married, so we worked on the Basement together and she held performances in the local library. We then came here in '76. So, we have been here all that time. That's how it started. In '76 I got involved working in the Seeder Program that the Great Society of [President Lyndon B.] Johnson got into. There were a hundred workers, ten of whom were in the arts. I was managing people like Hu Nenzu [?] and Ma Paisui, who were working in the Seeder Program as retired professors from Taiwan. When the Seeder Program collapsed we moved everything here. That's how we started the Asian Art Institute and the idea of putting together an archive. A few years later we changed the name so it wasn't just the Dance-Theatre and Institute. We called it the Asian American Art Center.

JD: That's good. So now, what year was the Asian American Art Center formalized?

RL: We adopted AAAC as our name around '86-87.

JD: I noticed that at some point you started doing visual art programs, starting in…

RL: '82-'83. So when we left the Seeder Program, we started to build an archive and began holding exhibitions. We

won a few grants in 83'-84'.

JD: Can you talk about some of your first projects that you were doing at the time? I know that in about '82-'83, you held a panel discussion called 'Eye to Eye.' and there were quite a number of now prominent visual artists who participated in that. In terms of some of the contemporary Chinese artists we have been focusing on, some names include Zhang Hongtu, Fung Min Chip, who is from Hong Kong... I would love to hear how you brought those artists together. If you remember how that panel discussion went, what was the nature of the questions? And, how did people respond?

RL: We remember that very vividly. It was one of those odd things. We gathered a lot of names. We wanted to focus on Asian American artists and no one understood why we wanted to do that, but we gathered a bunch of people and launched our event with that panel. A lot of artists were around and we met them. They sent us information or we asked them for information. We invited some prominent people like John Yao and some other artists to be speakers on that panel. We only had one or two pieces from each artist in the show. I am not sure if Christian Reddy was in that show, though he likely was. We tried to get a wide variety of ethnicities [of people] involved to show that we were not just focusing on Chinese artists, but Asian artists of many different backgrounds. John Yao had gotten a call from an artist who was exhibiting in SoHo. He told us a story about an artist who apparently was criticized by someone on opening night because 'He looked at his name on the wall, looked at the art, and thought it was impossible that the contemporary work was created by him', so he walked out. The artist then grew worried and called John and said 'I want to change my name'. For a large part of the panel afterwards, we focused on whether an Asian artist should change his name or not.

Since then, we learned that Jewish artists and other ethnic artists had to contemplate similar questions about naming. I forgot how many years later it was when this became a non-issue. Recently, we had a panel for an exhibition called "Process and Progress." I thought [the relationship between the two talks] was interesting, so I concluded that panel with the topic our first panel had addressed. That panel was held at White Box and the issue was definitely a non-issue. So, I guess we've made progress! (Laughter)

JD: Will you tell us a little more about that? We have moved into a very different world. I find that having a Chinese name, as an artist, can be an advantage. But it may still be a problem when speaking with Westerners. I always hear people say 'We know the artist who does the big smiley faces, but I don't know how to pronounce his name – I can't remember his name,' but they know the art of the guy who makes the work, or 'The Chinese artist that made his career on the bloodline series' or something like that. But they can never remember these artist's names, so perhaps things haven't changed that much.

RL: Unfortunately, you may be right. From the artist's point of view, one wants to assert oneself, but finds problems in the process. Potential collectors do not strut out of shows anymore, but they still have trouble remembering names. It is a reflection of a lot of things, specifically those related to culture. We're so involved with information, with trying to know everything, with people telling us they know everything…when in fact a lot of what is going on is miscommunication – or misunderstanding through art. You may understand, but many circles of people don't. I think there was French writer who wrote extensively about the ways we misunderstand each other. I think it'll be an issue for a long time. We should be okay with it. It's going to take us a while to see eye to eye (thus the name of our first panel discussion). We are trying to understand ways of understanding each other.

JD: Why is 'Asian American' an important category from your perspective, to bringing things together?

RL: In the '69-70s we were all involved with the Anti-Vietnam War Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. I had many friends who went down south to sit-in. We all went to the Pentagon to try to shut it down. I was involved in political groups, and at the Basement Workshop we set up a Health Clinic. We were active in Chinatown in helping the community, and began asserting the label 'Asian American' more, at that time. Having been

invisible for most of my younger years, I was absolutely turned on to have the opportunity to be visible. It was a relief to not have to question myself about how I was perceived by mass-culture. It was a great opportunity for me to follow African Americans. They asserted their blackness, and we asserted our Asian-ness. The leadership of the African American community helped us better understand our position. We had a lot of friends from other schools and other parts of the country. We talked to people on the west coast by phone – there weren't fax machines or email available in those days. It was a time of 'wow-ness; the youth generation with their marijuana and blue jeans taking over the United States! Everyone had their own publication. Everyone had their own group. We were a part of that phase. Young people truly thought they were 'it'. But we really felt we were going to transform things. It was a trip.

Asian Americans were sought after by these major national personalities who had their own groups marching down to D.C. I thought, 'Wow, they all want the little Asian group in their barrettes too!'. We felt compelled to strive for independence. It was quite a time. I had studied art history and amazingly enough met George Webber who was an authority on Chinese bronzes. I was just be blown away by him, utterly, utterly, blown away by him. I studied with him as long as I could. There were many other people who were important to me, but he was key. Being able to understand his perspective on things in relation to contemporary art gave me a sense of purpose and value regarding the radical politics with which I was involved. Meditating on him, his work, and everything he taught me helped me to relate to the contemporary scene. I am always involved with the fundamentals of 'today'– not 19th century France and stuff like that.

JD: It is actually very interesting. Which artists from Asia were visible at that time? Did they respond to the same kinds of issues that you responded to? Did they see themselves as Asian Americans or did the see themselves in a different way?

RL: The question of Asian American or 'Asian American-ness' is a term that came out of what we were doing. We debated the question all over the US. Given that the Census Bureau was interested in using a term and was willing to adopt it, we finally came up with Asian American. There are some people on the West Coast who claim there was a professor in '68 who started to use that term first, but that wasn't part of the debate as I remember it. So the term really came later. That means all the artists that came before '68 never used the term Asian American. They could have called themselves any number of things. You know: American Artist of Asian Ancestry, Amer-Asian, and when we studied and went back to previous generations, some would say 'Okay, I'll call myself Asian American or maybe I wont, I'll be part of your project, but that is not the term that I will use to call myself'. There were very few – there were some – older Asian artists from the post WWII period who did immediately adopt the term Asian American. They understood what it was.

For instance, one artist had been rejected by his parents in Japan and then had to experience a great deal of racism in galleries and whatnot. So, he immediately adopted the term Asian American. We were thrilled to meet him. In the '80s many artists had the opportunity to exhibit under a new framework. Very few Asian [American] artists had exhibited, at least in New York at that time. So it was a rarity to find and Asian American being represented by a commercial gallery – except for OK Harris, who was already doing it. But even Ivan [Karp] never understood clearly, even though he had shown so many. OK Harris was the only place that had shown a number of Asian Americans. I remember – I think you know him -- Rodriguez at Alternative Museum did a show on Asian Americans and published a catalogue. He used the term Asian American too. No, actually, these were 'Artists in Exile', or something like that. I can't quite remember. I remember there was one artist, an older artist, who totally rejected the idea. Olse Te [?] was his name. He wanted to be called an 'Artist of the International World, of the Global World'. It took twenty years of multiculturalism before it began to decline, just like Surrealism or any other movement it begins to fade. Artists like having terms that will push them forward. If this term Asian American isn't going to do that, then a new term will surface. But I don't think I have ever used the term as a promo for the marketplace. I have always used the term with a long-term vision about the world, between all people but particularly between Asian and Western worlds and between the

Asian civilization and Asian group who have migrated to America. Multiculturalism or Asian American – I use those terms to describe a long-term perspective. It is going to take three or four hundred years to see how it will work itself out.

JD: Given the number of artists from the 80's -- and there were many, why weren't the galleries showing them? Do you think they were not showing them because they were Asian or because of other reasons?

RL: Largely because they were Asian. The racism in the gallery system was all over the place. Even after the big change in the marketplace, when all of a sudden Asians were the next wave, and in all the magazines. Many galleries said 'We need a token Chinese artist to have in our stable'. Things like that. There were still a whole bunch of galleries who didn't want anything to do with us. There were a lot of people who were interested in the Renaissance and felt the Modern period was a passing phase. We wanted Asian American artists to be accepted on all grounds. There is a great deal of resistance to Asian American art. Many oppose the work they create. The cultural battles are here and the maneuvers and tactics of artists are being played out. I don't necessarily know the results of that battle.

JD: Wasn't OK Harris showing artists from Asia in the '80s? Who was he showing and why? Where did the gallery find those artists?

RL: I don't remember everyone he showed, I've blanked on that, sorry, but I do remember he showed a lot of people from Taiwan, and most of them made photorealist work. We showed a couple of those same people, but that was just one area of work we showed. I think Ivan did show a number with other people too. I know he did, and they were making non-photorealist work. He had that particular angle on things. His colleague went another way, and he went that way. That's another well-known story.

Zhang Hongtu gave me a wonderful feeling when I met him. I forget now whether we met at a show or somebody's party or reception, but I just immediately took to him and felt that he was someone we could really start with. He had done all these studies of Dunhuang [Caves] and I had done studies of Dunhuang in school. It was fascinating to see how artists in China – a lot of artists in China – were going there to study art, public art. We wanted to bring that to New York and Chinatown. We wanted the people in Chinatown to see what was happening culturally [in China] and to show that public art was important in China. By inference, public art was important in Chinatown. We were friends with Annette Juliano, who went to Rutgers like I did, the same time I was there. We studied in the same department too. We were able to bring her to the panel and have a very interesting talk. At that time I think we were able to get enough funding to put out various publications. We can't really do that anymore.

JD: What was the response to Zhang Hongtu's work at that time? What was the general public's response? Was there critical response, to his work – to that particular show?

RL: I don't remember if there was critical response, but we had a good audience. A lot of his friends were present. It is always interesting bringing a Chinese speaking audience together. There is an intelligencia different to that of that of English speaking world. They have their own points of view on things. Sometimes they are quiet and subtle. We had a mix of people, from my generation, the younger generation and people from Chinatown. It was a nice mix. I wish it could have been bigger and stronger.

At those events, like a lot of Asian American things, I discovered a professor in Buffalo who made some kind of Chinese painting – he innovated a new form of painting. Had three daughters, Nina, Hannah, and I don't remember the last one. They all become artists too. Every weekend or so he has a crowd of people gather together to play Chinese music and talk of things cultural in Buffalo, New York. I suppose that's how a culture grows. You never hear about this, but this is how Chinese culture does or does not thrive in the United States. It can be isolated. There needs to be a strong personality behind cultural exchange and growth. For instance there is a famous artist in Seattle – nobody knows him and San Francisco, LA, let alone Chicago or New

York. And I think this is still part of the pattern. The pattern of the international, global marketplace of art is dominated by big names – that's a different phenomenon, utterly different. The domestic scene and the national scene are quite different from one another.

JD: At that time he had just arrived from China. Did he understand? Did you talk to him about the issues around Asian Americans? Do you remember? Have you since talked to him? I mean he is a very sensitive guy, and a very smart guy. I was just wondering if that concept was interesting to him, or already understood or engaged with.

RL: Normally, I try to encompass things into a historical view. As a historian I should just observe what is happening. I shouldn't impose my thesis on artists. I don't think I ever talked to Hongtu about Asian Americanism or Asian Americans or the Movement or Basement Workshop. I don't think I ever talked about that stuff. He had what he was doing in China. Now he was here. He didn't want to get censored. I was so upset when he felt upset about getting censored by the US Senate for a show we did on Tiananmen Square. He came to this country to not get censored and then he got censored.

JD: Can you talk a little bit it? It was such a fascinating time.

RL: We were all watching TV together in '89, and watched the demonstration grow and grow in Tiananmen Square. It became an international media phenomenon. And then boom! It happened. It was so unexpected. We didn't expect things to happen the way they did. The next day I immediately knew I wanted to do a show on this. I was in the middle of a multi-year grant and I didn't need to apply for funding that year. I didn't need to submit another proposal that year to the State Arts Agency. I told myself 'I'll tell the State later. I'm going to do one show this year. It is all going to be about Tiananmen Square.' The next day we figured out the name of the show. We saw this as a great opportunity for Chinatown and our organization. All this time we had been exhibiting in Chinatown and we had not been able to get the NY community or much of the Chinese community to support or understand what we were doing in the contemporary art field. I thought, 'Here it is, the opportunity to combine politics with art'. I wanted to show that this big media event was simultaneously art as well as politics. This media event to me was absolutely art. It had turned on the whole world –the whole world! Everybody was moved. Everybody was out in the street. I knew as an art organization we couldn't just say 'Free the students' and I couldn't say 'Fring democracy to China'. So we named it China, June 4th 1989. That was the name of the show.

A few days later we figured out that we would have a show of doors. All of the artists would submit doors. Bing [?] came up with that idea. We could stack the doors up and collect everything. Children and parents and others could submit things. We were to have one wall for this, one wall for that. The doors would be over on one side. That Saturday, there was a big demonstration going up from Chinatown to the United Nations in NY. We passed out all fliers announcing the show. Yan Li was the first artist to submit work. Most of the stuff submitted was sent to us by artists. The show grew over the course of a year. In October it went to Blum Helman Warehouse in SoHo. There we had about two hundred works, maybe a hundred doors, at least. In May the show went to PS1. That time we had nearly three hundred artists with two hundred doors. Then we toured it around different parts of the country. One thing I want to say about the demonstration that Saturday is that somehow the organizers were faxing each other on an international scale – that is how we got our first fax machine. I guess they thought the only people demonstrating would be Chinese. I couldn't believe that they would make that mistake, but they did.

JD: Who led the demonstrations?

RL: I don't know. There were so many students involved. There was a big center in Paris that was centered here in New Jersey. Various major centers emerged and became influential in making these decisions. I thought it was a stupid mistake. There were so many New Yorkers trying to join the march. They were told that they were not allowed to join the march. Anyway, that is the way things went. I think the goals I had for the show

were not reached, not in terms of the American community or the art community, but in terms of the Chinese community. Nobody in the Chinese community could understand what the purpose of the show was. They wanted to free the students. They wanted to help the students get out. They wanted to buy tents for the students, and bring medical care to the students and bring democracy to China. They didn't understand how powerful this show could be on a global scale. I think it could have been tremendously powerful.

We had masks of Chai Ming [?] and Wang Dan [?] printed. We handed them out. Nobody would wear the masks. They would all say they didn't care if the Chinese governments saw their faces. I said, 'If I can get thirty of you walking down the street I will get you on global TV. Thirty of you, marching in the masks.' The Chinese community just didn't understand the point. I think many still have trouble understanding what Chinese artists are doing in China. They still don't quite know. I firmly believe this. I am not in China so I don't try to deal with the Chinese situation in China. I'm here. This is where I have my focus. So, the community here and most Chinese intellectuals here didn't support us. They did not see or understand the value of what we were doing. Finally Chai Ming escaped from China to Washington and wanted to do something in the Russell [Senate] Rotunda as a welcome event. We were asked to put together part of the show. Hong Kong was asked to put together another part of the show. They looked at the pieces that we wanted to bring to the show, including Zhang Hongtu's Last Banquet.

JD: Which organization in Washington was in charge?

RL: I've forgotten the name of the organization in Washington, but it was totally under the thumb of [Congressman] Lantos and [Senator] Kennedy and another Senator there. And we understood that it was the wives of these people—the Senators were the ones who actually censored three works and would not allow them to be in the show.

JD: What was the venue for this show?

RL: The Russell Rotunda. The argument for censorship was that the Rotunda was not a gallery and that a little girl from Kansas City might come to D.C. and be offended by the work.

JD: So you submitted the works. The works were submitted as a body of work and then what happened?

RL: They censored three pieces. They said 'Take these three pieces out of the show'. They censored Zhang Hongtu, Byron Kim, and an artist from the Hong Kong side of the show. I don't remember his name. He had a piece of the Great Wall and he had three bodies inserted into the wall: a mother, a father and a child. The argument was that it reflected the policy of the Chinese government all onto one family or something like that. Byron Kim's piece was a birdcage with an acupuncture figure standing in the middle with tubes of blood surrounding the birdcage. They said that it reflected some kind of voodoo, and they didn't want any voodoo in the show. Hongtu's piece was the Last Supper with all the faces turned into the face of Mao Zedong. It's one of the most well known pieces in that show, and was quite large too. They said 'Well, this is blasphemous; you know you can't do this kind of religious work in the Russell Rotunda. You do not have any rights for that. We have perfect rights to say what goes in and what stays out.' We tried to negotiate with them, and finally gave up and pulled out of the show. The catalogue had already been printed in Hong Kong. I understand all of them were destroyed. NPR got hold of the story and was the only news agency that went down to Washington to try to confront Kennedy about this. By that time the show was de-installed. Kennedy had found a whole bunch of artists to do something last minute. Apparently, they had the reception and immediately got rid of all the catalogues. I was lucky to get a hold of one, which I may have lost, but all of the works that we had presented for that show were printed in the catalogue. All the works from Hong Kong were in the catalogue too. It was a very upsetting time. Byron and Hongtu wrote letters stating how they felt about being censored. The rest of the media didn't bother to investigate the issue or our cause. We thought it was a big story, even though it was a horrendous story. Most of the American media didn't bother either, except for one picture in the Atlantic Monthly and NPR's report. I remember one reporter trying hard but no news agency would work with him.

Why would they? This was an Asian American minority group. Would they challenge the rights and freedom of speech of Asian Americans? No, it wasn't something Americans were turned on by. It's an Asian American story that somehow gets colored, and yellowed, and hidden. At least that's what we learned. What is freedom of speech in America? What is freedom of the press? Things are utterly different in Chinatown. Not only for the Chinese press and what the Chinese press does in the community, but also for the American community covering stories about Chinatown. We don't live. We have never lived. Our organization didn't exist in the eyes of American people. There are so many layers to this. But this is how nationalism functions. Nationalism functions by skewing perspectives, to make everyone follow certain terms. 'My team is going to win, therefore, their team is going to lose." That's nationalism.

Anyway, we found a professor who once published something in the New York Times about having been the Chairman of the American History Organization for the last 25 years – I may have the name of the organization wrong. His comment on America was 'America is amazing. For the last four hundred years we have been able to keep the fantasy about America going' and that 'It is incredible, that a country like ours can do that.' No wonder we didn't fit into the news. Who would want to know about Asians or about diversity in America? The question of Asian Americanism now gets totally buried by the big news of Chinese artists and artists in Asia becoming important. It's all about collecting the work from Asian artists in Asia, not Asian artists in America. 'It's a good investment,' they would say, or something like that. Once you understand that this is the way things are run, you need to operate on a difference basis.

There were some artists who came out of the whole experience of Chinatown and the Basement Workshop and felt that Asian American artists referred to people who had very Asian American experiences. The Basement began with Danny Yung and his friends, many of whom came from Asia. They were 'foreign born'. The locking of horns between the foreign born and the native born Asians has been documented in books and other sources. Most of the Hong Kong born left within a year of the organization being founded. The people who were running Yellow Pearl were American born. They began to take hold of the Basement as if it were their own and theirs only. But it really began with the Hong Kong group, with their project few people know of, called the New York the Chinese Way. I showed you some pictures earlier. People like to romanticize the days of the Basement and often bring up the Yellow Pearl publication to the old generation Asian Americans who are still around. People don't want to talk about the difficulties that the Basement had. For me, well, I have my own background too, and I guess I questioned the differences between the two 'civilizations'. There are Asian American artists all over the world. A lot of artists like to talk behind your back too. Whisper things; once you take a position you become a target to be taken down. That's been true of Museo del Barrio; the leadership there that has done so much, but there is always a little sector that is whispering things in the dark.

JD: Zhang Hongtu continues to exhibit and work with you. In terms of other artists from China—again, focusing on the Chinese side of things—I'm fascinated to see the wide variety of artists, also the non-Asian artists who come together on different projects with you. But another one who's obviously become quite famous recently, and whom a lot of people want to know more about is Ai Weiwei. When he came to the United States—obviously you met him and knew him at the time—he participated in some panels and exhibitions. Could you talk a little bit about your interaction with him? When did you meet Ai Weiwei? What did you think about him? How did you understand his experiences in the United States in the '80s?

RL: There's not much I can say. I didn't really know him that well. He was quite a presence, like a number of artists coming from China. He was aloof, and at that point I think this Center had a lot of visibility amongst a small circle. Some artists would tell me that they were from a prominent family, or that they were considered an important artist from China. They didn't, like most artists, come after me. Some of them were shy and wanted me to come after them. So there were a variety of personalities to work with.

Ai Weiwei didn't really try to assert himself in this country. I sort of observed him from a distance and saw that he had his own circle of friends. I remember a painting that he did of a friend of his—I don't know who

that person was—where he had joined himself and his friend at the hip. So it was a work of two guys with one lower torso. I thought he had found his circle. We did get to put him in a show; I'm not quite sure which one it was. I remember the painting though; it's on our old website. It was a large work. Apparently he had left it here. I had totally forgotten about it until I discovered it one day rolled up in storage. By that time he had become a personality in China. I don't know how to deal with it, but I love the fact that he has kept his chutzpah and that he dares to put his finger up to those monuments of Western neocolonialism—the whole Western idea of where the West wants to take the world, and still wants to do so, which is clearly a big marketing scheme. I'm always thrilled with people who are able to challenge their own terms, like the film The Matrix or the other film from Japan, Final Fantasy. Bringing in other visions from other cultures is important. 'Here we are, a battery', and Neo says 'Oh, no we can't be this battery.' But we certainly are this battery, certainly in the contemporary economy that Michael Moore claims in Capitalism. This is where we are. I don't care how great you think the Founding Fathers are, this is where we've been carried by our Fathers. We no longer think about peace that can be brought to peoples' lives without the help of money.

That is why China has so much to offer. That is why people in Africa respect China and Latin America. It has got to be reinvented. We are all waiting for it to be reinvented. Then, we will have something to say beyond the politics of finance and of the marketplace. I think that community action and street action have to be viewed as effective modes of study, and on par with academic study. How do you really impact how people think and how things change? The myth is powerful. Facts sometimes don't make it. If Buddhism is correct and we don't exist, then we are mythic creatures, are we not? Who am I, sitting here? Who was I, ten generations ago? Who am I going to be? Anyway, forget that. I think there is a role, a great role, for community action and involvement.

I'll give you another example but I probably shouldn't. There are Chinese artists who have become very prominent, who have decided which path they want to take and who they want to associate themselves with, and who not to associate with, and how they are going to go forward in their careers, or something else. Sometimes they are very explicit about the path they are going to take. Sometimes AAAC is a part of that path, and sometimes it is not. But those paths take different paths, and diverge and change. Sometimes it's about focusing on the marketplace; sometimes they want to have an exhibition through the organization. If I am not part of their vision, that's okay. Whatever. A lot has changed since then.

We were the only thing going on in those days, and then after '92 there was an explosion and we were different. Then there were so many little Asian galleries that opened up that could focus on Koreans, Chinese, Indians —all different things. Another gallery focused on mixing Americans with Asians. Before this point, we were the only Asian American organization that could continue consistently, with the help of our grants. We were totally reliant on grants and willing to stay here even if we were getting peanuts. That was okay for us. Most places weren't in for that toil, so they didn't stick around. Now, major institutions and major funders are focusing on this subject, but all of the groups in the community, Latino, Black or Asian or otherwise are still working in the community and getting paid less than peanuts. So, I guess the question is, what is our role now? What should we do? At this point I think it is the archive we are working on. There might be something else that will show that what we do is important. Maybe that will emerge.

JD: Who were your funders during the '80s?

RL: The State Arts Agency, the city, the feds, and I think Expansion Arts too, under Spellman. We were involved with TAAC, The Association of America Cultures, which gave us and others a national review of Latinos, Asians, Native Americans and African Americans. For eight years I was lucky to have that. Expansion Arts was funding all of us, only a small amount was given but you could rely on it to grow an organization. Expansion Arts got canned after Piss Christ, Serrano's piece. Now there is some talk about getting it back. We did get a Rockefeller grant once or twice as well as from some other foundations which helped us start up the Milieu Project. The project focused on Asian American artists from 1945 to 1965. About eighty-five or ninety artists were involved

and we had interviews in the three native East Asian languages. But we were never able to mount the national show of those peoples because funding was tight. I don't know if you want to go into that.

JD: It is interesting, at the time of the '80s you were able to put together, cobble together, sew together enough funding to keep your place viable. Those agencies in the '80s seem to have come out of a multicultural agenda from the United States government. Or was it from a wider social agenda at that point?

RL: Who came out of what agenda?

JD: The agencies that were funding some of these projects.

RL: Right.

JD: Looking back at the '70s and the '80s there was a social agenda coming out of the United States to promote multiculturalism for whatever reason. Has that changed, have those funding sources moved on to other agendas?

RL: Maybe you have a different perspective on the agencies. That is not my experience.

JD: Can you share your experience?

RL: The riots of '68 in Newark, Watts, Chicago and the big demonstration - I think there was a big show called Harlem on My Mind at the Met, where people [from Harlem] protested in front of the Met. All those things forced the US government to give funding to community groups, particularly cultural groups. So some of those groups got enough funds to make big institutions. But most of us got little bitsy things. Ghetto Arts was the name of the agency inside the New York City Council for the Arts. Then they changed the name to Special Arts Services. In Washington D.C., they were lucky enough to have – what's his name…I can't remember – start Expansion Arts and convinced the NCA to name it Expansion Arts. We weren't seen as a professional art group, like groups of architects, dancers, museums…'Who are these people, getting money from the agency in Special Arts Services?' Once Piss Christ happened then Expansion Arts was no longer there. Something else happens and money disappeared. It's grown fifty percent, but it still isn't back up there yet. Bloomberg gives money to NCA, but for the last 25 years, NCA has not consistently given to community groups of color.

You can't establish the culture of the United States based upon the actual people of the United States. I think we are going to give an incredible thing to the world; the fate of this country will show. But it's not on that path now. The path that it is on now is dominated by what people think this country is so it is hard to make the incremental steps towards something better. That is what people of color face. The US will have 50-60% people of color but we will still be doing things that don't reflect who we are. It is going to be an American fantasyland for the next hundred years. There are people of color who think they are not people color. How are people going to truly find out who they are?

JD: Lets talk about China. The Chinese artists of the '80s were invisible. They weren't in any of the galleries. They are now in a lot of the galleries. How do you feel about that? How do you analyze that?

RL: You get cooped up in the marketplace. How much do you want to buy into it? How much representation do Filipino artists have? It might be that in the Philippines, its history is going to keep them on track and all the temptations aren't going to matter. It might be that this happens in India, or Korea. It might be that the Asian American artists won't be doing anything of significance. Right? Anything could happen. We have to look to where progress is being made, at least from what I believe progress to be. People say it would have been better if we had never taken public funding. We had to compromise to do that. We chose to do it. But we tried to stick with our vision. We still try. The situations here have changed; we can have a major financial breakdown in this country and still people won't be marching in the streets. This is certainly not the 1930s. How can people continue to live like that? Are they asleep? It is amazing what people can adapt to – that they are okay with not having healthcare. Well, I certainly understand that; I haven't had healthcare for most of my life. I accept it. I think that a crisis will come, like Tiananmen Square, to wake people up. If artists do the right

thing, they can take advantage of these moments. Maybe political figures will take charge, to help move these sleeping dogs along, to get us to the right place. I love movies that are about big, global, celestial catastrophes. What do you do under those circumstances? You've just lost half the world's population, but maybe you'll get to the right place after all. Those films really turn me on. I cry.

Like I said I don't 'do' China. I am here. I hear good things from China. People make a lot of money and are interested in art. They give my friends a lot of shows. They still keep a vision. Even the Chinese people who push carts have a long-range vision. Taxi cab drivers that screw me still have a long vision. Chinese think differently from Americans. Maybe China will be inspired by something that happens in Africa. But just because they are Chinese doesn't mean they are smart or that they are on the right track. If they can take cues from the right people who are doing the right thing, things can be great. I would love to see that happen. I would love to see this Chinese culture, which I love so much, take leadership and do the right thing.

RL: There were five of them, living out in a huge loft in East Williamsburg: Ling Ling and Zhang Jianjun were there - anyway their truck burned down. Hu Bing was there. And she survived among these big personalities. She became her own person. She was great, to live there and do that. They became a group of important Chinese artists. Like I said, about Seattle earlier, communities are all over the place. In New York City, the Chinese one is over here, the Korean one is over there, the Asian American one is over there, the Vietnamese one I tried to start but it didn't really happen – maybe now it does. The artists all had their own little circles. They all hung out at different restaurants. I didn't always get invited to those things. Those artists who became prominent and got recognized were regarded as Chinese. I called them Asian American because they were influenced by America. So, to me they are Asian Americans. To the marketplace they are Chinese – it doesn't matter where they live. But Zao wanted to adopt this country. He's incredibly busy, and making a name for himself – he's making all sorts of installations all over the United States! He doesn't care a bit about China. He doesn't care whether he's a part of the Chinese art uprising. He's part of that same group of artists, but he's making his name in another sector. He's not in the Armory Show but he doesn't mind or care really. Tremendously gifted insightful people who figure things out in six months or less and set on a course really push through. I heard that there were fifty artists a year coming from China in '89, and for the next five, six years. They were all painting on the street seven days a week. In five years they were buying themselves a house. And of course never make art again. Exceptions being Ling Ling, or Lin Lin, who was the leader of the Tiananmen Square Show that we did. He painted this mural of Picasso's Guernica with Mao Zedong in the middle. We gave him this wall for the summer. It was 24 feet by 10 feet, which he spent every last penny to buy. He stayed here all summer to paint it. People came to take pictures of him in front of it. It became part of the show. He only painted on the streets three or four days a week, spent one day to cool-out, and then would make 'real' paintings during the weekend. Painting on the street was his way of making money. Then on 42nd and Broadway he was mugged and killed. The Chinese community marched for him. They tried to get more than fifteen years in jail for the guy who shot Ling Ling for no reason at all. Now the man is free. Anyway, that is the social pattern of the artists that came from China to try and do something here.

Ling Ling lived in Harlem. He called himself 'Billy Harlem'. He loved and wanted to identify with Harlem and that is what he did. He painted that big mural. We tried to get him shown at the Port Authority. That didn't work out. But people like Ling Ling are all part of the story of Asian artists in New York. Gu Wenda was another one who was quite aloof. He is from a very good family and already made a name for himself in China before he came here. He had a shaved head and a ponytail in the back. He had a big show in France.

MB: You knew Gu Wenda, but did he ever come here?

RL: I saw Gu Wenda at a lot of parties. I was very curious about him. I think that there was a point where we began to relate to each other. So, I did have a relationship with him. He was in more than one show with us. There was a show in 1991. It was a two-part group show on Chinese artists. I think we had four people in the show.

I know Gu Wenda was in that show, though he may have been in a show with us earlier than that. It was an extensive installation. But he was in other shows too. We did get to talk and meet a little bit. I was not always a part of the group of artists who hung out together. Once in a while we would chat and talk about all sorts of things. We did get a record of all the things he had done. At that time he was working on these big characters. He had not yet developed his hairpieces. They came much later. It was what Xu Bing and others tried to do with calligraphy. Fung Ming Chip was there too. There was a professor who wrote a great article about Ming Chip's work, which was subsequently published in Hong Kong. That essay brought out the many subtle variations he dealt with in his work with characters. The advancement of calligraphy was really something else.

We had a conversation with Gu Wenda. We reviewed everything he had been interested in during the 1980s, and before 1989. Gao Minglu wrote a big essay covering that ten-year period. All the artists who participated in that came with an edited version that we published in our Arts Spiral Newspaper. We all sat together and reviewed it and compressed the information to form a two page document. Gu Wenda and Zhang Hongtu were involved in shaping up that essay to pick out the most important developments in China during that time. It helped us see and become more aware of what was happening in China. Of course we knew that what was happening there was connected to what was happening here. I couldn't make trips to China to see things for myself, so the fragments from these artists were really helpful.

In some ways Asian American artists have moved further along, compared to Asian artists. They are more like African American artists. They are really living in an American situation and on the fringe of life. When you talk about these Chinese artists you are speaking about them in a way an alternative museum would speak of them. They are artists who are in exile. They are living a socially different interaction. The parameters of their world are somehow larger than Asian American artists who were born and raised here.

MB: Where did your ideas stem from, for the shows you put on?

RL: I don't know. Ideas just come out of the woodwork. It was a long time before we did a show on Chinese artists. One of our first shows involved Ming Fei. When you look at his work certain things pop up. We did a three-women show in the early days. I think we called it something like Triangles. I think we called Ming Fei's show Fantasy or something. We did Tishan Hsu's show, which was about being Asian American. He and the other person in the show had a very American experience. They had no real experience with Asia or of an Asian country. Tishan Hsu didn't study art; he studied architecture. The themes of the shows evolved. If we did a theme we tried to do something that we hadn't looked at yet. Mixed Race is a more recent show. When Tiananmen happened we jumped on it to put a show together. Is that the way to go? Maybe. The whole thing came out of the moment. I think now there are certain things we haven't done which we can focus on. But, we are primarily looking at being Asian in the United States. We are not looking at being Chinese in China.

MB: Did you know much about the Star Star Group?

RL: I did ask Hongtu if he was part of the Star Star Group and he was very clear that he was part of another group. What was that group? I wasn't consistent about finding out about all the groups. Wasn't it Ai Weiwei that was part of the Star Star Group? We touched on that but I never got to ask him about the Star Star Group.

MB: There were some key people that came here. Some went back to China and some stayed. There is a history that happened simultaneously.

RL: Yes. But I focused on what was going on here. The artists that came here made it as artists here. Is there an interaction between those artists and the artists that I showed? It is very complicated. You have to ask whether there was an interaction, or if many of the Chinese artists from China slide by us. A lot of things just slide by. What really rubs off? Is there any link anywhere? I think those links are crucial. They link up to personalities.

MB: So are you saying that things manifest on an individual level?

RL: I think whatever happens really happens inside the individual person. If those links don't happen none of us get turned on to it. If things just slide by nothing happens. That's how a lot of things happen these days. There is so much miscommunication. We see something pass by and then there it goes…there it went. There are many opportunities to misunderstand each other, and misunderstand each other in very significant ways.

One thing that comes to mind is Alexander Monroe coming to speak for a show we did for Chinese artists in '91. She was very grateful. She wrote us a letter saying thank you. She was a specialist in Japanese art, and we were giving her the option to talk on Chinese art. She gave a great talk and led an interesting intellectual discussion. Now she is a curator for the Guggenheim. She was an important presence in the Third Mind show here in New York. I think if we can find more of these hooks, you will have more significant information. I know we just had a relationship with an Indian artist and a Vietnamese Chinese artist, who seem so close now. But that is different from the focus of your exploration.

Realizing these are the artists that are creating now helps us foster relationship because we are an important part of the mix. We are a part of the creation process. It would be good to have more time to be more academic but those things don't always lead to being part of that mix. Those things kind of take you away.

[There is a collection of small photographs on the wall. They are numbered and they illustrate Robert Lee's life. They are numbered and organized randomly around a larger image. The numbers seem to be indicative of when they were taken, but they are not organize by sequentially]

MB: Why don't you guide us through this and give us some highlights. Tell us some things you remember.

RL: Okay. Let's see…here is Eleanor dancing here and here. This is the ribbon dance at the Chatham Square Library. The Asian American Art Center at that time was called the Asian American Dance Theatre. That was before we came to this location in '86. The audience is sitting her, and we had someone documenting her performance here. This is Kaiko Suna [?] who documented Eleanor's dance. She and John Albert founded Downtown TV, which is a larger organization around the corner. A lot of her dancers evolved in the dance company…here are Swati and Suani from Bali [pointing at picture of three women in coats with a small child in red], Marlene [pointing at a different photograph with a different woman hugging a child] helped run the company, Re Elanzo [?] was part of the dance company in those days too. Elaine Chu [pointing to fourth photograph, with three women and a child] was very much a part of this organization. Lauren Dang was a key dancer at that time. So this was the beginning, before the visual arts component became an active part of the organization. We became active with Hongtu, with my wife's mirrors and with Hongtu's show on Dunhuang. And here's the panel discussion with Annette Juliano and Ross Lewis. That's how we continued with the visual arts component. There's Hongtu again with Jerry Thomas. That was one the early shows we did. Every year during the lunar year we would complement our contemporary art shows with shows of folk art. Here is a folk artist who was into the opera drumming. Even before we formed the organization my wife was involved with Basement Workshop. They did this first project New York the Chinese Way. They would have all these materials produced and distribute them free at Rockefeller Center. Another one of our dancers was Guanyu Fong. She was a very important person in this organization. She now has her own shadow puppet organization called New York Chinese Theatre Works. Sharon Hong was on the board and a key supporter of ours too. All of the organizations had their children socialize with each other. Here they are all playing together enjoying life in Chinatown. We supported Jesse Jackson. She danced for him as a little girl. Here she is dancing and here she is lounging in the back room that used to be our living quarters. Igarta's [?] painting was there for many years until we gave it back after he passed away. One of the folk artists we were involved with was Ang Shunchi, who was a Taishan singer. He got picked up and became a national figure, meeting President Bush in 1991 and singing to seven hundred bureaucrats in Washington D.C. We will publish a CD of his music soon. Some prominent people, like Master Ku and Master Ru Yi, a great tai chi master who carried the casket for Sun Yat-sen. Master Ru is an acupuncturist. Then Danny, Eleanor's brother, who has always been a part of the founding

of this place and key to us. Of course, Danny was a seminal person at Basement and set us on the road.

MB: Culturally, you mentioned there being some medical or health related things going on. Was that also part of Basement?

RL: No, Basement was on the third floor when we moved to 22 Catherine Street. The health clinic was on the second floor. You could participate in both organizations by running up the stairs. (Laughter) I think that the health clinic was separate and always more focused on doing professional healthcare. It wasn't really part of Basement, but we were all part of the same generation.

MB: What was Basement focused on?

RL: You could go there and start something. It was a big umbrella. That umbrella eventually became more cultural than political or social service-related. Bridge Magazine and I think Asian Sino-vision was part of that in the early days too. It spun off early on, but we were all close. Bridge Magazine was later more a part of Asian Sino-vision, and so on. There were people involved in other kinds of cultural things. Yellow Pearl came out of Basement and I mentioned, but New York the Chinese Way also happened – here they are again, giving out fliers up at Rockefeller Center. This was in '71, '72. No one really remembers this project. Here is the American born group that did Yellow Pearl, the publication that came out after Chinese Way and which most people associate with Basement. In the more recent years, Danny was back and we had a big party for his birthday. Around that time Bell also had a party for his anniversary. Charlie and Chris and Nobuko have always been a part of the culture we came out of in the early days of Basement. This is a picture taken when I went back to my village in Taishan, and saw the houses that were there in those days. Seeing the Institution of American Cultures was very important for me because it provided me with details about the national perspective on people of different color. That organization was very influential in those days, until around '93.

MB: What about Eye to Eye? Do you have any pictures?

RL: No, I don't have any pictures of that here. I think we have some images of that installation, but I don't know where they are exactly. I don't think we have a complete set of images of what was exhibited at that time.

And here. That's Jerry Thomas at Hongtu's opening in '74 or '75. And she was a staff person along that way. This is our former City Councilman Gerson [?]. Quirky. Here is the woman who works for Verizon. And Eungie. This is a proposal for public art in Chinatown back in '88 by Toshio Sasaki who was third for his proposal for the World Trade Center. He is a very important Asian American artist.