

Zun Lee | for:GROUND

Presented by the Goethe-Institut & Art Metropole

Curated by Jutta Brendemühl

Core Exhibition CONTACT Photography Festival May 2024

"I wasn't loitering, I was actually moving." - William L. Pope (aka Pope.L)

German-born Toronto artist Zun Lee is known for his immersive auto-ethnographic documentary and social practice projects that often span several years. In its collaboration with the 2020 Guggenheim Fellow, the Goethe-Institut Toronto presents never-before exhibited images from Lee's street photography practice, which offer an early glimpse into his approach to engaging individuals and communities around the globe. Moving through different cities around the world, Lee seeks active possibilities to momentarily destabilize the urban environment and to produce unexpected ways of understanding his world, that of his participants, and perhaps even his audience's.

When it comes to street photography, flâneurism, and other aesthetic walking practices, loitering –Lee's *leitmotif* in this exhibition-in-the-making– is often discussed in a regulatory and/or legal context that criminalizes racialized bodies, limiting their ability to move through western urban environments unharmed and unsurveilled. Lee departs from this focus by proposing loitering as something in excess of that: a participatory grounding strategy to subvert how modern urban spaces regulate wayward bodies. He critically engages with his own lived experience in his birth city of Frankfurt am Main to arrive at an expanded understanding of loitering, which he strategically utilizes in his street photography and that is reflected in the for:GROUNDing process of this show, which will develop and grow with invited international guests and in conversation with local audiences over weeks and months. "I find myself on the side of discourse that considers loitering more broadly than solely in terms of the probability to suffer its negative consequences. Beyond the idea of aimlessly hanging about, I suggest that loitering be examined as a social and relational practice that is about possibility and participation and that requires intent and deliberation," says Lee.

Loitering for Lee describes a transformative approach that is about more than risk, uncertainty and reclamation of space. It is a practice of individual and collective knowledge production, resulting in an archive of "spatial literacy" that racialized and othered practitioners often deploy in navigating their

urban terrain. “I rely on my own lived and shared experience to posit that marginalized communities often acquire their own knowledge on and of hostile grounds, deep knowledge about social and spatial legibility that allows them to determine where to be and how to move in specific, purposeful ways,” claims Lee. He proposes that artists can deploy their place-based insights as a tactic to destabilize existing structural meaning and instead allow for a “regrounding” of oppressive cityscapes in ways that diffuse the bounds of negation othered bodies are often theorized within.

As colour prints and digital projection in the Goethe Space, many images will be featured and brought into relation for the first time. The images in Lee’s solo show span the decade from 2009 to 2019 and draw from a vast collection of works produced in cities like Toronto, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Washington DC, Frankfurt am Main and London. His ability to create a mutual give-and-take with individuals yields fleeting but purposeful exchanges that can dissolve the bounds between the maker and sitter, the body in front of and behind the camera. It is evident that the photographed not only register Lee’s presence but reciprocate his energetic invitation and have equal agency in how they present themselves — from a tentative, curious gaze all the way to fully embodied performance.

In keeping with the theme of the exhibition, the Goethe-Institute invites audiences to spend time in its Goethe Space to deeply engage with Lee’s images from his street photography archive, to browse through an accompanying collection of books and films curated by Lee that critically supplement the exhibition, or simply, to hang out. Programming that includes immersive workshops, talks with local and international interlocutors, portfolio reviews and other engagement opportunities will serve to round off the project, offering audiences the opportunity to experience the fluid, participatory and collaborative nature of Lee’s practice first-hand. Crucially, the exhibition itself will be expanded over time —with Lee’s own notes and thoughts, image contributions by participants, and responses by viewers. We invite you to spend time to “ground yourself” in our exhibition and to return to it over and over, not only to experience it but also to nurture it with your presence. As a result, our space will be ever-evolving to convey a sense of surprise, ebb-and-flow, and serendipitous connection inherent in Lee’s street photography practice.