

# Hai-Wen Lin: Orientation



Hai-Wen Lin, *Orientation; 1st Score; Movement for Two* (performance still), 2021. Photo courtesy the artist.

*Orientation* (2025) reimagines an earlier performance by Chicago-based artist Hai-Wen Lin that focuses on the interdependent movement of two bodies. Lin originally conceived *Orientation* in 2021, when they performed it with their collaborator Charlie Thornton; Thornton has returned to realize this version. For Lin's presentation at CAM—the artist's first museum commission—they have recorded a new performance for the camera, presented as a part of Street Views, the ongoing series of video projections on the Museum's facade, on view every evening from dusk to midnight.

Lin and Thornton's interaction fuses the popular American party game Twister with the Chinese practice of feng shui, which strives to create harmony between people and their surroundings through the strategic arrangements of objects in space. In Twister, players compete to be the last person balanced on rows of

colorful dots on a large plastic mat while responding to instructions like "left hand, red; right foot, yellow" until someone (or everyone) collapses. For *Orientation*, Lin has adapted this format by offering cardinal directions in lieu of colors: "Right foot, south; left hand, northeast." With this shift, Lin suggests that winning may not be everyone's goal. Instead, we encounter activity where shared process, exploration, and discovery come to the fore.

In the video, Lin responds to a series of spoken commands in Mandarin while Thornton responds to commands in English. The two move with and around each other, engaging in what might appear as a slowly unfolding dance. The instructions appear as subtitles in this silent video and viewers who read Chinese characters will notice that they are not translations of each other.

Since the instructions the two performers are following differ, so do their actions. It becomes a constant negotiation as the two work together—grappling, engaging, accommodating, and supporting one another. They get close. Their bodies tangle and touch. They make room for one another. They hold space.

For Lin, who grew up in a home where both Mandarin and English were spoken, this performance is just as much a mental struggle to focus only on the instructions in Mandarin as it is a physical one to take the action described. In order to move their body accordingly and in tandem with Thornton, they need to focus, listen, and react. For the pair, “orientation” becomes a holistic practice. Lin has cited the book *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed as “key to creating” the first version of *Orientation* in 2021. Here, Ahmed considers the many layers and meanings “orientation” may have. It can refer to how individuals are attracted to (or repelled by) objects, ideas, or people, or how personal sexual or gender identities are expressed. Broken down even further, the word itself contains “Orient,” an outmoded notion related to the ways that Western hegemonies have stereotyped and misunderstood cultural difference in an effort to realize sociopolitical dominance. Lin’s *Orientation* speaks to this layered reality.

Individual identity and orientation are often thought of as binaries. Here, many analogues unfold: East and West, straight and gay, citizen and foreigner, and more. What if, instead of thinking about such identities as opposing ends of a line, circular possibility was embraced? Here, turning reveals many vistas, bringing us back to where we began. In *Orientation*, we encounter a space where in-betweenness is powerful and where a full spectrum of possibilities replaces limiting binaries.

*Hai-Wen Lin: Orientation* is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Dean Daderko, Ferring Foundation Chief Curator, and Misa Jeffereis, Associate Curator, with support from Grace Early, Exhibitions Assistant.

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Hai-Wen Lin. Photo: Wassaic Project.

**Hai-Wen Lin** (b. 1994 in Urbana, IL) is an artist living somewhere beneath the sky. Their work explores constructions of the body and the attunement of oneself to the environment, often working through metaphor, etymology, sunlight, wind, and the way time passes perfectly when you are out walking on a beautiful day. Lin is an alumnus of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and received a M.Des in Fashion, Body and Garment from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Lin has been an artist-in-residence at Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts and the Grand Canyon National Park, among others. Lin has exhibited work at the Chinese American Museum of Chicago, the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles, and the Pittsburgh Glass Center.

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### Related Programs

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### Artist Talk: Hai-Wen Lin

Thursday, October 23, 6:00–7:00 pm

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### Learn More

Visit our website for more information about *Hai-Wen Lin: Orientation*, including an **audio guide** from the curator.



Wed–Sun 10:00 am–5:00 pm  
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