

A conversation about Applause is Due

DRC NO.12 Space = DRC. 12

Liu Xinyi = L

DRC.12: In the text preceding the opening of the exhibition, you stated that the project's objective is to "to discuss in the new phase of China's economic and social development to the context of international mentality and political ambition, as well as the cultural choices shared with today's global political diversion." However, this still appears somewhat general and wide-ranging. Could you offer more comprehensive details about the specific topic you intend to address?

L: The spring of 2019 marked a calm before the impending storm. In hindsight, four years following the culmination of the exhibition, concepts such as China's "international mindset" and "cultural preferences," which I had proposed, have now been distinctly revealed to those who closely monitor domestic affairs. My initial intention was to cultivate a sense of unfamiliarity within the heart of Beijing, to refract the essence of the "Chinese psyche." The tangible manifestation of this endeavour relies upon the firsthand physical experiences of the audience.

When I wrote the promotional text, the exhibition was still in the midst of a hectic preparation process. As a result, the words could only convey the general concept's direction and provide some context. Due to my intention to allow room for interpretation, the text might give an impression of vagueness and inaccuracy. Furthermore, due to the promotional nature of the content, my writing style might have taken precedence, overshadowing the intended message.

DRC.12: Many of your works deal with socio-political issues and international politics. To grasp your perspective or appreciate the intricacies of your narrative, knowing your basic political view and standpoint would be helpful. Would you like to share your thoughts on this?

L: For many years in the past, I urged myself to maintain my political values as neutral as possible, aiming to comprehend the choices made by various groups of people within historical contexts. I have witnessed how individuals' perspectives are contingent upon specific cultural backgrounds. For instance, during my time in London, I found inspiration in the cultural left and developed an affinity for anarchism. Upon returning to Beijing, during the initial years, I also experienced a phase of empathy with the domestic New Left. As time passed and my hair turned grey, benefiting from the critical urgency of the contemporary art community in Beijing, since 2017, I no longer hold the same fervour for practising cultural relativism as I once did. If evaluated by international standards, I would position myself somewhere left of centre on the political spectrum; I still oscillate between liberalism and communitarianism when addressing specific matters. Yet, whenever I find myself in relatively passive situations, such as teaching or caring for an ailing family member, I observe a discrepancy between my perspectives and actions.

All these experiences have left me with doubts and misgivings about my own rationality. If I'm still willing to connect individual political views to one's internal choices, then I've also been observing my own politics. Consider this as a self-assessment of my circumstances.

DRC.12: In your projects such as the Chaoyang masses, the signal tower, the airport runway (Dongguan), the displaced coordinate system in digital mapping (Taikang Museum, Beijing), and the consulate, certain methodological similarities can be observed. Are you aiming to formalise these patterns into a consistent method for your future works, or are you seeking to deconstruct them and embrace an entirely new approach?

L: After completing the project *Applause is Due* in 2019, I attempted to organise a set of exhibition proposals that were in the planning stage into a blueprint. My goal was to logically arrange them within a more structured and defined creative framework. However, I began to vaguely realise that creativity often arises from the convergence of various serendipities.

In many ways, artistic practice can be modelled after other enterprises, wherein planning and summarising are essential. However, the joy of artistic work comes from encountering intellectual contingencies, which compel the artist to frequently make choices along their paths and consider trade-offs in their methods and approaches. It was only towards the end of last year that I recognized my pursuit of a genealogical blueprint might have been unconsciously influenced by the prevailing PR mindset in the art industry, aiming to self-promote and engage more efficiently with the exhibition system. Reflecting on my existing body of work, I can, at most, discern the directions and scopes of my interests. Therefore, I am more concerned about the sustainability of my practice; perhaps it should resemble a bamboo grove rather than an industrial pipeline. I don't need to obsess over developing novel methods and means as long as they are appropriate.

DRC.12: A few members of the audience have mentioned that your project was transplanting a form of functional decoration without truly presenting anything new. How do you view this perception?

L: I suppose some of them might not have been paying much attention to the information within such contexts, or they could hold resentful sentiments toward it, leading them to believe there's nothing worth contemplating. Others might have lacked tactile and psychological engagement due to experiencing the exhibition online. This perspective is quite common and not irrelevant. In this project, I've minimised personal subjectivity, aiming to make the space closely resemble its real-world counterpart. However, in doing so, I intended to enable a different way of viewing, distinct from the mundane context of administrative services, and to create an extended contextual experience. After exiting this scenario, one might also recalibrate their perception of inside and outside: if this were a Chinese consulate service, then what lies behind that door?

However, my attempt to encourage the audience to consciously immerse themselves was questionable. Throughout the exhibition period, I maintained a certain level of expressionist mysophobia, fearing that any direct conceptual expression would disrupt the contextual ambience of the site. On the night of the opening, I even assumed the role of a gatekeeper, driving away any friends who lingered on the site. Even during the closed discussions, I was hoping to remain in the position of an outsider and listen to the feedback from the visitors, rather than explaining the thought process and installation as the artist. In hindsight, I realize I might have taken it a bit too far.

In the past, I would have taken it for granted that the intellectual engagement in an art exhibition is reserved by the artist for the viewers themselves. However, in this exhibition, situations arose that challenged my preconceived notions. During the exhibition, artist Enoch Cheng contacted me and expressed his interest in using my exhibition as a location for shooting his video work. I agreed because I wanted to see precisely how he would utilise it. Before the exhibition concluded, artist Guo Hongwei approached me, expressing that he wanted to draft and submit a proposal to DRC.12 based on my exhibition. I did not oppose this either. Both professional artists must have had the insights to recognise that my concept was about the deconstruction of a specific relational field. Nevertheless, their approach was to use my exhibition as a backdrop or a readymade product, taking it as an existing fact to engage with. It could be argued that their works endorsed and further complicated the ambiguity of the project. I believe the primary reason for this lies in the fact that I had already attempted to blur the boundaries between the exhibition and reality prior to their interventions. The exhibition site seems to serve as a mental challenge for me, demonstrating that I cannot simply accept that this project was a mere nonsensical renovation.

DRC.12: I believe your exhibitions and writings can be envisioned as targeting a specific audience. The exhibition at DRC.12 or your writings represent your artistic creation tailored for a specific site, with an experimental essence. From the standpoint of DRC.12, the fulfilment of artistic creation and experimentation suffices to achieve our purpose. We do not assume the responsibility for art promotion or marketing, nor are we involved in such activities. For this reason, we would like to ask you, the artist, to consider your ideal audience when creating a work. Who would you most desire to present your work to? Whose appreciation or discussion with whom would matter the most to you? If specific, who might these individuals be? Your mentors? Former classmates? The owner of your gallery? Your friends?

L: What particular audience an artist's work could reach measures the genuine relationship between the artist and society. Ten years ago, I was eager to envision that my exhibitions could establish an emotional and conceptual connection with a broad public. Creating art for only a small group of people, especially for those with power and wealth, is always narrow-minded and opportunistic. However, until recently, I kept being reminded by exhibition organisers that the messages I wanted to convey through my exhibition would only spark interest in viewers if more comprehensive guidance were offered. Those who are able to grasp and comprehend my intentions through indirect means like exhibition texts and visual information are most likely working in the field of art. I still anticipate connecting with strangers and befriending them in real life. Nonetheless, when my mind

calms down, I realize they are the artists and writers I admire. And hopefully, my exhibition could convey a few words to them, with my blessings and longings.

DRC.12: Nowadays, artistic creation is considered a form of knowledge production. This way of formulating can easily give the impression that art can be generated through specific methods and labour, like other commodities. How do you understand the characteristics of artistic creativity? Do you believe that site-specific practices contribute to such creativity?

L: If we were to identify distinctive features of artistic creativity, I would argue that the most prominent would be its enthusiasm for weaving certainty and serendipity together in a dance. In artistic endeavours, the pursuit of predictability almost inevitably stifles creativity. Beyond questions, methods, and clues, which can be accumulated, polished, and marketed, an artist has to wait for opportune moments to convert the reality around them into artistic expressions. In contrast to scholarly knowledge production, however, the role that artists usually take is more likely to be capturing social memories and reconciling individual experiences. Therefore, the output of art-making is not generally regarded as knowledge or a product in the strict sense, and the public responsibility it holds need not be substantial.

I think artists and writers who feel constrained by working in a studio will definitely find site-specific practices helpful. It's a proactive approach that configures the balance between certainty and contingency within the creative process. However, the most challenging aspect of site-specific practices is the need to evaluate one's affinity with a particular site—this involves not only embracing how the local context might disrupt previous experiences but also developing a strong passion for the designated location that is often not equipped with professional support. I take site-specific work as an educational experience or saplings planted to mark potential fields of my interests. If these markers are not too loosely spaced, a sense of certainty must slowly, and occasionally, emerge.

— Translated by Dakota Guo