

Liu Xinyi On His Practice

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After having graduated respectively from the sculpture department of the China Academy of Arts (Hangzhou) and the Department of Art at Goldsmiths College, Liu Xinyi now resides and works in Beijing. Oftentimes the development of his artistic creation is done by dissection of a certain political context, in an attempt to turn political knowledge into visible and tangible contemporary artistic topics of discussion. In doing so, he liberates art's potential for interference in political phenomena, apart from the merely "getting involved". I invited the artist for an in-depth discussion on the different phases of his creative experience, and his thoughts on the relationship between art and politics. His project *Responsive Institution* is currently on display at Look Art Space.

Personally I don't use the word "allegory" to describe and understand the works I create. It isn't my goal to satirize per se. In English, implied metaphors and analogies are all referred to with the word 'Metaphor'. This is also not my field of interest. I'm interested in how the internal logic chain of politics can be upset by certain concrete relationships, and how a new logic can be implanted, or can be shuffled into an existing logical pattern. For example, you can fracture a certain logical chain within political knowledge, and obstruct it before it can take on the orientation that its thread was originally leading towards.

Critique is also a topic that I've tackled for many years. People at Goldsmiths would all have a kind of expectation of the artist being endowed with the role of critic, or a leftist stance. Goldsmiths is a school that emphasizes conceptual art. It relies heavily upon French post-modernism for its knowledge background, and so within this background even though there's no pure discussion of politics, but rather a discussion of 'knowledge' or a broader version of knowledge, critique still counts as a very important attitude. In dealing with political issues, people in my surroundings expect me to embrace a critical attitude, but such an attitude will inevitably bring my Chinese background into play, and also relates to the problem of Europe as such.

In the very beginning, my works did comprise an allegorical method like the one you mentioned, as well as an undertone of critique. The question I felt bewildered by was: why "play" a role which has already been set up by others? As far as I'm concerned, the external environment doesn't cherish any serious expectations of you putting forward any insightful views on the topic of Europe itself. Rather, they expect you to become a critic of Chinese politics, or even a 'dissident' on a more general, less deep-going level. At this moment, you'll find out that in a left wing school it's impossible to avoid "identity

politics". A whole series of contradictions has left me feeling that internal political relations can be the point from which I carry out my work. Perhaps some new angles can thereby be unearthed.

My graduation work (2010) counts as the first phase of my artistic creation. Although the three works in it were still to some extent related to the Chinese identity - to the extent that for about eight months after the graduation show I was unable to make works - I still made it explicit that "politics" was a fundamental topic that I was very concerned with, some kind of fundamental experience, that provided a means to extend toward more concrete phenomena, for example how different cultures are seen within daily life, or even as concrete a topic as how are consumption, identity and language approached. Politics acts as a kind of ground layer, which has kneaded into shape a method through which to react to the world.

Assuming that my graduation show constituted the first phase of my artistic creation, then the next two years, starting from *Civil Diplomacy* (2011), up until the work featured in the *On / Off* exhibit at UCCA, entitled *Rise of the 20th Century* (2011) counts as a following phase. This phase is representative for the period of time in between my graduation and my departure from England. Back then, I found myself in a phase where "you" are no longer a student enrolled at the school, and even have a certain difficulty in explicitly defining yourself as an artist. It was a kind of dissociative state: becoming dissociated from the Chinese art circles, as well as from my classmates, or perhaps from the world of professional artists. I had to find two jobs to make ends meet, at times even more than two, and I only had very limited time to put some of my ideas into practice. At that time, I was involved in exhibits, but none that could actually spur on my professional development.

Rise of the 20th Century (2011) was work in which I started to make attempts at making use of autonomous investigative properties. I hoped that through works that felt somehow "experimental", I could display the complexity of those things that are hard to conclusively generalize or put into logic. At that time, I came up with a bunch of similar ideas, of which *The Centre of the World* (2011) was the first to be put into practice. *Rise of the 20th Century* (2011) is an appraisal of political figures. Because of the divergence in opinions and positions, it's hard to give a fair and just evaluation, even though I didn't want to make "objectivity" into some kind of basic attitude. My method is aimed at producing some things that lie outside my own personal judgment. Assuming that I possess very strong judgment, then my work can only become a chart/diagram representation of that judgment, or rather an explanation, a footnote, these aren't the things that art should busy itself with. In my understanding, art can hopefully solve those problems that cannot be entirely solved on the plain of logic. The goal is to display these problems in a more interesting way through methods of visual experiment.

Over the past years, this has become a fundamental method in my work: it's not enough to assert that I wish to "rupture" certain chains of thought's logic: I also need to "rupture" my own attitude. Is it possible to come up with some new possibility within the artist's musings and estimations? - Be it visual or pertaining to ways of thinking - It all depends on whether or not I'm able to establish a model, which can then hopefully become self-consistent, be relatively complete in itself. Then, by slowly distancing

myself from it, it becomes a point of that arouses my interest, it's no longer my own judgment, but rather a kind of knowledge, a brand-new thing, which through trimming here and there becomes gradually unfamiliar again.

I'm inclined to consider everything I've done after my return home as a new phase, because I'm attempting to implant myself anew within a certain context. But primarily I don't hold any grand expectations towards this "industry". When I just got back I still considered that through technical work such as editing texts or installing exhibits I would be able to find my new position. Taking part in group-exhibits at home in China, or even solo exhibits, only partly relieved me of my anxieties. These anxieties were caused by family life, as well as fussing over wanting to affirm myself explicitly as an artist. From now on, it appears I can fend off some of the influence the industry exerts on me, allowing me to work according to my own rhythm.

After I had my first solo exhibit in 2012, I received a sort of confirmation: it wasn't my desire to become an artist who exhibits in galleries. Making works solely for the industry to continuously satisfy the needs of an art market, this was not what I was laid out to do. Something became ever so clear to me: whether I'm able to work out some new aspect, remains to be seen. You could say that *RESPONSIVE INSTITUTION* was a highly autonomous work. It's kind of like a "musical accompaniment", or an alternative type of "melody" - artists can't only possess one type of melody, or work according to a single method. Except for exhibits, I wish to be able to engage in work that has some autonomy to it, so I can reach an expression that lies outside the context of gallery sales. This stems from my initial interest in artists' self-curating and self-planning.

To put it conclusively, I'm not at all an artist who "does" politics. I feel the work that I do is a kind of examination of political knowledge, or a dissection of it. I can be likened to a shitty repairman opening up a radio, reassembling it and making it into "another" thing. It'll still be that thing, but the original functions of that radio won't exist any longer, or it'll have changed into an object that's meant purely to be watched, recalling associations of its former functions. Only then will it become clear how material a thing that radio is, what type of existence it leads. Perhaps that's wherein my work lies.

It's hard for me to avoid the question how my works reflect upon political discussions of China in the present moment. I think it might well take several years to confront this issue. It's the same as getting reacquainted with an environment that you originally knew like the back of your hand. Living abroad for a few years has allowed me to realize that understanding the politics of China actually is an undertaking requiring huge amounts of energy. It's not as easy as finding a general entry point or arriving at a macro-level knowledge-based judgment. Actually, after having spent about two years, some of my works have already started to relate to the Chinese political context, among which *GEMS* (2013), because all of the beverages used in the work were found on the Chinese market. Another obvious one is the work *RESPONSIVE POLITICS* (2013), because it alludes to the political visions that have arisen within the borders of China over the past 100 years. These topics interested me to begin with, but now they have

appeared automatically in a kind of inconceivable way, arriving faster than the progress I had imagined I would make. I'm very pleased to be able to carry out artworks related to these aspects.

---Translated by Sid Gulinck